This volume has many points of origin. One is the work Patricia Ebrey did in the late 1970s with support from an NEH grant that led to Chinese Civilization and Society: A Sourcebook (New York: Free Press, 1981). Over a period of about three years, a group of graduate students at the University of Illinois working with Pat looked for texts that would make good classroom reading, then drafted translations. Pat went over them all, did some translations herself, wrote the introductions, and tested them in class. So many pieces were translated that publishing them all in a single volume became impossible, so Pat set aside several longer autobiographical pieces, thinking they might one day be published in a set of personal accounts. Four of the pieces included here were resurrected from the old paper copies that had been sitting in file folders for decades. They had to be shortened to be included here but are still among the longer pieces.

Another point of origin is our history together. This goes back to the 1990s, when first Ping Yao and later Cong Ellen Zhang entered the graduate program at the University of Illinois, took courses with Pat, and became good friends with each other. Although we have since scattered, a quarter century later we still read and discuss each other’s work. Together, the three of us edited Chinese Funerary Biographies: An Anthology of Remembered Lives (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019). That volume, having begun with a workshop, contained translations by nineteen different scholars. This time we thought we would try doing most of the translations ourselves, making consistency easier to achieve. Ping largely did the first drafts of the pieces through the Tang, and Cong and Pat the ones for later periods, but we each spent quite a bit of time going over the others’ work, so have not credited translations to one person. In the end, we also chose to include four translations by other scholars.
Since we were happy with the University of Washington Press’s handling of the earlier anthology volume and enjoyed working with Lorri Hagman and her team, we turned to them with this volume as well. We were particularly impressed this time by the highly qualified readers they found to review our manuscript. We would like to publicly thank them for the obvious care they took in going through both the Chinese and English texts and the many suggestions for better phrasing they offered, almost all of which we happily adopted.