Document 19.5
An exchange of diplomatic letters between the Han (汉) emperor and the chief ruler of the Xiongnu (匈奴), 176 B.C.E.

At the beginning of Han Emperor Wen’s reign, he renewed the peace treaty with the Xiongnu. Three years later, however, the Wise King of the Right, a Xiongnu leader, invaded China’s border region south of the Yellow River. He attacked nomadic tribes allied with the Chinese and killed and kidnapped many people. The Chinese emperor responded by sending a force of 85,000 infantry and cavalry to Gaonu. This force succeeded in driving the Wise King of the Right beyond China’s borders. The presiding Xiongnu leader, the shanyu, sent this letter in the following year:

The great shanyu whom Heaven has set up respectfully inquires of the emperor’s health. Formerly the emperor broached the question of a peace alliance, and I was most happy to comply with the intentions expressed in his letter. Certain of the Han border officials, however, imposed upon and insulted the Wise King of the Right, and as a result he heeded the counsel of Houyi, Luhou, Nanzhi, and others of his generals and, without asking my permission, engaged in a skirmish with the Han officials, thus violating the pact between the rulers of our two nations and rupturing the bonds of brotherhood that joined us. The emperor has twice sent letters complaining of this situation and I have in turn dispatched an envoy with my answer, but my envoy has not been allowed to return, nor has any envoy come from the Han. As a result, the Han has broken off peaceful relations and our two neighboring countries are no longer bound in alliance.

Because of the violation of the pact committed by the petty officials, and the subsequent events, I have punished the Wise King of the Right by sending him west to search out the Yuezhi people and attack them. Through the aid of Heaven, the excellence of his fighting men, and the strength of his horses, he has succeeded in wiping out the Yuezhi, slaughtering or forcing to submission every member of the tribe. In addition he has conquered the Lou-lan, Wusun, and Hujie tribes, as well as the twenty-six states nearby, so that all of them have become a part of the Xiongnu nation. All the people who live by drawing the bow are now united into one family and the entire region of the north is at peace.

Thus I wish now to lay down my weapons, rest my soldiers, and turn my horses to pasture; to forget the recent affair and restore our old pact, that the peoples of the border may have peace such as they enjoyed in former times, that the young may grow to manhood, the old live out their lives in security, and generation after generation enjoy peace and comfort.

However, I do not as yet know the intentions of the emperor. Therefore I have dispatched my palace attendant Xihuqian to bear this letter. At the same time I beg to present one camel, two riding horses, and eight carriage horses. If the emperor does not wish the Xiongnu to approach his frontier, then he should order the officials and people
along the border to withdraw a good distance back from the frontier. When my envoy has arrived and delivered this, I trust that he will be sent back to me.

*When the envoy reached the Han with the letter, the emperor called his ministers together to decide what to do: keep attacking the Xiongnu or make peace. The high officials all agreed that it would be better to make peace. The Xiongnu had just subdued all the other northern tribes and were therefore formidable opponents. Also, the Xiongnu lands were all either desert or swamps, so the Chinese could never make a living there. In 174 B.C.E., Emperor Wen sent his response to the leader of the Xiongnu:*

The emperor respectfully inquires about the health of the great shanyu. Your palace attendant Xihuqian has brought us a letter which states: “The Wise King of the Right, without asking my permission, heeded the counsel of Houyi, Luhou, Nanzhi, and others of his generals, violating the pact between the rulers of our two nations and rupturing the bonds of brotherhood that joined us, and as a result the Han has broken off peaceful relations with me, and our two neighboring countries are no longer bound in alliance. Because of the violation of the pact committed by the petty officials, I have punished the Wise King of the Right by sending him west to attack the Yuezhi. Having completed the conquest of the region, I wish to lay down my weapons, rest my soldiers, and turn my horses to pasture; to forget the recent affair and restore our old pact so that the people of the border may have peace, the young may grow to manhood, the old live out their lives in security, and generation after generation enjoy peace and comfort.”

We heartily approve these words. This indeed is the way the sage rulers of antiquity would have spoken.

The Han has made a pact of brotherhood with the Xiongnu, and for this reason we have sent generous gifts to you. Any violations of the pact or ruptures of the bonds of brotherhood have been the work of the Xiongnu. However, as there has been an amnesty since the affair of the Wise King of the Right occurred, you need not punish him too severely. If your intentions are really those expressed in your letter, and if you will make them clearly known to your various officials so that they will henceforth act in good faith and commit no more violations of the pact, then we are prepared to honor the terms of your letter.

Your envoy tells us that you have led your troops in person to attack the other barbarian nations and have won merit, suffering great hardship on the field of battle. We therefore send you from our own wardrobe an embroidered robe lined with patterned damask, an embroidered and lined under robe, and a brocaded coat, one each; one comb; one sash with gold ornaments; one gold ornamented leather belt; ten rolls of embroidery; thirty rolls of brocade; and forty rolls each of heavy red silk and light green silk, which shall be delivered to you by our palace counselor and master of guests Jian.