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Realizing the “Outwardly Regal” Vision in the Midst of Political Inactivity: A Study of the Epistolary Networks of Li Gang 李綱 (1083–1140) and Sun Di 孫覲 (1081–1169)

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Abstract: How did politically inactive members of the Song literati attempt to realize the Confucian “outwardly regal” vision by putting their political ideal into practice? To what extent did their social networks play a role in this process? This paper aims to examine these questions via a comprehensive investigation of the writings of two prominent political and literary figures who experienced the Northern–Southern Song transition, Sun Di 孫覲 (1081–1169) and Li Gang 李綱 (1083–1140). A close examination of the letters written to senior court officials by these figures during their periods of political inactivity reveals not only these writers’ political agendas but also their attempts to exert influence in the political arena—a manifestation of the “outwardly regal” notion—via their epistolary networks. Despite the fact that Li has been highly praised while Sun has been widely condemned by posterity, the two men employed similar strategies to curry favor with senior court officials, who turned out to be potential patrons and facilitated the subsequent political rehabilitations of these two men. Sun Di’s and Li Gang’s eagerness to resume public service indicates the opportunistic motives underlying their epistolary exchanges and the unguine claims of disinterest in the politics expressed therein. Such claims, I would argue, are rhetorical conventions that the two men employed to present themselves as virtuous Confucian gentlemen who continued to cultivate “a sage inside” even when they lacked the opportunity to exercise the “outwardly regal” vision.

Keywords: Sun Di; Li Gang; “outwardly regal”; Southern Song; epistolary network



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1. Introduction

Since the arrival of the Jesuit missionaries in the late Ming period (1368–1644), leading intellectual figures in the past few centuries had diverse views over the religious nature of Confucianism. Whereas Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) perceived Confucianism merely as a secular and non-religious tradition, Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858–1927) advocated Confucianism to be the state religion (Sun 2013). Driven by their beliefs that Confucianism is an ethical and a humanistic religion, New Confucian scholars in the twentieth century highlighted the religiosity of Confucianism and held it as a common ground with other religions, such as Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism (Chen 2013, p. 148). Religious consciousness and the religious spirit of Confucianism, according to Mou Zongsan 牟宗三 (1909–1995), “are entirely imbued with moral discernment and practical morality. This is because its emphasis is on how a person should embody and manifest the Way of Heaven.” (Mou 1981, p. 39). A person’s zeal toward moral perfection can hence be interpreted as one’s Confucian religiosity. In the words of a leading New Confucian scholar, Tu Weiming, “being religious, in the Confucian perspective . . . means being engaged in the process of learning to be fully human. We can define the Confucian way of being religious as ultimate self-transformation as a communal act.” (Tu 1989, p. 94). The three guiding principles and eight steps that every individual can follow to perfect oneself to “be fully human” are stipulated in the Confucian sacred text, *The Great Learning*:

The way of great learning lies in keeping one's inborn luminous Virtue unobscured, in renewing the people, and in coming to rest in perfect goodness....Only after the principle in things is fully apprehended does knowledge become complete; knowledge being complete, thoughts may become true; thoughts become true, the mind may become set in the right; the mind being so set, the person becomes cultivated; the person being cultivated, harmony is established in the household; household harmony established, the state becomes well-governed; the state being well-governed, the empire becomes tranquil. (Gardner 1986, pp. 88–94). 物格而後知至，知至而後意誠，意誠而後心正，心正而後身修，身修而後家齊，家齊而後國治，國治而後天下平。

Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200), a Neo-Confucian master in the Song period (960–1279), further explained the connections between the three guiding principles and the eight steps: from cultivating oneself on up to setting one's minds in the right, to making one's thoughts true, to extending one's knowledge to the utmost, and to apprehending the principle in things are the affairs of keeping the inborn luminous Virtue unobscured. From establishing harmony in households on down to governing the states well, and to making the empire become tranquil are the affairs of renewing the people (Gardner 1986, p. 94). The former five steps help to cultivate one's moral character in order to attain sagehood, subsequent to which one should go beyond inner moral perfection and engage oneself in the outer world by following the latter three steps. Hence, one should attain perfection in both the inner realm of moral cultivation and the outer realm of worldly matters in order to "be fully human." This Confucian ideal of human life is better known as "a sage inside, outwardly regal" (*neisheng waiwang* 內聖外王), a phrase adopted from a pre-Qin philosophical text, *Zhuangzi* (Watson 2013, p. 289). Such a quest for being "a sage inside and outwardly regal" is religious in the Confucian sense as it "engaged in ultimate self-transformation as a communal act." (Tu 1985, p. 64).

However, not many Confucian scholars in traditional China managed to realize the religious vision of "a sage inside, outwardly regal." Despite the fact that there were sages such as Confucius (551–479 B.C.E.) and Mencius (372–289 B.C.E.) who managed to cultivate their virtues to become morally perfect men, they rarely had the opportunity to put the "outwardly regal" notion into practice. Even elite members of the literati who served as officials did not always have the chance to "accomplish great deeds in the world" (Feng 1952, p. 2) because their careers were never without difficulties. An official might be rapidly promoted one day, but on the following day, he might suddenly be demoted or even banished to the outer realm. Such an experience is similar to a ride on a roller coaster. During times of career misfortune, such as a banishment to the far south, suspension from public service, or enforced idleness in a sinecure, to what degree did politically inactive Confucian scholars embrace the "outwardly regal" vision? How did they attempt to exert their influence in the political arena? To what extent did their social networks play a role in this process?

This paper aims to address these questions by examining the epistolary networks of two prominent political and literary figures during the Northern–Southern Song transition, namely Sun Di 孫覿 (1081–1169) and Li Gang 李綱 (1083–1140). Both Sun and Li became Song officials in the 1100s after years of study at metropolitan schools in the Song capital of Kaifeng, where they had been learning from the Confucian canonical texts and cultivating "a sage inside". Subsequent to the rapid advancements of their careers, to the point that they became senior court ministers in the mid-1120s, they got more chances to be "outwardly regal". After the Song court moved south in 1127, both men were temporarily deprived of the opportunity to further their pursuits of being "outwardly regal" as they were demoted and received a certain degree of punishment in the late 1120s. After Li was removed from the post of chief councilor of the left in 1127/8,¹ the court stripped him of his assignment (*zhi* 職), installed him in a sinecure, and banished him to E'zhou 鄂州 (in modern Hebei) in 1127/11 (*Li Gang quanji*, pp. 1688–90). Li's movement was initially confined to his place of exile until this restriction was lifted in 1129/11. Li then re-

turned to his hometown in Fujian. Freed from political duties, in 1130 and 1131, Li spent most of his time in leisure until his rehabilitation in 1132/2. Similarly, Sun Di had been removed from the post of secretariat drafter in 1127/6 and banished to Guizhou 歸州 (in modern Hubei), where his movements were restricted and he was placed under surveillance, although he was given a nominal official title. Sun was restored a few months later in 1127/10, after which he occupied a few court and prefectural positions for one and a half years. In 1129/4, Sun was appointed to the position of prefect of Pingjiang 平江, a post that he occupied for only five months as he was reassigned to a sinecure position in 1129/18. Removing himself from politics, Sun resided in the vicinity of Lake Tai for more than a year until he resumed public service in 1131/1 as the prefect of Lin'an 臨安 (Fu 2011, pp. 683–84). Faced with the reality of an unglamorous political career, how passionate were Li Gang and Sun Di with respect to the “outwardly regal” notion? Considering that more than 1800 letters of the two men survive and have yet to capture much scholarly attention as of today, to what extent can a study of these writings shed light on their religious faith in being “outwardly regal”? Recent works in pre-modern Chinese literature and religion have utilized epistolary sources to study friendship, the culture of letter writing, and social networks. For example, Anna Shields examines the literary genres of letters and epitaphs and investigates how writing on friendship reflects and shaped broader transformations in mid-Tang literary culture (Shields 2015). Antje Richter analyzes the letter genre in detail and discusses the social and cultural dimensions of letter writing in medieval China (Richter 2013). Through the nuanced study of the epistolary writings surrounding the Buddhist leader Zhuhong 祿宏 (1535–1615), Jennifer Eichman discusses how he related to his fellow Buddhist monks and lay disciples and how they engaged in intellectual debate through their letters (Eichman 2016). Building on the insights of the above works, I will reconstruct the epistolary networks of Li Gang and Sun Di through a comprehensive analysis of their writings, with an aim to see how they exploited such networks to realize their “outwardly regal” vision during their periods of political inactivity.

Li Gang and Sun Di are also interesting subjects of study, as the historical reputations of the two men are markedly different. Despite following a similar career path, Li and Sun had differing attitudes toward the Jurchen in the mid-1120s: the former asserted the need to combat the invaders, while the latter tended toward appeasement. Under the influence of the moralistic historiography that became increasingly dominant from the mid-Southern Song period onward, traditional accounts usually portray Li Gang as a morally perfect minister who had an upstanding character and exercised principled action (Hartman and Li 2015, pp. 113–19), while Sun Di is condemned as a disloyal and opportunistic official (Hartman 2003). It is therefore interesting to compare the letters and epistolary networks of the two men, by which means some of the hidden dimensions of Li Gang behind his virtuous façade might be revealed.

2. Epistolary Networks of Li Gang and Sun Di

Both Sun Di and Li Gang were prolific letter writers, as evidenced in the respective 1626 and 213 letters featured in the *Complete Prose of the Song* (*Quan Song wen*), a collection of all the prose writings by Song literati that are extant today, compiled by scholars in the early 21st century. I have reconstructed the epistolary networks of the two men based on these 1839 letters collected in the *Complete Prose of the Song*, which include both formal letters (*qi* 啟) and informal epistolary writings, such as a letter (*shu* 書), a calligraph (tie 帖), and “alternative sheets” (*biefu* 別幅). Because most of these letters do not explicitly state the addressees or provide temporal references, it is difficult for contemporary researchers to identify the intended recipients or date the letters. After a close examination of all the extant writings of the two men, the letters and poems addressed to the two men by their contemporaries, together with the epigraphic, chronological, biographical, and anecdotal accounts of the two men, only 444 and 58 correspondents of Sun and Li, respectively, can be identified. A pairwise analysis of their epistolary networks reveals that the two networks were somehow separated as they had few connections in common (see Figure 1). This

prompts me to take a closer look at the group of twelve common correspondents of Sun and Li, with a particular focus on the political background of the common correspondents as well as the circumstances under which the two men wrote to them.

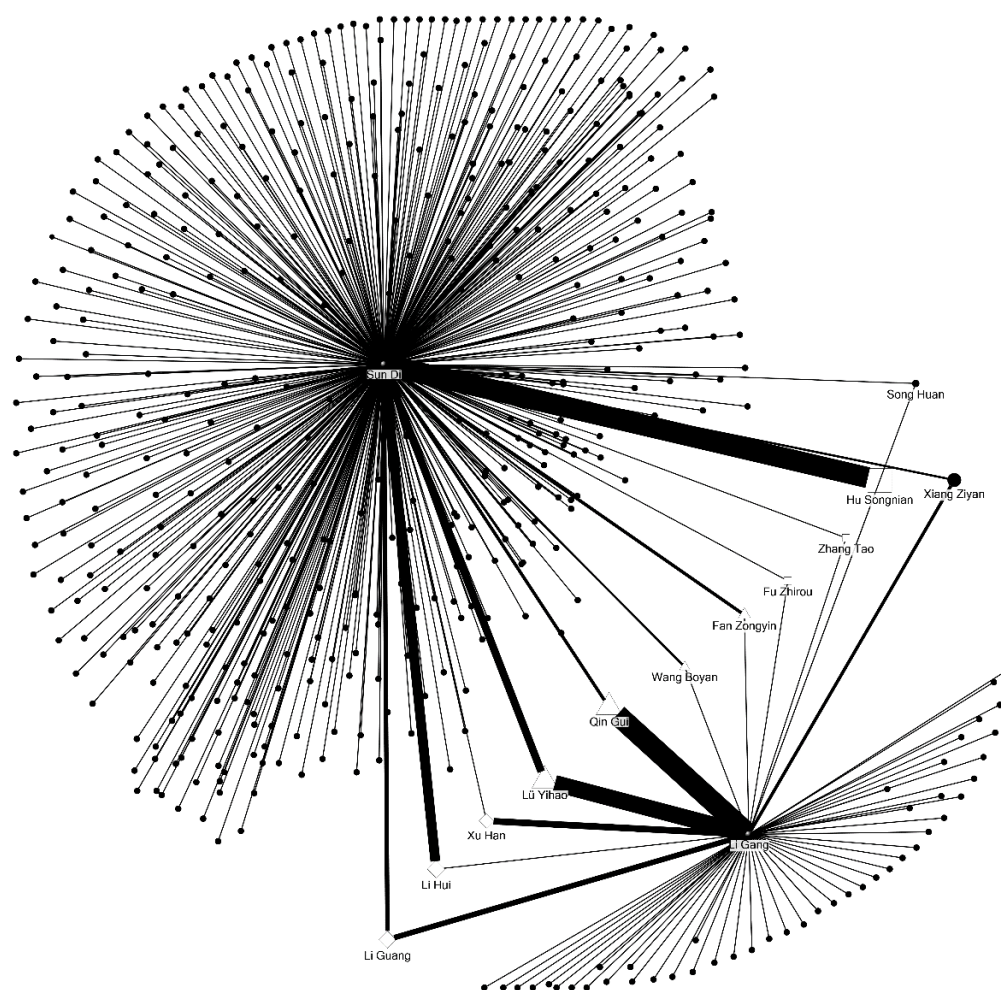


Figure 1. The Epistolary Networks of Sun Di and Li Gang.

Regarding the political background of the twelve common correspondents of Sun Di and Li Gang, ten of them were members of the state council in the early Southern Song. Among them, Lü Yihao 呂頤浩 (1071–1139), Fan Zongyin 范宗尹 (1100–1136), Wang Boyan 汪伯彥 (1069–1141), and Qin Gui 秦檜 (1090–1155) had reached the top position in the Song civil service as chief councilors; Li Hui 李回, Xu Han 許翰 (?–1133), and Li Guang 李光 (1078–1159) had once been promoted to be assistant councilors; and Hu Songnian 胡松年 (1087–1146), Fu Zhirou 富直柔 (1084–1156), and Zhang Tao 張燾 (1092–1166) had once served as co-administrator (*tongzhi* 同知) or signatory official (*qianshu* 簽書) of the Bureau of Military Affairs (*shumiyuan* 樞密院). Of these twelve common correspondents, Sun Di sent the most letters to Hu Songnian (95 letters), Li Hui (10 letters), and Lü Yihao (8 letters), while Li Gang sent the most letters to Qin Gui (20 letters) and Lü Yihao (16 letters) (see Figure 2). Most of the epistolary exchanges between Sun Di and Hu Songnian can be dated to the period between the mid-1130s and early 1140s. By then, Hu had retired from the post of signatory official of the Bureau of Military Affairs and spent most of his time in Yixing 宜興 county in Changzhou 常州, where he built a studio (QSW, 161.102). Around the same time, the politically inactive Sun was staying in his hometown, Jinling 晉陵 county, a place adjacent to Yixing. It is under such circumstances that Sun often visited and exchanged letters with the retired Hu.

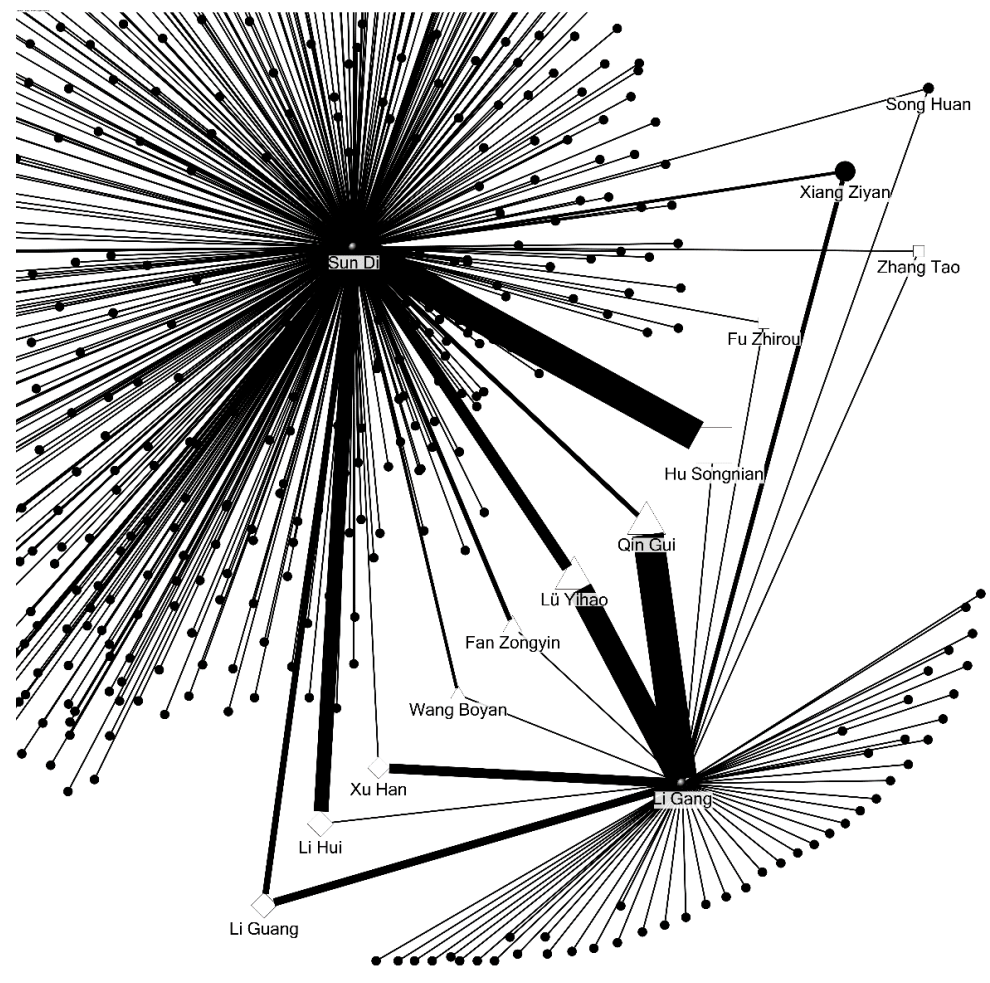


Figure 2. Common Correspondents of Sun Di and Li Gang. The shape of the nodes denotes the highest official position that the common correspondents of Li Gang and Sun Di reached in the Song civil service. (Triangle = chief councilor; diamond = assistant councilor; square = co-administrator or signatory official of the Bureau of Military Affairs). The size of the nodes and the thickness of the edges represents the number of letters that Li Gang and Sun Di sent.

Unlike Hu Songnian who was a retiree, Li Hui, Lü Yihao, and Qin Gui were occupying senior positions in the Song court when Sun Di and Li Gang sent them letters. Three of Sun's letters to Li Hui were written as early as 1126 when Sun Di was the prefect of Hezhou 和州 while Li Hui was the vice-minister of Rites (QSW, 159.459–60). The first letter that Sun Di addressed to Lü Yihao can be traced back to 1129/4 when the former was the prefect of Pingjiang and the latter was the chief councilor (QSW, 159.242). Even though Sun was later demoted to a sinecure position and stayed outside of politics in late 1129 and 1130, he continued to write to Li Hui and Lü Yihao, the then co-administrator of the Bureau of Military Affairs and chief councilor, respectively. As for Li Gang, he first addressed Lü Yihao in 1130/7 by sending him a formal letter of gratitude (*xieqi* 謝啓), in which he thanked the councilor for restoring his official title (QSW, 171.296). Li also sent his first letter—a formal congratulatory letter—to Qin Gui upon noticing the latter's promotion to assistant councilor in 1131/2 (QSW, 171.298). It is worth noting that Li Gang was not playing an active political role when he initiated the epistolary exchanges with Lü Yihao and Qin Gui. Interestingly, shortly after the politically inactive Sun Di and Li Gang had sent letters to senior court ministers, they received political assignments and were fully rehabilitated. Such a coincidence suggests that it would be fruitful to investigate their relationship with senior officials in the early 1130s when they had yet to resume public service. A detailed analy-

sis of their letters and other writings to their correspondents will hence shed light on the extent to which they exploited their social networks to fulfill their political ambitions. It will also enable us to see whether they shared a similar agenda and how they attempted to realize the “outwardly regal” vision even when they were not in active public service. To what extent did the recipients of their writings entertain their political requests or even facilitate their political rehabilitation? The answers to these questions can help us better understand how successful the efforts of the politically inactive Li and Sun were with respect to realizing the “outwardly regal” notion in the context of the early Southern Song.

3. Li Gang’s Writings and Social Networks in 1131 and Early 1132

Li Gang was allowed to reside wherever he liked in 1129/11, following two years of confinement. Likely driven by his perception that the emperor had somehow pardoned his previous misdeeds, Li’s political ambition was reignited even though he had not been assigned any political duties. Residing in his hometown of Fujian for most of 1130 and 1131, he continued to pay close attention to court affairs, as evidenced by his awareness of the changes in the upper echelons of the civil administration. After his former colleague Qin Gui was promoted to the position of assistant councilor in 1131/2 (*XNYL*, 42.903), Li sent Qin two letters, in which he shared some of his “outwardly regal” visions with the assistant councilor.

In a “formal congratulatory letter” (*heqi* 賀啟) to Qin, Li first employed a flattering rhetoric to congratulate Qin on his promotion, claiming that people throughout the entire realm were delighted due to their expectation that “now that an upright person has been promoted, good and honest people have someone to rely on” 方正人之登用，知善類之有依. (*QSW*, 171.298). Li then praised the loyalty of Qin, who had initially followed Emperors Huizong (1082–1135, r. 1100–1125) and Qinzong (1100–1161, r. 1125–1127) to the north and subsequently rejoined the Song court without compromising his moral integrity. Qin’s promotion, according to Li’s view, is a way of highlighting Qin as an exemplar of loyalty. Li then compared Qin with two virtuous ministers from the past. According to Li, when Yin Jifu 尹吉甫 (ca.852–775 B.C.E.), a minister of King Xuan of Zhou (ca.862–782 B.C.E.), was entrusted with state affairs, the entire Zhou (1046–256 B.C.E.) realm was delighted. When Ji An 汲黯 (?–108 B.C.E.) served in the court of Emperor Wen of the Han (203–157 B.C.E., r. 180–157 B.C.E.), the King of Huainan (179–122 B.C.E.) dared not rebel. It is worth noting that Yin Jinfu and Ji An were famous for ensuring the stability of their dynasty: the former defended the kingdom against the aggression of neighboring tribes to the north and south, while the latter’s upright character thwarted the seditious plans of a rebellious king. Li predicted that Qin Gui would live up to the achievements of Yin and Ji, defending the Song against the Jurchen conquerors, on the one hand, while pacifying uprisings within Song territory, on the other hand. In the final part of this formal letter, Li expressed his gratitude to the court, which pardoned him from banishment and allowed him to return to his hometown. Li then claimed that he was satisfied with the life of an eremite in a rural area and was disinterested in resuming public service. Li hoped that Qin would exhaust his talents to stabilize the Song regime, which at that time faced difficult conditions. In that case, even Li, who had retired to a rural area, would receive the blessing. Li predicted that Qin’s deeds would be recorded and inscribed in stone steles so that people who saw them would admire his meritorious achievements (*QSW*, 171.298). The ways in which Li extolled the virtue of Qin not only provide evidence for the former’s high aspirations concerning the latter but also demonstrate the intention of the politically inactive letter writer to please the newly appointed assistant councilor.

During Qin Gui’s tenure as assistant councilor between 1131/2 and 1131/8 (*SS*, 26.486 and 490), Li sent him another long letter. Li first recalled their former acquaintance when both of them served in Qinzong’s court in 1126 and apologized for being unable to socialize with Qin at that time due to the demands of work. Li then explained why he had only contacted Qin recently: since Qin had accompanied emperors Huizong and Qinzong to the north while Li had been removed from office and demoted to the far south, they

could hardly remain in touch. Not until the previous autumn had Li been pardoned and allowed to return home. He then learned that Qin had managed to escape from the Jurchen camp and returned to the court. Li was surprised as “almost no one in history managed to achieve what Qin had done. If not because of his extreme loyalty, which was as hard as metal and stone, and the support of supernatural power, how could Qin rejoin the Song?” 求之載籍，蓋亦罕有，非忠貫金石，神明扶持，何以得此？(QSW, 171.94). According to Li, he intended to send Qin a letter upon becoming aware of his return, although he failed to do so as he was preoccupied with moving his family to evade pillaging bandits. Only after Li became aware of Qin’s promotion to the position of assistant councilor did he resume writing to Qin, as he explained in the first part of the letter.

The second part of the letter contained similar material to what Li had said to Qin in his earlier “formal congratulatory letter” as discussed above; Li claimed that scholar-officials were all so pleased with Qin’s promotion that they were unable to sleep. Members of the literati were delighted, claiming that “when an upright person is in the court, good and honest people have someone to rely on.” 正人在朝，善類有依 (QSW, 171.94). However, the present was not a good time to celebrate according to Li’s view because the Song dynasty was in peril: “Outside there are invasions from ferocious enemies while inside there is turmoil incurred by cunning bandits. Soldiers are arrogant, and the government lacks financial resources. The literati’s morale deteriorates increasingly.” 外有疆敵之憑陵，內有猾賊之紛擾，兵驕財匱，士氣益衰。(QSW, 171.94). Li hoped that Qin would not simply cloister himself away and be satisfied with the relatively peaceful conditions in his immediate vicinity, because he would likely be disappointed after a thorough review of the situation of the entire realm.

After highlighting the severe conditions faced by the Song dynasty, Li proffered some advice to Qin in the letter. Quoting a line from a poem by Du Fu, which read “should you, sir, become a councilor, you should not just love your own self when you encounter difficulties” 公若登台輔，臨危莫愛身 (*Dushi xiangzhu*, 11.911), he reminded Qin that calamities in history emerged because senior officials were only concerned with securing imperial favor or with their salary. He then quoted two sources, Li Linfu 李林甫 (683–753) of the Tang (618–907) and Wang Fu 王黼 (1079–1126) of the Northern Song (960–1127), to substantiate his argument. During his tenure as chief councilor during the reign of Emperor Xuanzong of Tang (685–762, r. 712–756), Li Linfu recommended the use of non-Han generals to defend the border. Such a move, according to Li Gang, was driven by Li Linfu’s self-interest because these generals, even if they had notable achievements, would be ineligible to be promoted to be councilors and hence could not become a threat to the chief councilor. Similarly, the late Northern Song chief councilor Wang Fu advocated for a collaboration with the Jurchen to attack the Khitan Liao (907–1125) for the sake of securing his own position as well as to curry imperial favor. However, the selfish intentions of these figures led to the rebellion of An Lushan 安祿山 (703–757) in 755 and the Jurchen invasion in 1125. Li Gang therefore concluded that if councilors are only skilled at benefitting themselves, they will not exercise proper care in planning for the dynasty. Conversely, if councilors sincerely care about their country, they should not be skilled at benefitting themselves. It is not possible to excel in both activities. According to Li’s view, it is essential for councilors to care about public affairs. “If someone’s heart cares about the public, then every measure that he takes will succeed. If someone’s heart cares only about his own self, then whatever means he takes will fail.” 以公用心，則一切法成；以私用心，則一切法壞。(QSW, 171.94). Li predicted that Qin would continue to enjoy imperial favor and would soon be promoted to the position of chief councilor. If Qin kept the public in mind, the entire realm would receive great fortune.

In the final part of Li’s letter, he told Qin about his poor health and his disinterest in resuming public service. Residing in his hometown, which entailed the risk of contracting malaria, Li claimed that “he dared not again discuss affairs relating to the realm.” 豈敢復論天下事 (QSW, 171.95). However, due to his vivid memories of the emperor, Li broke his own vow and commented in his letter to Qin that councilors should be selfless.

Such a political vision, as Li explained in the letter, was driven not only by his loyalty and righteousness but also by his own interest, which was intertwined with that of the state. If the court were tranquil, the entire realm would be peaceful. Only when the entire realm became stable would Li's family and Li himself have a place to settle. Li encouraged Qin to adopt his suggestions upon receipt of the letter to bring peace and prosperity to the Song realm. With the help of the assistant councilor, Li hoped that his political vision would somehow be realized (QSW, 171.94–95). Unfortunately, we can no longer determine how Qin reacted to Li's letter or whether he took Li's advice. What we can know from the letter is that Li remained passionate with respect to exerting his influence in the court even though he was residing in his hometown and was politically inactive in mid-1131.

What Li Gang predicted in his letter to Qin Gui regarding the latter's career prospects came true in 1131/8, when Qin was promoted to the position of chief councilor of the right. Again, Li sent Qin another "formal congratulatory letter," in which he first extolled the fact that Qin had "upheld great moral principles" 立大節 (QSW, 171.299) when the ancestral halls of the Song imperial clan were at the brink of collapse and bore heavy responsibility when the court faced difficulties. Li then encouraged the court to rely on the wisdom of the virtuous Qin to develop grand plans for governing the country and resolving state affairs. The role that Qin would play in the government, as Li predicted, was similar to a boat that helps to cross the wide river or a ridgepole that braces a collapsing building. The former analogy is taken from the *Book of Documents*, in which the Shang King Wuding 武丁 (?–1192 B.C.E.) hoped that his talented minister Fu Yue 傅說 (ca.1335–1246 B.C.E.) would serve as his boat and paddle to cross a wide river (*Shangshu Zhengyi*, 10.294). The latter analogy comparing Qin with a ridgepole originates from hexagram 28, "Preponderance of the Great" (*daguo* 大過), in the *Book of Changes*. The fourth whole line of the hexagram means "the ridgepole is braced. Good fortune (Wilhelm 1977, p. 113)," thus implying that Qin Gui's promotion to the position of "nine in the fourth place," just below the ruler, who occupies the supreme position of "nine in the fifth place," would be an auspicious sign as the chief councilor would serve as the ridgepole to support the building (*Zhouyi zhengyi* 3.150). Li predicted that Qin would help restore the former territories of the Song in the Central Plain, thus consoling the masses who had high hopes of him. In the final part of the letter, Li asserted that even though he was residing in a rural area, he would still benefit from the patronage of Qin and longed to witness Qin's meritorious achievements in the court (QSW, 171.299).

Apart from congratulating Qin Gui, Li Gang also sent a "formal congratulatory letter" at approximately the same time to two senior court officials, Fu Zhirou and Li Hui, who had been promoted to be co-administrator of the Bureau of Military Affairs and assistant councilor, respectively, in 1131/8 (XNYL, 46.977). Even though we are uncertain regarding whether Li Gang had any prior acquaintance with Fu Zhirou, Li's admiration of the meritorious achievements of Fu's grandfather Fu Bi 富弼 (1004–1083), a prominent chief councilor of Northern Song during the Renzong (1010–1063, r. 1022–1063) era, is obvious. This admiration is well evidenced in a colophon that Li wrote for a portrait of Fu Bi, a piece that he saw in the house of his friend named Luo Ji 羅畸 in the early 1120s during his tenure as a tax supervisor in Sha 沙 county (QSW, 172.232). In his "formal congratulatory letter" to Fu Zhirou, Li Gang not only praised the intended recipient as a clever, erudite, sanguine, and generous official but also highlighted Fu's reputation within scholarly circles, which had been developed over generations since the time of Fu's grandfather. According to Li, the senior Fu made significant contributions to the Song dynasty, to the point that the dynastic altars had relied on his meritorious service and the Khitan Liao regime had respected his magnanimity. Li then noted that scholar-officials were delighted upon hearing of the junior Fu's promotion and encouraged Fu to play a role similar to the sagacious Qi minister Yan Ying 晏嬰 (578–500 B.C.E.), who "did not move from amidst the cups and plates of food [set out for an official banquet], but nevertheless caused the enemy to withdraw their troops a thousand *li* away." (Milburn 2016, p. 323). By making reference to the meaning of the second whole line of hexagram 7, "army" (*shi* 師), in the *Book of Changes*, Li Gang

asserted that the entire realm was awaiting an auspicious sign from Fu, whose service in the army could facilitate the recovery of former Song territory (Wilhelm 1977, p. 33). In the final part of the letter, Li claimed that even though he had isolated himself in a rural area because of his exhaustion and sickness, he still hoped to witness the meritorious achievements of Fu and to benefit from Fu's patronage (QSW, 171.299–300).

In another congratulatory letter sent to the newly promoted assistant councilor Li Hui, Li Gang similarly noted that scholar-officials were delighted upon hearing the announcement of the promotion of the new appointee. He then encouraged the new appointee to exhaust his wisdom to assist in state affairs, which were in dire straits, and in the task of cultivating the populace, who longed for humanity and longevity. At the end of the letter, Li Gang explained why he had isolated himself in a rural area as a result of his feebleness and illness. He then expressed his desire to witness the meritorious achievements of the new appointee and to benefit from his patronage (QSW, 171.300). The way in which Li Gang praised Li Hui's loyalty appears to be quite ironic. Whereas Li Hui is praised in the letter for "serving the country with wholehearted loyalty" 精忠許國 (QSW, 171.300), a fact that deserves our attention is that Li Hui had previously been demoted precisely because of his "disloyalty to the Song." Because Li Hui had once occupied the position of provisional right executive assistant of the Department of Ministries for the puppet Chu regime in 1127/3, he was perceived to be a disloyal subject of Song. Li Hui swiftly received retribution when the court stripped him of his assignment in 1127/6 (XNYL, 6.170). Li Gang was responsible in some way for Li Hui's earlier punishment, which took place during his tenure as chief councilor. A few years later, in late 1131, when the fates of the two men were reversed, the politically inactive Li Gang turned a blind eye to Li Hui's earlier misdeeds. Instead, to ingratiate himself with the newly appointed assistant councilor, Li Gang sent Li Hui a "formal congratulatory letter" featuring an abundance of flattering rhetoric.

Apart from ministerial changes in the court, rampant banditry in the Jiangnan East circuit also captured the attention of Li Gang, who remained politically sensitive despite his residence in a rural area in Fujian, which was far away from the court. After Li learned that outlaws had somehow been suppressed in mid-1131, he sent a poem to Lü Yihao, at that time the grand supervisory military commissioner of Jiangnan East 江東安撫, 制置大使, to praise the loyalty and gallantry of the minister in subduing the rebels and restoring social stability. Li then noted how the populace in Jiangnan was delighted to receive the victorious Lü and to celebrate the elimination of evil spirits. Predicting that more tasks would be delegated to Lü to facilitate dynastic restoration, Li bemoaned his political inactivity at the end of the poem and regretfully noted that he could only allow his weak and sick body to rest peacefully (*Li Gang quanji*, 28.377–378). Li's prediction of Lü Yihao's political fortune turned out to be accurate as the latter soon received a promotion to the position of chief councilor of the left in 1131/9. Li then sent Lü a "formal congratulatory letter" that started by heaping lavish praises of Lü's virtues: "Your mind is settled with lenience and openness, your spirit is strong and grand, your talent comprehensively covers civil and military aspects, and your insights penetrates deeply through everything" 宅心坦夷, 養氣剛大. 材兼全于文武, 識洞照於幾深 (QSW, 171.300). Li then extolled the grandeur of Lü and compared him to two virtuous ministers from the Zhou period, namely Ji Fangshu 姬方叔 and Yi Jifu 尹吉甫, who assisted King Xuan of Zhou in suppressing what they perceived to be "barbaric" tribes and to some degree restored the glory of the Zhou kingdom. Li predicted that Lü, as chief councilor, would strive for a balance between heaven and earth and defend the Song regime against a foreign invasion. In the final part of the letter, Li recalled his unfortunate fate in recent years: he left the court due to slanders and moved his family thrice to evade banditry. He then lamented that only when the Song dynasty had restored its glory would he be able to live peacefully in rural areas. Noting that Lü, as the chief councilor, bore the responsibility to reclaim dynastic glory, Li encouraged him to exhaust his strength to assist in state affairs to repay the emperor's faith in him (QSW, 171.301).

In addition to sending Lü a “formal congratulatory letter,” Li Gang sent several notes to Lü that are assembled under the title “Alternative sheets to Councilor Lü” 與呂相公別幅 in his collected works (QSW, 171.95–98). All these notes were sent during Li’s stay in Fujian during late 1131 and early 1132. The first note echoed the “formal congratulatory letter” and praised the promotion of Lü. Li encouraged Lü to do the following: “sincerely caring about the country and loving the emperor, you should take pride in wholehearted loyalty; bearing the responsibility as a general outside and a minister inside the court, you should assist in both civil and military affairs” 勵憂國愛君之誠, 精忠自許; 膺出將入相之任, 文武兼資 (QSW, 171.95). In Li’s words, people across the realm were delighted to know of the promotion of an experienced minister. However, Li’s happiness far surpassed that of others as he was indebted to Lü for his previous assistance when Li had been weak and sick, thus explaining why Li wrote this congratulatory note to express his joy (QSW, 171.95).

Unlike the first note, which appeared to be a “formal congratulatory letter,” the second letter was more casual and discussed the exchange of literary writings between Li and Lü. Li recalls that he had recklessly sent his writings to Lü, likely two poems that he had composed to celebrate Lü’s promotion and to bemoan his own political inactivity (*Li Gang quanji*, 28.382). Li then described how honored he was to receive a piece of Lü’s work that echoed his earlier compositions. Expressing his great admiration of the syntax of Lü’s writing, Li claimed that he would put it in a basket and keep it safe for transmission to posterity (QSW, 171.95).

In the remaining three notes to Lü, Li shared his views concerning contemporary politics with and offered his suggestions to the chief councilor. The third note was written in response to a letter from Lü, who suggested “suppressing banditries from within before resisting foreign aggression” 平內寇然後可以禦外侮 (QSW, 171.95). Li concurred with Lü’s view, although he suggested that the court should be wary of merely enlisting the rebels by offering amnesty without imposing imperial authority upon them. Li then noted how rampant banditries were at that time in regions near the middle and lower Yangzi River: dozens of large bandit groups prowled these areas, some of which had nearly a hundred thousand followers. Their power overwhelmed local governments to the degree that prefectures and counties could not implement effective governance while soldiers and civilians could not become settled. The only way to resolve this problem, according to Li, was to send experienced generals to suppress the bandits with sheer military might. Li therefore suggested that Lü should submit a list of bandits to be suppressed to the emperor and order generals such as Zhang Jun 張俊 (1086–1154) and Han Shizhong 韓世忠 (1089–1151) to arrest, expel, and ultimately eliminate them. For bandits who were willing to surrender, their leaders should be held in captivity, and the followers should be dispersed. Elite fighters among these bandits should be enlisted and assigned as subordinates of different generals. Li concluded that only after the successful suppression of bandits in the southern regions of the Yangzi River would the populace be able to live and the restoration project be accomplished (QSW, 171.95–96).

Li’s fourth note was another response to a letter from Lü, in which the chief councilor had lamented that the military institutions and establishments instituted by the founding Song emperors had deteriorated in recent times. Lü’s worries proved his sincerity to serve the country, a virtue that Li praised highly in his reply. Sharing a similar view to that of Lü, Li noted that there had been an upsurge in defunct institutions since the outbreak of wars with the Jurchen. He then reminded the chief councilor to restore these institutions gradually to avoid provoking opposition. In addition, Li also emphasized the importance of employing and rewarding righteous ministers to the task of achieving the restoration: “exposing achievements and crimes, distinguishing evil and upright, employing righteous gentlemen and expelling petty people.” 明功罪, 別邪正, 內君子, 外小人 (QSW, 171.96). These measures, according to Li, were means of caring for the root of a plant and straightening the vigor of a body, following which branches and leaves would naturally become luxuriant and diseases would naturally be cured (QSW, 171.96).

In his fifth note, Li suggested that Lü should produce a blueprint for governing the country. According to Li, all prominent ministers of the past, like designers of a house who create plans for a building before they assemble builders and furnish building materials, had a blueprint for the country. After days of work, the building would be completed. To make great achievements, both an ambitious plan and diligence are essential. However, it is difficult for shortsighted people to make achievements when they are entrusted with important tasks. Even if all relevant plans have been established, success can hardly be attained if someone is anxious to achieve quick success in ten days or a month. Li then elaborated on the ways in which the political setting had changed in recent years: when the Southern Song court was first restored in 1127, the grand strategy of the court was to defend modern Hebei and Henan, which served as a barrier to the Central Plain. However, this area was no longer in the hands of the Song court by the early 1130s. Hence, by the time that Li wrote this note, defending the Huai River and Jinghu regions (modern Hubei and Jiangsu) had become the most pressing requirement. Li then referred to precedents of such division throughout history to increase the persuasiveness of his arguments. According to Li, the Southern dynasties (420–589) had managed to survive due to their defense along the Huai River and their strong garrisons in the upper reaches of the Huai River (the areas of modern Hubei and Hunan). The Southern Tang dynasty (937–975) managed to establish its capital in Jiankang (modern Nanjing) because it controlled the area south of the Huai River. After this area had been conquered by the Later Zhou (951–960) of the Five Dynasties, the Southern Tang regime migrated to the modern Jiangxi area. To protect the Jiankang area and restore the Central Plain, it was essential for the Southern Song regime to strengthen the defenses of modern Jiangsu and Hubei. Li therefore suggested that Lü should appoint prominent generals to strengthen the defenses there and allow them to grow crops should circumstances permit. Refugees should be enlisted to assist in both farming and fighting. Apart from defending against ferocious enemies from without and suppressing bandits from within, agricultural products should be stockpiled, and trade and commerce should be promoted. Emphasis should also be placed on the tasks of educating the literati and training soldiers. Should these goals be achieved, Li predicted that in one to two years a fence against the enemy would be constructed. When the situation of the state became stable and surplus power and resources became available, it would then be time to develop plans to recover the lost territory. Similar to Wang Pu 王朴 (?–959), who advised Emperor Shizong (921–959, r. 954–959) of the Later Zhou to finish an easier task first by conquering Huainan, Li suggested that Lü should first pay attention to nearby areas such as Huainan and Jinghu before planning to conquer the north (QSW, 171.97).

This review of the epistolary correspondences between Li Gang and Lü Yihao reveals that the former shared his views concerning banditry suppression, personnel administration, and strategic defenses with the chief councilor. Li's eagerness to proffer advice to Lü, I suspect, was partly the result of his partial rehabilitation in 1131/8 and partly Lü's positive responses to his letters. As a result of an amnesty instituted previously in connection with a change in the reign name in 1131, Li Gang was restored as the senior academician of Zizheng Hall 資政殿大學士 in 1131/9 (*Li Gang quanji*, p. 1733). Previously, in 1127/1, when Li Gang had initially received this assignment, he had simultaneously been ordered to supervise affairs in the Kaifeng prefecture (*Li Gang quanji*, p. 1717). Li was probably expecting to receive some actual political duties in late 1131 in connection with his restoration, a wish that was finally granted in 1132/2, as discussed before. For the time being, Li continued to reside in his hometown of Fujian and remained politically inactive, although his political passion had been reignited to some degree. Li's political eagerness was intensified partly because the newly promoted chief councilor, Lü Yihao, valued his insights and sent him letters to discuss state affairs in late 1131. Lü's sincerity somehow prompted Li to write him additional letters including political suggestions, which can be perceived as a manifestation of Li's embodiment of the "outwardly regal" vision—his passion for accomplishing great deeds in the political realm. Through the fact that he encouraged the chief councilor to take his views into account when considering policies, Li's eagerness to make

contributions to state affairs indirectly becomes obvious. What deserves our attention is that Li repeatedly expressed his feebleness and sickness in his “formal congratulatory letters,” poems, and the first note to Lü Yihao, all of which were composed before or shortly after 1131/9 when Li became aware of Lu’s promotion to the position of chief councilor. Interestingly, Li no longer mentioned his health conditions in his second to fifth notes to Lu, which were composed in late 1131 and early 1132; this omission can be interpreted as a hint to the chief councilor that Li would be fit to take up official duties.

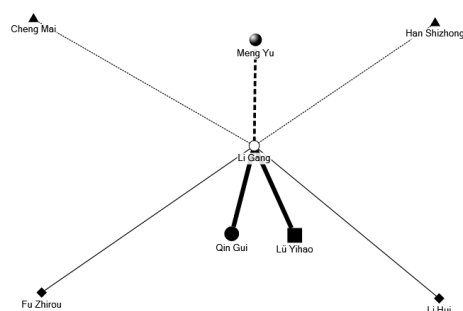
Given his zeal for full political rehabilitation, Li Gang aimed to develop a good rapport not only with court councilors but also with senior officials in his home circuit of Fujian. After Li noticed that the court had appointed assistant councilor Meng Yu 孟庾 to the position of pacification commissioner 宣撫使 for the circuits of Fujian, Jiangxi, and Jinghu in 1131/11 (XNYL, 49.1022), he sent Meng a “formal congratulatory letter” and two poems. In the formal letter, Li first noted how delighted the mass populace were upon hearing of Meng’s assumption of duties as pacification commissioner. Praising Meng’s past loyalty and meritorious achievements, Li encouraged the new appointee to reassert imperial authority and restore social order by subduing the bandits. At the end of the letter, Li claimed that he was looking forward to witnessing Meng’s military success and benefiting from Meng’s patronage, although he had not contacted Meng for some time due to his isolation in rural areas (QSW, 171.301–302). As Li recalled in a poem, the two men had not seen one another for five years since they had parted in the Southern capital of Yingtian prefecture in 1127. After Meng became the pacification commissioner and reached Fujian, he had a reunion with his old friend Li Gang in early 1132, following which Li sent two poems to Meng: the first poem glorifies the military success of Meng in subduing the uprising, while the second poem thanks Meng for caring for Li’s sick body (*Li Gang quanji*, 28.383–384).

Another old acquaintance with whom Li Gang managed to resume contact was vice-pacification commissioner Han Shizhong, the deputy of Meng Yu. Han was once a subordinate of Li when the latter was responsible for the defense of the Song capital of Kaifeng in 1126. One year later, when Li was traveling to the Song court to assume the chief councilorship in mid-1127, Han welcomed him to the outskirts of the Yingtian prefecture (*Li Gang quanji*, 28.383). In late 1131, when Han was heading to Jianzhou 建州 to eliminate bandits, he visited Fuzhou 福州 and met with Li, who suggested that Han should not eliminate the city’s entire population because many civilians were innocent. We are told that Han heeded Li’s advice and spared many lives in Jianzhou (XNYL, 51.1047). After Han had subdued the Jianzhou uprising, he had another reunion with Li prior to leaving Fujian. To celebrate Han’s victory and bid Han a warm farewell, Li offered Han the armor, sword, spear, and shield that had previously been bestowed upon him. He encouraged Han to utilize these gifts to assist in the restoration of the dynasty because he, being a sick man living in a rural area, could no longer make good use of them (*Li Gang quanji*, 28.383). Cheng Mai 程邁 (1068–1145), the military commissioner of Fujian at the time, was also a target with whom Li attempted to establish social ties. After social order had been restored, Cheng renamed the armory the “hall of holding back arms” (止戈堂). A dozen scholar-officials, including Li Gang, sent poems to commemorate this hall and praise the achievements of Cheng (*Li Gang quanji*, 28.384; *Chunxi Sanshanzhi*, 7.178; *Tiaoxiyuyin conghua*, 53.362). All these facts suggest that Li aimed to develop a good rapport with leading officials in Fujian, such as Meng Yu, Han Shizhong, and Cheng Mai, in early 1132.

Li Gang’s efforts to curry favor with court councilors and senior officials in his home circuit of Fujian, I would argue, were essential to his rehabilitation in 1132/2. Apart from restoring Li’s position as an academician of Guanwen Hall 觀文殿學士, the court also assigned him to the position of pacification commissioner for the Jinghu and Guangnan circuits 荆湖廣南路, an area where Li had suggested Lü Yihao strengthen its defense. In his sixth note to Lü, Li expressed his delight upon noticing that he had been restored to his position. However, Li followed the conventional practice of not accepting the appointment as pacification commissioner immediately, using his illness as an excuse: his teeth and hair

had fallen out, and his feet had become swollen to a degree that it was difficult for him to walk. For fear that he could hardly live any longer, Li planned to rest at home and take medicine so that he could live on and “witness the great achievement of the restoration and enjoy the blessing together with farmers and people living in rural areas” 觀中興之偉績，得與田夫野老同受大賜 (QSW, 171.97). However, Li contradicted his claims in the letter, as he soon reported for duty as the chief administrator of the Jinghu and Guangnan circuits, a position in which he remained for nearly ten months, until he was once again demoted to a sinecure position in 1132/12 (XNYL, 61.1212).

In summary, even though politically inactive, residing in his hometown and repeatedly claiming that he was feeble and sick in 1131 and early 1132, Li Gang continued to believe passionately in the “outwardly regal” notion and wished to make great accomplishments in the political realm. His political sensitivity to court and state affairs is well evidenced in the letters that he sent to newly appointed councilors in the court during this period. Moreover, Li also proffered political advice via his epistolary correspondence with assistant councilor Qin Gui and chief councilor Lü Yihao, as a part of which he encouraged the councilors to put his political ideals into practice. Li’s ultimate goal was to seek full-scale political rehabilitation. To impress his potential patrons, Li projected himself to be a virtuous gentleman (*junzi* 君子), on the one hand. According to a famous dictum in the *Analects of Confucius*, a gentleman “should guard against acquisitiveness in old age when the blood and *qi* have declined.” (Lau 2000, p. 165). Li therefore reiterated in his letters his disinterest to acquire an official position owing to his feebleness. Such an “apolitical” assertion is a rhetorical convention that Li adopted to demonstrate his continuous efforts to cultivate himself to be a gentleman—his pursuit of “a sage inside” in the midst of political inactivity. On the other hand, he employed profuse flattery in his epistolary and poetic exchanges with court councilors as well as exhausting every means of developing a good rapport with senior officials in his home circuit of Fujian (See Figure 3). Li’s efforts soon reaped rewards when he was assigned to take charge of the military and political administration in Jinghu and Guangnan in 1132/2. Even though Li reiterated that he was unfit and rejected the appointment at first, the fact that he ultimately accepted this duty not only demonstrates that his claims of disinterest in politics in his letters are far from his real intention but also shows that he valued the opportunity that was offered to him to fulfill his political ambitions and put the “outwardly regal” notion into practice.



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Figure 3. The Social Networks of Li Gang in 1131. The shape of the nodes denotes the mode of communication between Li Gang and his correspondents (triangle = poem; diamond = formal congratulatory note; circle = formal congratulatory note and letter; sphere = formal congratulatory note and poem; square = formal congratulatory note, letter, and poem). The size of the nodes and the thickness of the edges represents the number of formal congratulatory note, letter, and/or poems that Li Gang sent. Solid edge denotes that the correspondent was in Yuezhou while dotted edge denotes that the correspondent was in Fuzhou.

4. Sun Di's Letters to Senior Court Officials

After Sun Di was accused of advocating methods of tax collection that were similar to the “ever fair and equal” (*changping* 常平) policies that Wang Anshi 王安石 (1021–1086) had previously implemented in the mid-eleventh century, he stepped down from the position of prefect of Pingjiang in 1129/18. His assignment as auxiliary academician of the Lungtu Pavilion 龍圖閣直學士 was also rescinded (XNYL, 27.614). After that, Sun resided as politically inactive in the Lake Tai area in the vicinity of Pingjiang and Changzhou 常州 (QSW, 159.36), where the Jurchen pillaged ruthlessly in 1130/2 and 1130/3 (SS, 26.476–477). Apart from witnessing the brutality of the Jurchen conquerors, Sun also became aware of the impoverishment of the populace in his neighborhood due to the extra levies demanded by local officials and clerks. Partly for the sake of relieving the suffering of his neighbors—a manifestation of the “outwardly regal” notion—Sun actively wrote to former acquaintances who were senior ministers in the court and offered possible solutions for their consideration.

One of Sun's correspondents was Fan Zongyin, a former colleague of Sun in the court during the Northern–Southern Song transition in 1127. Soon after noticing that Fan had been promoted to the position of chief councilor of the right in 1130/5 (SS, 26.478), Sun sent his old colleague a long letter. Sun had long admired Fan and was pleased to learn about the latter's rapid promotion, as he noted at the beginning of the letter. During Sun's tenure as the prefect of Pingjiang the previous year, he noticed that Fan had been summoned back to the court to assume duties as executive censor. At that time, Sun was prepared to send Fan a “formal congratulatory letter” upon the latter's assumption of duty, although he failed to do so because he was busy escorting his family back home following his demotion. Soon after social stability was restored in the region upon the departure of the Jurchen invaders, Sun was delighted to learn from his friends that Fan had been promoted to be chief councilor. Sun then prepared a letter to Fan, drafts of which had been destroyed and revised several times, to offer political advice for the consideration of his old colleague (QSW, 159.36).

According to Sun's view, the suffering of the impoverished population of Changzhou was largely the result of the cumbersome bureaucratic structures that plagued the local administration. Instead of focusing on trivial matters such as rewarding eremites and punishing officials who refused to engrave Sima Guang's 司馬光 (1019–1086) *Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Governance* (*Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑) onto woodblocks, the Song court should streamline management by eliminating redundant agencies and officials in the region. According to Sun, more than one hundred men worked in a single military commission in a small prefecture, such as Changzhou. Among the innumerable civil and military officials in the region were some abusive bureaucrats who, in the name of strengthening local defense, had wantonly conscripted labor to strengthen defenses, seized lumber to build warships, demolished dwellings to widen the moat, and confiscated private properties such as cash, grains, and silk fabrics to supply the troops. All these depredations had left most people destitute. Even worse, some military officers, such as Qi Fang 戚方 and Guo Ji 郭吉, became bandits when they learned that the Jurchen conquerors were approaching. Instead of assisting in the defense of the cities, they pillaged Pingjiang and Changzhou. Civil administrators in the two prefectures fled, leaving the populace to be the sole victims of these raids. The two prefectures were later plundered by the Jurchen invaders for nearly twenty days, and nearly 90% of the population in Pingjiang fled or was killed. Social stability was only restored after several months. Sun attributed the miseries of his neighbors to officials in the two prefectures, who bore the name of custodians but were revealed as tormentors of the populace. Such a mismatch between name and reality was a consequence of poor customs among members of the literati from the early twelfth century onward, namely the fact that scholar-officials blindly sought fame at any cost (QSW, 159.35–36).

According to Sun, in addition to causing chaos for the populace in different places, this trend of scholar-officials pursuing fame also caused two major harms to the Song administration: rampant slander and frequent political changes. The former tendency started

to emerge in the mid-1120s when “people who had trivial conduct and who made absurd speeches” 妄言無行之徒 submitted memorials criticizing the misdeeds of senior officials (QSW, 159.36), with the aim of becoming officials themselves or receiving rapid promotions within the bureaucracy if the emperor were to accept their views. To increase the credibility of these claims and criticisms, such slanderers even incentivized other people to echo them. However, the court took these rootless accusations and defamations seriously, and the trend of slandering officials and even the emperor continued to grow. It is under these circumstances that Miao Fu 苗傅 (?–1129) and Liu Zhengyan 劉正彥 (?–1129) were able to rally their troops and launch a *coup d'état* to force Gaozong to abdicate in 1129/3. Even though the uprising was swiftly subdued and Gaozong was restored to power, this trend of slander continued to prevail (QSW, 159.36–37). Another aspect of the Song court that Sun perceived to be problematic was political inconsistency. This criticism owes much to the fact that chief councilors merely adopted the critiques of the censorial officials without verifying their veracity and changed their minds easily and without deliberation. Whenever a policy was criticized, it would soon be abolished; whenever an official was condemned, he would soon be removed. As a result, changes in policies and personnel shifts occurred frequently within the bureaucracy, which is detrimental to Song governance. Without resolving these two problems, Sun predicted that Jurchen invasions and rampant banditry would continue to plague the Song court, and that the goal of restoring dynastic stability and relieving the suffering of the people would remain far removed from fulfillment (QSW, 159.36–37).

In his letter to Fan Zongyin, Sun Di then quoted the story of Emperor Gaozu (256–195 B.C.E., r. 202–195 B.C.E.), the founder of the Han, as an example to emphasize the importance of having faith in one's subordinate ministers. Gaozu's success, as Sun argued, owed much to his good rapport with his subordinates. The Han (202 B.C.E.–220 C.E.) founder overlooked slanders against his talented subjects such as Han Xin 韓信 (231–196 B.C.E.) and Chen Ping 陳平 (?–178 B.C.E.) regarding their previous flaws with respect to moral probity and utilized their talents without reservation. As a result, Gaozu managed to establish the Han dynasty after defeating the Qin empire (221–206 B.C.E.) and his archrival Xiang Yu 項羽 (232–202 B.C.E.) (QSW, 159.37). Sun Di therefore encouraged Fan Zongyin, as the chief councilor who bore the responsibility of assisting the emperor in bringing prosperity to the entire realm, to be consistent. Once Fan decided to implement a policy or put his faith in an official, he should not abandon the policy or remove the official without serious thought (QSW, 159.37–38). Fan should trust his subordinates wholeheartedly, similar to the way in which the King of Yue Goujian 勾踐 (r. 496–465 B.C.E.) trusted Wen Zhong 文種 (?–472 B.C.E.) and Fan Li 范蠡 (536–448 B.C.E.) or the Duke of Qi (?–643 B.C.E.) trusted the prominent statesman Guan Zhong 管仲 (723–645 B.C.E.). Most importantly, Sun suggested that Fan should imitate the Han founder by ignoring ridiculous opinions and turning a blind eye to the previous misdeeds of his subordinates. Bearing in mind the fact that Sun himself had previously been demoted due to defamatory accusations of disloyal deeds during the Northern–Southern Song transition, the hidden agenda underlying Sun's political advice was likely to be his request for Fan's assistance in redressing these injustices or even rehabilitating him. This background may explain why Sun employed a flattering rhetoric in his letter to the chief councilor. In addition to praising Fan's “flourishing virtues and grandiose reputation, which are honored and manifested under the reigns of three emperors [i.e., Huizong, Qinzong and Gaozong]” 盛德偉望，尊顯三朝 (QSW, 159.36), Sun also praised Fan's previous achievements as a censorial official whose upright critiques were circulated widely throughout the realm (QSW, 159.36).

Sun's efforts in composing and revising this long letter to Fan soon led to certain benefits. As part of an amnesty promulgated previously (SS, 26.476), Fan managed to obtain the emperor's consent to rehabilitate Sun, among other officials. An edict announcing the restoration of Sun's assignment as academician-in-waiting of the Huiyou Pavilion 徽猷閣待制 was thus issued in 1130/7. However, the imperial order was soon rescinded, as certain censorial officials noted that Sun had previously drafted a document of surren-

der earlier and hence should not be pardoned (*XNYL*, 35.802). Apart from attempting to facilitate Sun's rehabilitation, Fan also endeavored to put Sun's political suggestions into practice. We are told that Fan suggested that his ally Ji Ling 季陵 (1081–1135) should submit a memorial following an audience with the emperor in 1131/8 to petition for the re-employment of officials who had been banished or demoted in recent years (*XNYL*, 36.809–810). Such a proposal from Ji echoed what Sun Di suggested to Fan previously in his long letter, in which he advised the chief councilor to trust his subordinates irrespective of their previous misdeeds. Gaozong initially gave his consent and ordered Ji's memorial to be posted in the state council, although he soon changed his mind due to opposition from censorial officials. Ji Ling was demoted as a result (*XNYL*, 36.812 and 814; *SS*, 377.11648–11649).

Even though the politically inactive Sun Di did not reside in the capital, he was well informed of political upheavals in the court. Sun noted in his second letter to Fan Zongyin that someone had shown him the memorial of Ji Ling that led to Ji's demotion. Despite the fact that Sun felt upset upon reading Ji's memorial, because his previous proposals to Fan were similar to the petitions of the disgraced Ji, a letter from Fan lifted his spirits. Because Fan's letter is no longer extant, the exact nature of what he told Sun in the letter remains a mystery. Luckily, hints concerning this material can be found in Sun's second letter to Fan, in which he expressed his gratitude to the chief councilor, who not only tolerated Sun's frivolous suggestions but also wrote him a reply containing generous offers that far exceeded his expectations. Sun's emphasis on his reluctance to resume public service due to his deterioration, poor health, and fear of slander allows us to surmise that Fan had somehow mentioned his intention to rehabilitate Sun in his letter. Expressing his hesitancy to take up an active political role, Sun expressed his hope that the chief councilor could extend his goodwill to help his brother Sun Xian 孫峴 secure a better position. The junior Sun wished to be appointed to a position in the Liangzhe circuit after passing the examinations administered by the Ministry of Personnel. Aside from participating in the personnel examinations, Sun Xian also secured the help of Liu Guangshi 劉光世 (1086–1142), the pacification commissioner of Huainan 淮南宣撫使 at the time, in nominating him to the court to occupy the position of assistant subprefect of Changxing 長興 county in Huzhou 湖州. Ideally, in some way, the chief councilor would do Sun Di a favor by ensuring an appointment for the latter's brother. In addition to Sun Xian's appointment, Sun Di also related the previous achievements of a military commander named Deng Shizong 鄧士宗 in suppressing bandits and expressed his hope that Fan would give due credit and rewards to Deng (*QSW*, 159.38–39). The attempts of Sun Di to exploit his social connection with chief councilor Fan Zongyin to achieve two political goals, namely that of seeking political patronage for his brother and that of realizing his political vision concerning proper rewards for meritorious officials, suggest that Sun was far from apolitical. We should therefore not understand Sun's claim of disinterest in public service in his letter to Fan as an expression of his lack of passion for political pursuits. The fact that Sun accepted the appointment as prefect of Lin'an a few months later in 1131/1 proves that such a claim is merely a rhetoric of self-deprecation, as discussed below.

To realize his political vision, Sun Di wrote not only to Fan Zongyin but also to assistant councilor Zhang Shou 張守 (1084–1145). Sun had long been acquainted with Zhang and his family, partly because they all hailed from Changzhou. As early as the 1100s, when Sun was studying at the Imperial University, he resided in the same hall as Zhang Yu 張宇 (1081–1158), a brother of Zhang Shou. Sun Di and Zhang Yu later became part of the examination cohorts (*tongnian* 同年), as both men passed the advanced scholar degree examinations in 1109 (*QSW*, 161.72). After Sun became an official, he continued to have close ties with the Zhang family. In the early 1120s, when Sun served as an investigating censor, he once showed and lent Zhang Shou a poetic scroll, following which Zhang composed a poem to thank Sun (*Piling ji*, 15.199). After Zhang's mother passed away in 1125, Sun wrote two letters of condolence to Zhang (*QSW*, 159.297). All these facts indicate an intimate relationship between Zhang Shou and Sun Di.

Interestingly, when Zhang was promoted to the position of assistant councilor in 1130/5, Sun did not initially congratulate his old acquaintance in writing. We are told that Sun dared not send such a letter as he perceived himself to be a disgraceful official. Only because of the increasing grievances of the Changzhou populace against corrupted clerks did Sun decide to write Zhang a letter in the second half of 1130. Hoping that his old friend, who then occupied the position of assistant councilor, would offer assistance, Sun first highlighted in the letter the miseries of their fellow countrymen, who were being tortured by Jurchen invaders and cruel bandits and suffering severe brutality. Plague and famine in the late summer and early autumn of 1130 further increased the death toll, a situation of which Zhang should have been well informed (QSW, 159.43–44). A fact of which Zhang was probably unaware, according to Sun, was the evilness of officials and clerks. Accompanied by armed troops, these unlawful bureaucrats “ransacked one’s granary, snatched one’s pocket, flogged the masses and abducted women” 發人之廩, 錄人之囊, 鞭笞百姓, 執縛婦女 (QSW, 159.44) in the name of searching for bandits. To substantiate his argument, Sun described in detail the misfortunes suffered by three of his old neighbors and relatives whose families had nearly been wiped out. Instead of comforting the victims, abusive bureaucrats indulged themselves in extortion at will, to such a degree that the populace did not know where to put their hands and feet. Driven by their despondency and hatred toward their abusers, some peasants carried the long handles of their farming tools and joined the local strongmen. Degenerating into banditry and violence, these peasants vandalized government offices as a form of revenge. To rescue their desperate countrymen and restore social stability in their hometowns, Sun Di suggested that Zhang Shou should pardon those commoners, who had been forced by despair to become outlaws for the sake of pure survival. He also offered two solutions to the assistant councilor near the end of his letter regarding ways of improving local governance, namely reducing redundant clerks and imposing harsher punishments on abusive bureaucrats. Hopefully, Zhang would resolutely exhaust his strength to put Sun’s suggestions into practice, in which case not only their fellow countrymen but also the population of the entire realm would reap the benefits (QSW, 159.44).

Whether Zhang Shou took Sun’s advice remains unknown today. A fact of which we are certain is that Zhang wrote a reply to Sun. Even though this letter can no longer be found in the extant editions of Zhang’s collected works, we can deduce from Sun’s second letter that Zhang somehow offered his old friend political patronage. Sun Di euphemistically declined Zhang’s goodwill in the letter, similar to his response to Fan Zongyin, as discussed above, by reiterating his recent misfortunes. Shortly after he had been removed from the position of the prefect of Pingjiang due to slander, his family suffered from the depredations of the Jurchen invaders and local bandits. Even though he managed to survive after experiencing such calamities, he dared not dream of returning to the court to take up an honorable appointment, as he relates to Fan in the letter. Whereas Sun Di appeared to have a strong desire to spend the rest of his life in farming and fishing due to his fear of further troubles, his younger brother Sun Xian, who had just been admitted to the ranks of Song officials, was much more politically ambitious. As Sun Di told Zhang Shou at the end of the letter, his brother once attempted to take part in the examinations conducted by the Ministry of Personnel to obtain an official appointment. However, assistant councilor Xie Kejia 謝克家 (?–1134) indicated disapproval in some way. The junior Sun was therefore required to seek help from Liu Guangshi with respect to the latter’s nomination to the position of assistant magistrate of Changxing county. Sun Di hoped that Zhang Shou, as assistant councilor, would somehow help his younger brother to obtain the position in Changxing, a place from which it was convenient for Sun Xian to travel back to his hometown in Changzhou to take care of his family (QSW, 159.45–46). Securing a favorable political appointment for his younger brother appears to have been one of the chief political agendas of Sun Di, who attempted to achieve this goal by exploiting his social ties with senior court ministers, including Fan Zongyin, Zhang Shou, and Xie Kejia.

Apart from helping his younger brother obtain a political appointment, Sun Di also hoped that Xie Kejia, a former acquaintance who had recently been promoted to the position of assistant councilor, would help to relieve the suffering of his fellow countrymen by improving the local governance. During Xie's tenure as director of education in the mid-1120s, Sun had been one of his subordinate educational officials at the Imperial University (*Jingkang yaolu jianzhu*, 1.74). Later, both men were demoted in 1127/6 after being charged with having served in the puppet Chu regime (*XNYL*, 6.170 and 179). After spending a year in a sinecure, Xie was rehabilitated and subsequently promoted to the position of assistant councilor in 1130/8 (*SS*, 26.481). Sun then sent a letter to the new appointee, in which he noted that the promotion of an upright person when the dynasty is at stake deserves celebration throughout the realm. However, he dared not congratulate Xie, because the latter, as an assistant councilor, would be the target of slander by desperate, petty men. In addition to defaming court ministers, petty men extorted the populace in the West Zhe circuit. In his letter to Xie, Sun then related the sufferings of the people in the Pingjiang prefecture due to corrupt clerks and military men, similar to his reports to Zhang Shou, as discussed above. To reduce the suffering of the people, Sun suggested that Xie should reduce the number of redundant officials and impose harsher punishments on abusive bureaucrats. After proffering his advice concerning ways of improving local governance, in the second half of the letter, Sun vividly illustrated the gallantry of a military commander named Deng Shizong in capturing bandit leaders and subduing uprisings. According to Sun, bandits dared not plunder the territory under Deng's supervision. In view of Deng's contributions to restoring and maintaining social stability, Sun suggested that the court should swiftly reward Deng appropriately and expressed his hope that Xie, as assistant councilor, would facilitate this matter (*QSW*, 159.47–48). It is worth noting that Sun made a similar request concerning the need to reward Deng in his letter to chief councilor Fan Zongyin, as noted previously (*QSW*, 159.39).

Whether Sun Di's correspondents helped Deng Shizong acquire due recognition from the court and heeded Sun's advice to reduce the harms caused by abusive bureaucrats can no longer be determined. What is well known is the fact that Sun Di's younger brother, Sun Xian, indeed assumed the position of assistant magistrate of Changxing county, a post that he relinquished no later than 1134 during Sun Di's banishment in Xiangzhou (*QSW*, 159.205, 321 and 424). Whereas Fan Zongyin and Zhang Shou likely did Sun Di a favor by helping his younger brother, they turned a blind eye to his claims of disinterest in resuming public service. After Sun sent his second letter to Fan, the chief councilor recommended that Sun be appointed the prefect of Lin'an in 1131/1. Sun's assignment as academician-in-waiting of the Lungtu Pavilion was also restored to him (*XNYL*, 41.889). Unsurprisingly, Sun followed the standard practice among Song literati and initially refused to take up the appointment. In his third letter to Fan, Sun both thanked the chief councilor for restoring him and begged Fan to let him remain in his sinecure. Sun claimed that a more virtuous and talented person should be appointed to oversee Lin'an, an important city that was adjacent to Yuezhou 越州, where the Song court was located at the time. Lin'an was also a crossroads where many travel routes converged. Despite its significance, the city faced a pivotal movement that required urgent attention as it had thrice been pillaged by bandits. In Sun's words, "it is no longer a time for local prefects to decorate their kitchens and relay stations for the sake of pleasing visitors who pass by" 非飭廚傳、稱過客之時 (*QSW*, 159.40). Having learned a lesson from his own downfall in Pingjiang, Sun predicted that most people would not be satisfied with his swift reforms. He therefore requested to remain in his current sinecure (*QSW*, 159.39–40).

Instead of relying solely on Fan Zongyin, Sun also wrote to Zhang Shou and Xie Kejia in the hope that the two assistant councilors would help him to remain in his sinecure. In his letter to Zhang, Sun mentioned that social customs began to degenerate in the Xuanhe era (1119–1125), to such a degree that prefects and county magistrates bribed senior officials who passed by relay stations to prevent verbal disputes. Sun was adamant that this custom should be rectified, although he predicted that many people would be offended if

he were to take action. To avoid bothering the court with further complaints against him, Sun requested to remain in his sinecure (QSW, 159.46). Apart from the reasons for refusal that he conveyed to Fan and Zhang, Sun noted that his unfortunate fate also made it inappropriate for him to be the prefect of an important city like Lin'an. Sun explains his misfortunes between 1126 and 1130 in his letter to Xie Kejia in detail. Having been demoted twice, Sun also experienced the downfall of the Song regime, the capture of Huizong and Qinzong by the Jurchen, and the mutiny against Gaozong in Yangzhou 揚州. Because Lin'an was an important city that served as a shield to the court, a person who has a grand appearance and good fortune should be appointed as its prefect instead of Sun (QSW, 159.48). At this point, Fan, Zhang, and Xie no longer entertained Sun's request, likely because they treated Sun's refusal merely as a polite gesture that did not reflect his genuine intentions.

The fact that Sun ultimately assumed the role of prefect of Lin'an reveals his eagerness to continue to exert himself in the political realm. Ironically, Sun did not manage to remain in office for long, as two newly appointed chief councilors, Qin Gui and Lü Yihao, who had been promoted to the top position in 1131/8 and 1131/9, respectively, disliked him (XNYL, 48.1001). The way in which Sun ran afoul of Lü is no longer traceable today, although we know that Lü somehow defended and assisted Sun when the latter had encountered troubles and that Sun later sent several letters to Lü expressing his gratitude. The conflict between Sun Di and Qin Gui can be traced back to 1131/2, when the latter, who had just returned from the north after being held hostage by the Jurchen, was promoted to the position of assistant councilor. Sun wrote Qin a "formal congratulatory letter" that compared Qin to two loyal exemplars from Chinese history, namely Su Wu 蘇武 (140–60 B.C.E.) and Du Fu 杜甫 (712–770), who survived capture and deprivation and later rejoined the Han and Tang regimes, respectively (QSW, 159.82 and 252). However, Qin believed that Sun was teasing him (XNYL, 42.903). After Qin's promotion to the position of chief councilor, he first required Sun to plead illness and subsequently removed him from office as prefect of Lin'an and demoted him to a sinecure in 1131/10 (XNYL, 48.1001; Hartman 2003, p. 135).

This survey of Sun Di's letters to Fan Zongyin, Zhang Shou, and Xie Kejia written in 1130 highlights the way in which the politically inactive Sun attempted to exploit his relationships with the three senior court ministers to exert his influence in the political realm. All three men were subtly connected to Sun: Sun had long been acquainted with Zhang and his family, likely because both men hailed from Changzhou. Fan and Xie served together with Sun at the capital of Kaifeng in 1126–27. Sun's previous social ties and good rapport with these three men may explain why he did not hesitate to share his political views with them, proffer them political advice, and even raise political requests in his letters to them shortly after their promotions to the council of state. Sun attributed the suffering of the populace in Pingjiang and Changzhou to willful extortion by corrupt clerks and military figures. He therefore suggested that the councilors should impose harsher punishments on these abusive bureaucrats and get rid of redundant officers. Sun also expressed his contempt of the "petty men" in the court who often made slanderous accusations. Advising Fan Zongyin to ignore such defamations, Sun expressed his hope that the chief councilor would put his full faith in his subordinates irrespective of their imperfect moral probity. Aside from offering possible solutions to improve state affairs to be considered by the recipients of his letters, Sun also wrote to them concerning personal matters, such as his younger brother's political fortunes. Upon receiving Sun's letters, the council members managed to put some of Sun's political recommendations into practice and to some degree helped him to realize the "outwardly regal" notion. The fact that deserves our attention in this context is that they turned a blind eye to Sun's claims of being apolitical and facilitated his political rehabilitation. Sun's ultimate consent to become prefect of Lin'an in 1132 suggests that his claims in the letters were far from genuine but were merely rhetoric to present himself to be politically unaggressive. The recipients of Sun's letters were familiar with such rhetorical conventions and hence could identify Sun's real intention: his eagerness to resume active public service in order to better exercise his "outwardly regal" vision.

5. Concluding Observations

The epistolary networks of Li Gang and Sun Di that I have reconstructed on the basis of their letters collected in the *Complete Prose of the Song* reveals that the two men only had a few connections in common, which prompts me to investigate the political background of this tiny group of twelve common correspondents and explore the extent to which they helped the two men to realize the Confucian “outwardly regal” vision. It is found that most of the common correspondents of Li and Sun were members of the state council in the Song court, and that the two men often sent letters to congratulate the promotions of these senior ministers. The letters that Li and Sun wrote to senior officials in the early 1130s, a period when the two men were not playing active political roles, provide evidence concerning their political consciousness and sensitivity to personnel changes in the upper echelons of the civil administration. The structure and content of their letters to the newly appointed councilors were strikingly similar: after glorifying the virtues or past achievements of the new appointees and expressing their high hopes concerning those figures, the writers then offered their opinions and suggestions pertaining to state governance. The moral probity of officials, suppression of banditry, and deliberation concerning a grand strategy were just a few of the many issues that Li discussed in his letters to the two councilors Qin Gui and Lü Yihao, while Sun hoped that senior ministers such as Fan Zongyin, Zhang Shou, and Xie Kejia would adopt his advice to eliminate redundant clerks and impose a harsher punishment on corrupt bureaucrats. The intentions of Sun and Li to exert influence in the political arena and to realize the “outwardly regal” notion through their epistolary networks are obvious. Ideally, the recipients of their letters would help to put their political ideals into practice.

At the end of their letters, both Sun and Li frequently reiterated their claims that they were sick and disinterested in public service. Ironically, their actual behavior was the exact opposite of these claims. Partly due to the patronage of the councilors to whom they had written, the Song court soon assigned official duties to both Sun and Li, who did not resolutely refuse to take up these challenges. The fact that both men resumed public service suggests that their apolitical claims in the letters were far from genuine. Instead of truly reflecting the two men’s real intention, such claims are rhetorical conventions that they employed to project themselves as virtuous Confucian gentlemen who should have no desire to acquire career advancement in the midst of physical feebleness. Even though the two men hoped to forge an image that they were continuing to cultivate themselves during their periods of political inactivity, the recipients of the letters managed to unveil the intent of the two men beneath their rhetorical pursuit of “a sage inside”: their eagerness for political rehabilitation and their opportunistic motives underlying their epistolary exchanges.

The political opportunism of Li Gang and Sun Di, as evidenced by the flattering rhetoric that they employed in their letters to senior ministers, may have been related in some way to the custom of currying favor that became prevalent among Song literati from the late eleventh century onward. Partly as a result of fierce factional struggles, political idealists were ousted from the court, while abusive bureaucrats exploited every possible means of improving their careers. One scholar from the late eleventh century, Lü Tao 呂陶 (1031–1107), vividly illustrated the ways in which his contemporary “scholar-officials rushed to indulge themselves in power and profit. To curry favor with potential patrons, even friends and colleagues who were related by marriage turned against each other to the point that they harmed one another” 士大夫奔溺勢利... 雖姻戚僚友間輒向背, 甚者至自相魚肉, 以取寵邀遇 (QSW, 74.94). Members of the literati in the early twelfth century were equally aggressive with respect to their career pursuits. According to Sun Di, “when powerful and noble men held sway across the realm in the Zhenghe era, their countless admirers and followers competed with one another to fawn on them so as to earn promotions” 政和中, 權貴人擅天下... 而慕臆逐臭, 相扳而起者又不可勝數 (QSW, 161.40). Careerists continued to dominate the court throughout the Northern–Southern Song transition, as Sun Di articulated in the letter to Fan Zongyin discussed above. The letters that Sun Di and Li Gang wrote to senior ministers should be understood in the context of this broader picture of the Song political culture and literati cus-

toms. Ironically, on the one hand, both men encouraged the councilors to help eradicate such a frivolous trend of political opportunism upon receipt of their letters. On the other hand, they themselves employed flattery in their letters and fawned on senior ministers, hoping that the latter would serve as their patrons and facilitate their full political rehabilitation.

Even though Li has been highly praised and Sun has been widely condemned by posterity, a comparison of their letters to various newly promoted councilors during their periods of political inactivity reveals that the two men employed similar strategies to maintain or establish social ties with potential political patrons. For the sake of receiving another opportunity to play an active role in the political arena, both men employed flattering rhetoric to ingratiate themselves to the recipients of their letters, suggesting that Li was no less a political opportunist than his contemporary Sun. Li's eagerness to flatter senior officials is not attested by other sources, as inglorious deeds are certainly not intended for circulation among one's contemporaries or for transmission to posterity. Were it not for the survival of Li's letters, his negative aspects would have passed into oblivion. Hence, through a comprehensive study of Li Gang's epistolary writings, which no historians to date have utilized fully, this paper offers a more objective evaluation of a widely acclaimed Song scholar-official and challenges the traditional moralistic characterization of two historical figures as either good or evil.

Apart from offering new perspectives on these historical figures, this paper also deepens our understanding of the cultural significance of political communication as well as that of elite networks and behaviors in the early Southern Song. The writings of Sun Di and Li Gang to newly appointed councilors highlight the critical role of epistolary correspondence in the creation and maintenance of connections that are crucial to these figures' realization of the "outwardly regal" notion during their periods of political inactivity and subsequent political rehabilitations. It is worth noting that most senior officials to whom Li Gang and Sun Di wrote were former colleagues or schoolmates. Even though the two men tended to isolate themselves during their periods of exile in the late 1120s, they resumed writing to their old acquaintances when they noticed the latter's promotions in the early 1130s. Their intention to reactivate their relationship with these potential patrons suggests the expected permanence of social ties that had been established previously even though both parties had been separated for years. In the words of Bossler, "in the context of Song political culture, once a relationship had been established, it could be reactivated at any time through a properly written missive." (Bossler 2021, p. 309).

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- ¹ Dates in this article correspond to the Chinese lunar calendar. The years of the Song court calendar are converted into the corresponding Western year. Thus, 1129/18 stands for the intercalary eighth month of the third year of the Jianyan reign period of Song Gaozong.

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