# CONTENTS

**Preface and Acknowledgments**  ix  
**Translation Conventions**  xi  
**Chronology of Imperial China with Authors of Autobiographies**  xiii  
**Introduction**  1

1  A son’s tribute to his mother | An inscription on a bronze vessel (10th c. BCE)  20  
2  Crime and Punishment | Personal testimony given in four legal cases (3rd–2nd c. BCE)  23  
3  A Han emperor accepting the blame | Edict by Emperor Wu 武帝 (r. 141–87 BCE)  29  
4  Letters home | Three letters sent by ordinary men and women (3rd c. BCE and 9th–10th c. CE)  33  
5  A natural philosopher’s account of his life | Last chapter of his collected essays by Wang Chong 王充 (27–ca. 97 CE)  38  
6  A father writing to his son | A letter by Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (127–200)  49  
7  An abducted woman on returning home | Poems by Cai Yan 蔡琰 (ca. 177–ca. 249)  53  
8  Military men touting their merits | Essays by Cao Cao 曹操 (155–220) and his son Cao Pi 曹丕 (187–226)  59  
9  The pain of separation | Poetic writings by Imperial Consort Zuo Fen 左芬 (ca. 253–300)  67
10  **AN EMPEROR’S DISCOURSE ON KARMA AND VEGETARIANISM** | Preface by Emperor Wu 梁武帝 (r. 502–549) of the Liang 72

11  **LATE TANG WRITERS ON LIFE BEYOND OFFICE-HOLDING** | Accounts by Bai Juyi 白居易 (772–846) and Lu Guimeng 陸龜蒙 (ca. 836–881) 78

12  **MOURNING FRIENDS AND RELATIONS** | Elegies by Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824) and Han Qi 韓琦 (1008–1075) 86

13  **AN ADVOCATE OF THE SIMPLE LIFE** | Autobiography by Liu Kai 柳開 (948–1001) 94

14  **RECORDS OF THINGS SEEN AND HEARD** | Prefaces to five Song miscellanies (11th–13th c.) 101

15  **CHANTING ABOUT ONESELF** | Poems by four Song scholars (11th–13th c.) 107

16  **AN ENVOY’S TRIP TO THE JIN COURT** | Travel diary by Lou Yue 樓鑰 (1137–1213) 111

17  **WOMEN AND SUICIDE** | Writing on an inn wall by Qiongnu 瓊奴 (11th c.) and a poem by Han Ximeng 韓希孟 (mid-13th c.) 116

18  **WITNESSING DYNASTIC COLLAPSE** | Writings by Yuan Haowen 元好問 (1190–1257) and Wen Tianxiang 文天祥 (1236–1283) 121

19  **PEACEFUL ABODES** | Accounts of their homes by Yelü Chucai 耶律楚材 (1190–1244) and Xie Yingfang 謝應芳 (1296–1392) 129

20  **A FEMALE DOCTOR’S LIFE AND WORK** | Preface and postfaces to a book by Tan Yunxian 談允賢 (1461–1556) 135

21  **AN ECCENTRIC CONSIDERS SUICIDE** | Self-authored funerary biography by Xu Wei 徐渭 (1521–1593) 141

22  **LIFE IN THE EXAMINATION HELL** | Preface to a set of examination essays by Ai Nanying 艾南英 (1583–1646) 146

23  **A ROYAL CONSORT’S SONG** | Music for the zither by Madame Zhong 鍾氏 (fl. 1570–1620) 153

24  **ENVIRONMENTAL CATASTROPHES** | Harrowing reports by Chen Qide 陳其德 (fl. 1640s) and Pu Songling 蒲松齡 (1640–1715) 166
25 A CON MAN POSING AS AN OFFICIAL | Legal Confession of Luo Fenpeng 羅奮騰 (b. 1726) 176

26 A PRIVATE SECRETARY’S ITINERANT LIFE | Year-by-year autobiography by Wang Huizu 汪輝祖 (1730–1807) 181

27 TRIBUTES TO CLOSE RELATIVES | Appreciations written by a woman for her husband and a man for his elder sister (18th and 19th c.) 208

28 A TEENAGER CAPTURED BY THE NIAN REBELS | Record of a fifteen-week ordeal by Liu Tang 柳堂 (1844–1929) 213

29 KEEPING FAMILY MEMBERS INFORMED | Letters to his eldest son by Zeng Guofan 曾國藩 (1811–1872) 227

APPENDIX | A Select List of Widely Available Translations of Prose Personal Accounts to 1880 241

INDEX 249