A FATHER WRITING TO HIS SON
A letter by Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (127–200)

A letter from a Han Confucian scholar to his son combines autobiography and family instruction.

Zheng Xuan was one the most accomplished scholars of the Confucian classics in Chinese history. Born to a family of modest means, he studied diligently and was admitted to the Imperial University, where he studied both the New Text and the Old Text versions of the Confucian classics. After being banished from court due to factional politics, Zheng Xuan devoted himself to writing commentaries on the classics. His interpretations of the classics drew on both the New Text and Old Text schools and were regularly read along with the classics themselves through the rest of Chinese history.

The letter translated here was written when Zheng was seventy sui and is considered the first to combine autobiography with family instruction. In detailing his life experience, Zheng Xuan stressed that his lifelong goal was “to illuminate the original ideas of the sages, to compile, compare, and analyze different schools of thought of the Spring and Autumn and Warring States era.” Zheng Xuan’s instructions also touch on family ethics, household management, and family tradition, key elements in the family instruction tradition that matured during the following centuries.

The letter, dated 196, is addressed to Zheng Xuan’s only son, Zheng Yi,
referred to by his courtesy name, Yi’en. Zheng’s fatherly love is apparent in his concern that Yi’en will have to take over the “affairs of the family.” He admonishes him “to seek the Way of the gentleman, to study and explore incessantly.” He even reminds his son to “eat lightly and wear simple clothes.” Unfortunately, Zheng Yi would soon be murdered by the Yellow Turban rebels, most likely before Zheng Xuan’s own death of illness four years after he wrote this letter.

Letter Admonishing My Son Yi’en

Although my family was poor, my parents and siblings tolerated my aspirations and allowed me to quit my job as a county assistant and pursue learning. I visited capitals of the Zhou and the Qin [Chang’an, Xianyang, Shaanxi] and traveled around You [Hebei], Bing [Shanxi], Yan [Shandong], and Yu [Henan]. I was able to meet influential people who were in power as well as great scholars who did not serve the government. They accepted my request to study with them, and I learned a great deal. I studied the Six Arts, read broadly in the commentaries on the classics, and had the opportunity to access and understand astrological and augury texts. After reaching forty, I returned home to serve my parents. I tilled the land to support my family and enjoyed my life.

At that time the eunuchs were in control of political power; I was implicated in factional politics and banished from the court. Fourteen years later, I was pardoned. Afterward, I was recommended through the Worthy, Excellent, Straightforward, and Upright category and summoned by the general-in-chief and the office of three ministers [the minister of education, the defender-in-chief, and the minister of works]. If I agreed to have my name listed for consideration, my rank would be equal to a grand councillor a long time ago. Of course, these gentlemen (general-in-chief and the three ministers) were virtuous, refined, and capable of assisting the emperor; it was appropriate that they were where they were. Reflecting on myself, I know very well that I did not have what it takes to do the job. My goal was to illuminate the original ideas of the sages, to compile, compare, and analyze different schools of thought of the Spring-Autumn and Warring States era. This alone would exhaust my capability. Therefore, I did not accept the appointments. Then the Yellow Turbans rose up; I wandered from place to place, fleeing the destruction. In the end, I returned to my hometown.
This year, I reached seventy. My past work is in shambles, and I still find mistakes here and there. I will make some changes based on the classics so that I can pass them down to you. Hereby I inform you that I will retire and leave day-to-day affairs to you. I will lead a leisurely and peaceful life and focus on completing my work. Aside from receiving an order from the emperor, consoling relatives in distress, paying respect at the ancestors’ tombs, or observing wild animals, have I ever grabbed my cane and walked out of the door?

The great and small affairs of the family, you must now shoulder them all on your own. Ah, you solitary man, you never had a sibling to depend on! You should make every effort to seek the Way of the gentleman, to study and explore incessantly. You should be respectful to those with dignity and stay close to those who are virtuous. Illustrious reputations come from colleagues and friends, but virtuous conduct comes from one’s own aspirations. If one achieves fame and acclaim, this will also bring honor to one’s parents. Won’t you keep this in mind? Even though I did not leave behind the accomplishment of high office, my refusal of an appointment was high-minded. I am content with the fact that in completing all those commentaries and annotations of the ancient texts, I will not bring embarrassment to later generations. In the end, what really upsets me is the fact that I have not been able to complete my parents’ tombs, and that the books I love are crumbling and I did not manage to get them into the Imperial University so they could be passed down. With the sun setting, do I still have time to make it up?

Our family is now a bit better off than in the past. If you work diligently and follow the farming seasons closely, you will not have to worry about being hungry or cold. You should eat lightly and wear simple clothes; moderation on both matters will lessen my worries. If you forget or do not understand what I said, then I give up.


Further Reading

