After serving many years as a private secretary and a few years as an official, Wang Huizu wrote a book-length autobiography, something relatively rare in the Chinese tradition of writing about oneself. Drawing on journals or notebooks he kept over the years, he relates many important turning points in his life.

As more and more men took the civil service examinations, the number of those who repeatedly failed steadily increased. While some came from landowning families able to support them while they continued to study and take exams, most of those who persisted had to find other means of support. Working as a tutor or teacher was common, and by the Qing period, a better-paying alternative was to become a private secretary or adviser to a magistrate, prefect, or other regional official. The demands placed on local officials meant that they needed more assistance than the government provided, so on their own they hired men able to handle paperwork, especially
if they also had expertise in the legal code or taxation policies. These private secretaries/advisers should be distinguished from clerks, who were also literate and handled paperwork but were not considered in the same social class as the local official they served. Clerks usually stayed in one jurisdiction their whole careers and often came from families of clerks. Private secretaries, by contrast, were considered literati, had personal ties to the official they served, and might follow him from one post to another.

The eighteenth-century legal adviser/private secretary we know the most about is Wang Huizu, author of a lengthy autobiography. He came from Shaoxing Prefecture in Zhejiang, well-known for producing private secretaries. He began working as one himself at age twenty-three in the office of his father-in-law. Within a few years, he began studying the legal code, eventually serving as a legal adviser. For his autobiography, he adopted the year-by-year style, a format that lets the author draw attention to experiences and people that shaped his values and choices at different stages of his life.

As Wang Huizu’s autobiography shows, the life of a private secretary/legal adviser was an itinerant one. While working, he lived at the government yamen (the walled office complex), leaving his family in his hometown. To make it possible to visit them occasionally, he accepted assignments only in Jiangsu and Zhejiang. There was also time between assignments, as local officials generally held their posts for only two or three years at a stretch, allowing Wang Huizu to return home for months at a time before accepting a new position, sometimes with his previous patron, sometimes with someone else. He records all of these moves in his autobiography.

Wang Huizu did eventually gain the jinshi, but not until he was forty-six, and even then it took another decade before he got a regular appointment as a magistrate. In time, he achieved a considerable reputation for his books of advice on local administration. He was also known for his devotion to his widowed mothers (his father’s legal wife and the concubine who bore him). Of the five children in their care, only one was a boy, and in his telling they poured their hopes into him. Widows like them, who refused to remarry, were celebrated in the Ming and Qing periods as moral heroes. Wang Huizu made repeated efforts to ensure that his mothers’ story of widow chastity was recognized.

The passages from his autobiography included here were selected to show what he saw as formative experiences. They constitute only a small fraction
of his full autobiography and go only through age fifty-six, his final year as a private secretary. He records the births, deaths, and marriages of the twelve children born to his first wife, concubine, and successor wife, but these have been omitted here. Also omitted are all but one of the many legal cases he relates at length.

Reveries from a Sick Bed

THE EIGHTH YEAR OF THE YONGZHENG REIGN [1730]

I was born into the Wang family on the fourteenth day of the twelfth month, between three and five in the morning, in the eastern room of the Reverence for Friendship Hall, which is in the central lane of Great Righteousness Village. From the time my ancestor Wang Dalun moved to Xiaoshan County [Shaoxing Prefecture, Zhejiang] from Yin [Ningbo, Zhejiang] until the time of my great-grandfather Bizheng sixteen generations had passed.

My great-grandmother, Madame Shen, had three sons, of whom my grandfather Zhihan was the youngest. My grandmother (who was the daughter of my great-grandmother’s brother) had two sons, the elder of whom was my father, Kai, the jail warden of Qi County in Henan’s Weihui Prefecture. Thus, counting from the ancestor who moved to Xiaoshan, I was a nineteenth-generation grandson.

At the time of my birth, my father had gone to the capital [Beijing] to await selection for a post. His principal wife, Madame Fang, was recuperating from a chronic illness. My birth mother, Madame Xu, got up four days after my birth to take care of the kitchen work, causing a hemorrhage from which she never recovered fully. All my life I have felt bad about this.

THE NINTH YEAR OF THE YONGZHENG REIGN [1731], MY SECOND YEAR

Father was still in the capital. Wang [王 different Wang character] Tanren of Shanyin [in Zhejiang] and he were the closest of friends. When Mr. Wang had a daughter in the sixth month of the previous year, they made plans to marry their two children. The matter was settled when I was born, without the participation of a go-between.
**THE TENTH YEAR OF THE YONGZHENG REIGN [1732], MY THIRD YEAR**

Father was appointed jailer of Qi County in Weihui Prefecture, Henan.

**THE ELEVENTH YEAR OF THE YONGZHENG REIGN [1733], MY FOURTH YEAR . . .**

**THE TWELFTH YEAR OF THE YONGZHENG REIGN [1734], MY FIFTH YEAR**

This year I started going to an outside teacher.

On the twenty-ninth day of the fifth month, Father’s principal wife, Madame Fang, died. Concerning her, Mother Xu once told me, “When you were born, I was still young. Because I worked very hard in the daytime, Madame Fang was afraid I would get exhausted and not be able to nurse you. Therefore, in the evening, she would take you in her arms. If you cried, she would bring you to me to nurse; after that was done, she would carry you back to her room and personally attend to changing your wet clothes. When she was dying, she took your hand and told your two elder sisters to take good care of you. Her great love for you is something you should always remember.”

When I was in my forties, I reported this conversation to my two sisters, and thinking back on our mother’s love, we cried together.

In the eleventh month, Grandfather brought in a new principal wife for Father, Madame Wang [王 different Wang character].

**THE THIRTEENTH YEAR OF THE YONGZHENG REIGN [1735], MY SIXTH YEAR**

Mother Wang and Mother Xu joined Father in Qi County [Henan], bringing me with them. They invited Teacher Jingshan to come to the office to give lessons.

**THE FIRST YEAR OF THE QIANLONG REIGN [1736], MY SEVENTH YEAR**

Grandfather came to Qi and gave me the name “Huizu” [bringing luster to the ancestors]. When I was born, Grandfather was already fifty-nine; just to
have a grandson made him extremely happy. He gave me the baby name “Scraps” because scraps were cheap and plentiful but useful in farming. At five, when I began studying with a teacher, I was given the name “Ao” [turtle]. When Grandfather saw that I could make out the meaning of characters and could read books, he settled on my present name. . . .

**THE SECOND YEAR OF THE QIANLONG REIGN [1737], MY EIGHTH YEAR**

I studied at the official compound. One day, two pieces of pottery fell to the ground, and the thin one broke. Father, showing me the whole one, said, “If you can be as thick as this one, then you’ll remain even and complete throughout your whole life. Remember this when you are a man: be thick like satin to endure many years’ use, or be like cocoon paper, from which several layers can be removed. However, don’t be like bamboo paper, or you’ll rip apart in one touch.”

**THE THIRD YEAR OF THE QIANLONG REIGN [1738], MY NINTH YEAR**

I studied in the official compound.

**THE FOURTH YEAR OF THE QIANLONG REIGN [1739], MY TENTH YEAR**

In the first month, because Grandfather was old and my uncle was not able to care for him, Father quit his post on the excuse of illness. In the third month, we left Qi and departed for Jining [Shandong]. Mother Wang was pregnant and rode with Mother Xu in a very uncomfortable single-axle covered wagon, as we did not have enough money to rent a large carriage. We arrived home in the fifth month. Soon my younger brother Rongzu was born, but in the seventh month he died.

At this stage of my life, Grandfather cherished me and took me along whenever he went to watch a play. On our return, he would ask me the names of the characters and whether or not they were worthy people, always pleased if I could answer. One day we saw the play *A Record of Embroidered Jackets*. Grandfather said, “In the play, Zheng Yuanhe strove to capture the first
place in the palace examinations in order to become a man of character.” I remarked, “Although he made number one, in the end he did not become a man of character.” Because of this incident, Grandfather told my relatives, “This boy knows enough to become a man of character,” a comment I have never forgotten.

One day a neighboring student got a low grade on the yearly test. When people ridiculed him, I joined in. This made Grandfather angry, and he slapped me. “This man has the rank of ‘flourishing talent’ [qualified to take the provincial examinations], while you do not yet have any rank. How can you make fun of others so lightly?” I knelt and apologized, and Grandfather added, “I expect you someday to be a ‘flourishing talent’ and to be wearing an official robe when you bow at my grave.”

In the tenth month, my second elder sister married into the Sun family. I sneaked out and climbed on a boat to watch the decorated carriage. Losing my footing, I fell into the water at the base of the boat. Before long I was rescued, but Grandfather gave me a painful beating.

On the twentieth day of the eleventh month, Grandfather died. This year I was still studying with Teacher Jingshan.

THE FIFTH YEAR OF THE QIANLONG REIGN [1740],
MY ELEVENTH YEAR

On New Year’s Day, I joined a game of kickball. Father stopped me and scolded me. He gave me a volume of Editor Chen’s “Four-Six” Style Works (Chen jiantao siliu) and ordered that I read half a section every day. I was not allowed to come downstairs until I had finished my assignment. The fact that later, when I served as private secretary, I was known for my ability to write in the balanced style probably can be traced back to this incident.

This year Teacher Zheng Youting was invited to take charge of the school, and I studied with him.

Father had started his career as a merchant. He bought over a hundred mu of land and entered office through purchase. His younger brother, who lived in our village, was corrupted by associating with gamblers and, when deeply in debt, sold almost everything we owned. On Father’s return, he was advised that if he sued, he would be able to get back his fields. Father could not bear to bring an accusation against his brother, so from this time on, our
resources were never enough. After arranging for Grandfather’s tomb, Father made plans to go to Guangdong to try to make a living there.

Before he left, on the evening of the fifteenth of the eighth month, we took an excursion to visit Mother Wang’s family in Kuaiji [Zhejiang]. As our boat trip began, the rain was coming down so hard it looked like silk. I slept, using Father’s left leg as a pillow. After we had gone twenty li or more, he woke me, gazed out through the awning, then turned to me and said, “Son, do you know why I’m making this trip?” When I could not answer, he continued, “I don’t want to have to depend on others in my old age. Fortunately, I am still healthy. But unless I plan now for our livelihood, what will we live on?” I began to cry, and Father also cried, neither of us able to stop. He made an effort to control himself and picked up some books at random and asked me to read aloud from them. “Son, what do you seek through your reading?” he asked. “To become an official,” I answered. “You are wrong. To become an official is one of the reasons we study, but you shouldn’t aim at it. Being an official does not necessarily mean that you’re a man of character. If you aim, instead, to become a man of character, then, even if you don’t become an official, you’ll at least be a good person. On the other hand, if you are lucky and do become an official, you’ll be a good official and certainly won’t incur the hatred of the common people and thus bring calamity on your descendants. Remember what I’ve said.”

Later he picked up The Analects, turning to the sections “Study,” “Filial Piety and Brotherly Love,” and a few others. He discussed them with me until midnight, after which we slept. When we reached Kuaiji, he gave me a copy of The Concise Official Histories (Gangjian zhengshi) and told me to become familiar with it by the time I was grown up. Then he sent me home and left for Guangdong. Those were the last instructions I was to receive from him.

**THE SIXTH YEAR OF THE QIANLONG REIGN [1741], MY TWELFTH YEAR**

I studied with Teacher Zheng Youting.

Father had died the year before on the fifteenth of the twelfth month in a hostel by the Southern Ocean. In the fourth month, his body arrived. Neither of my two mothers remarried, managing by economizing. After they spun and wove, if they still had time, they would earn money by making imitation
paper money to be burned for the dead. From morning to night, they never rested. They often instructed me with tears in their eyes, “Son, if you don’t study, you won’t be able to become a man of character, and your father won’t have an heir. We two would be better off dead.” They then supervised me even more strictly.

**THE SEVENTH YEAR OF THE QIANLONG REIGN [1742],
MY THIRTEENTH YEAR**

I studied with the Teacher Zheng Youting.

In this period, our family was in decline. A number of close kinsmen who fell in with gamblers suspected that my two mothers had private savings from Father’s official service. My father’s younger brother demanded money from my two mothers, and when he did not get it, he beat me. To deal with the situation, my two mothers had to borrow money all around. Once someone even snatched me out of Mother Xu’s hands. Often we were urged to move to avoid these greedy people, but my mothers absolutely refused to leave because Grandmother was still alive and the ancestral temple was there. My mothers often had no food, and it even reached the point where they each had only one single layer of clothing. But Grandmother and I never lacked anything in the way of food or clothing.

**THE EIGHTH YEAR OF THE QIANLONG REIGN [1743],
MY FOURTEENTH YEAR**

I studied with Teacher Zheng Youting. There were four fellow students, but he was strict only with me. Every time I wrote an essay, he would make me revise it three or four times, not giving me a moment’s rest from morning to night. Discouraged, I privately asked my sister’s husband, Sun Huichou, why the teacher treated me this way. He reported that the teacher said, “This boy has real potential, but unfortunately he is not concentrating on his studies. I discipline him to make him apply himself. If I relax my vigilance, then as long as he lives he will fall short.” Teacher Zheng’s words became a part of me, and I have never forgotten them. But because my two mothers were not able to pay his salary, at the end of the year he left to teach elsewhere.
THE NINTH YEAR OF THE QIANLONG REIGN [1744],
MY FIFTEENTH YEAR

A kinsman, Wang Huanruo, invited Teacher Xu Guanzhou of Shangyu [Zhejiang] to come to his house to start a school. I attended it, going in the morning and returning in the evening, Mother Xu personally taking care of my needs. The teacher was about seventy and had a young son. Since I reminded him of his own son, he taught me with extreme care and gave me the courtesy name “Huanzeng” [illuminating what came before]. He once advised me, “If you don’t exert yourself to study, you won’t be able to establish yourself, and your mothers won’t have a bright future.” He must have known about my family difficulties. Our house was separated from the school by a river. I still am moved when I remember how every time I left school he would watch me until I crossed the bridge.

Teacher Zheng was always careful in correcting essays. He considered it his duty to encourage students, and he often praised me. Therefore, after a year with him, my writing became smooth and pleasant. Probably I would not have acquired a foundation in writing if it were not for Teacher Zheng, nor an interest in studying if it were not for Teacher Xu. Instruction from these two teachers was thus a kind of “mutual reinforcement.”

This year my father-in-law-to-be, Wang Tanren, held office in Huai’an’s Shanyang County [Jiangsu] as jail warden. Someone spread the rumor that I followed my uncle’s bent for gambling and was a troublemaker. Men currying his favor whispered, “Since there was no go-between, the engagement can be broken if you wish.” A few times, the members of my father-in-law’s family almost believed it. When my future wife heard that the marriage might fall through, she cried day and night. Her mother told her father (my future father-in-law) to show sympathy for his daughter.

THE TENTH YEAR OF THE QIANLONG REIGN [1745],
MY SIXTEENTH YEAR

After Teacher Xu left because of poor health, it was beyond our means for me to study with another teacher. Depending on my two mothers, I spent my days and nights in a small upstairs chamber. Under my mothers’ watchful eyes, I did not dare take a step outside the gate.
Looking through my late father’s books, I came across *The Annotated Book of Rewards and Punishments* (Taishang ganying pian zhu). I trembled when I read it. From that time on, on getting up in the morning, I would chant it once devoutly. Thanks to this work, for the rest of my life I was cautious in my behavior.

**THE ELEVENTH YEAR OF QIANLONG [1746],
MY SEVENTEENTH YEAR**

With the help of my two mothers, I studied for the county examination for youths. When I asked permission to take it, my mothers refused on the grounds that my studies were not yet complete and we were too poor. When I begged, they asked if I expected to pass. I exaggerated my skills and said that I did, to which they replied, “If you have a chance of passing, how can we refuse to let you go?”

In the sixth month, I arrived at the county seat. I saw that most of the men to be examined wore silk gowns, and I began to long for one. Someone offered me money to have a gown made, and I wrote an essay for him. After the examination results were announced, all eighteen of my kinsmen were invited to take the second exam, but not me. This disappointed my two mothers. When they learned that I had taken money from someone, they angrily demanded, “Have you no willpower? It seems you don’t mind risking your reputation for the sake of a little financial gain.” They hit me and sent me to return the money. Bitterly regretting what had happened, I studied day and night.

In the eighth month, at the prefectural exam, none of the eighteen kinsmen succeeded, yet I passed. In the ninth month, the superintendent of education Chen Qiuyai of Jiangning [Jiangsu] gave the next set of tests. I placed sixth and was admitted to the county school [making him qualified to take the provincial examinations]. There I studied essay writing with Teacher Mao Zailu of Shanyin [Zhejiang].

**THE TWELFTH YEAR OF THE QIANLONG REIGN [1747],
MY EIGHTEENTH YEAR**

Mother Wang’s brother invited me to teach the seven boys in his family for a salary of twelve strings of cash. I gave three strings to Teacher Zhang Baisi of Shanyin and studied essay writing with him. I also took the provincial
examination for the first time. . . . When the lists of successful candidates were posted, I learned I had not succeeded.

**THE THIRTEENTH YEAR OF THE QIANLONG REIGN [1748], MY NINETEENTH YEAR**

In the second month, my father-in-law-to-be, thinking I could not spend all my time in solitary study, invited me to his office to study with Xu Xuzhou, a provincial graduate of Shanyang [Jiangsu]. I stayed there until the eleventh month, when I returned. . . .

On hearing that my uncle was going to move elsewhere with his family, my grandmother wanted to go with him. My two mothers, weeping, tried to stop her, until finally she agreed to stay.

**THE FOURTEENTH YEAR OF THE QIANLONG REIGN [1749], MY TWENTIETH YEAR**

I was still working for my father-in-law and studying essay writing with Teacher Zhang Baisi. In the eleventh month, Madame Wang joined our family as my wife.

**THE FIFTEENTH YEAR OF THE QIANLONG REIGN [1750], MY TWENTY-FIRST YEAR**

. . . On the first of the fifth month, at night, I felt dizzy and fell while walking by the pond in the back garden, landing in waist-deep water. When the sun came up, a servant was able to help me get out, but I had still not regained consciousness. After I regained consciousness, I got sick, so I returned home. In the eighth month, I took the exams unsuccessfully.

**THE SIXTEENTH YEAR OF THE QIANLONG REIGN [1751], MY TWENTY-SECOND YEAR. . .**

**THE SEVENTEENTH YEAR OF THE QIANLONG REIGN [1752], MY TWENTY-THIRD YEAR**

. . . This year my father-in-law was appointed magistrate of Jinshan in Songjiang [Jiangsu]. On the fifteenth of the third month, I moved to Jinshan and
began my career as a private secretary. Since I did not want to make this my lifework, I continued my studies on the side. My salary was only three taels a month.

THE EIGHTEENTH YEAR OF THE QIANLONG REIGN [1753],
MY TWENTY-FOURTH YEAR

I was employed at Jinshan. . . . When my father-in-law was appointed magistrate of Wujin in Changzhou [Jiangsu], I accompanied him there.

In the seventh month, when I returned home to take the provincial examination, Grandmother was sick, and after I took the examination, I also became ill. Because my father-in-law had summoned me to return to work, I had to leave, yet I did not like leaving Grandmother in her condition. Learning that I was about to leave, she asked me when I would come back. “If I pass the examination,” I replied, “I will come back probably on the twenty-second or twenty-third of the ninth month. Otherwise, I will be back at the end of the twelfth month.” “You will pass the examination,” she assured me, “but the time has not come yet. I can’t wait for you, and you can’t wait for me. You go ahead, and don’t worry about me.”

Mother Wang sobbed, “Our son is sick. What am I to do?” Grandmother replied, “Don’t worry. He will have good luck, a long life, and lots of children and grandchildren.” . . .

Soon thereafter I left. On the second of the tenth month, Grandmother died. I did not return home, so my two mothers presided over the funeral. It was not until fifteen years after Grandmother’s death that I passed the provincial examination, and another seven years before I passed the metropolitan one. Now that I am sixty-plus years old, I realize how prophetic her words were.

THE NINETEENTH YEAR OF THE QIANLONG REIGN [1754],
MY TWENTY-FIFTH YEAR

In the fourth month, my father-in-law’s mother died. While waiting for his replacement in Wujin, he recommended me to a Yangzhou [Jiangsu] salt merchant, Mr. Cheng, to handle his paperwork at a salary of 160 taels per year. This pleased me until I heard that he was very haughty and reclined on couches or leaned against tables, facing south like a ruler, with attendants
sitting nearby to explain matters. Not thinking I could tolerate such treatment, I told my father-in-law to decline the offer. In less than two months, Hu Wenbo of Haiyang, the prefect of Changzhou, invited me to be his secretary since he had been a subordinate of my father-in-law's. The annual salary would be twenty-four taels, and I accepted. Those who heard of this were surprised, but I explained that though the pay is low, the prefect will treat me with courtesy. My father-in-law considered me proud but shared my feelings.

THE TWENTIETH YEAR OF THE QIANLONG REIGN [1755], MY TWENTY-SIXTH YEAR

In the second month, I took up work in Changzhou. When I had time, I studied legal principles with Luo Bingwen of Zhuji [Zhejiang]. In the ninth month, when Mr. Hu was promoted to fiscal intendant of Jiangsu, I declined to go with him. He said to me, “I won’t keep you in a low position for long,” and tried hard to get me to change my mind, offering an additional eight taels per month. After he raised my salary five times, I went with him to Changshu. Mr. Hu was an upright person and treated me with more courtesy than his other secretaries. Whenever there was an important issue, he could call me in and discuss it with me and often adopted my recommendation. . . .

This year my fourth sister married Shen Yougao of Shanyin [Shanxi]. In Shaoxing [Zhejiang], the fall harvest fell far short, so the next year in the spring and summer, rice sold for three hundred cash a peck, and beggars and bodies filled the roads.

THE TWENTY-FIRST YEAR OF THE QIANLONG REIGN [1756], MY TWENTY-SEVENTH YEAR

Mr. Hu became fiscal intendant of Linqing [Shandong], but not wanting to go so far away, I declined on the ground of illness and instead took up work with Mr. Wei Tingkui, the magistrate of Wuxi [Jiangsu]. There I assisted Mr. Qin on legal matters. Mr. Qin was a legal expert, familiar with the code. . . .

In the fifth month, Mr. Wei’s mother died, so I returned home and took the provincial examinations, for which the quota had been expanded by ten. In the ninth month, I learned I had failed. Mr. Hu sent an invitation asking me to return to Changshu to work for him as a secretary. . . . In the tenth month, I accompanied him to Qingjiangpu [Jiangsu]. While I worked as a secretary, it
was my practice to go home to see my family at the end of every year. But this year I passed the New Year on the road. Since it was my duty as a secretary to work for my master when he was busy, I had no time to see my mothers.

**THE TWENTY-SECOND YEAR OF THE QIANLONG REIGN [1757], MY TWENTY-EIGHTH YEAR**

I stayed on with Mr. Hu. In the fourth month, an assignment was over, and I went with him to Jiangning [Jiangsu] to prepare a report. While in the region of the Qinhuai River, I was able to tour around the famous sites of Jinling [Nanjing], not returning to Changshu [Jiangsu] till the seventh month. . . . Early in the twelfth month, we arrived at Changzhou to inspect grain transport at Suzhou [both Jiangsu]. The commander of the grain transport division, Yao Qirui, offended Mr. Hu, who wanted to immediately impeach him. I argued against it because it was an error of speech. Because of this disagreement, on the fifth, I resigned and went home.

**THE TWENTY-THIRD YEAR OF THE QIANLONG REIGN [1758], MY TWENTY-NINTH YEAR**

. . . On the eighth of the first month, Mr. Hu sent a relative with a letter to my house to apologize. After he pleaded with me two or three times, I returned with him to Changshu. . . .

At the end of the year, Mr. Hu wanted me to stay with him over the New Year holiday; even as late as the twenty-sixth of the twelfth month, he had not let me go home. Because of this, I wrote a poem on the wall. . . . At dawn on the following day, when he read my poem, he felt very sorry and immediately sent a fast boat to take me home. I arrived on New Year’s Eve. . . .

My third sister married Chen Jingsheng of our city. . . .

**THE TWENTY-FOURTH YEAR OF THE QIANLONG REIGN [1759], MY THIRTIETH YEAR**

In the first month, I took my wife’s maid, Yang, as a concubine. I then returned to work for Mr. Hu. . . .

On the eighth of the eighth month, the day I entered the examination hall, it rained so heavily that water flowed over my bench. Almost unable to finish
my examination, I felt that I had failed to live up to my teacher’s instructions. On the twelfth day, during the second test, I got sick and could neither eat nor drink. After exerting myself to finish the third test, I hurried back home.

My illness became so bad I could not get up; I even needed other people to help me turn half-around and could eat no more than a few chestnuts. Several times I neared death, and my family even prepared a coffin for me. The doctors could not figure out what kind of illness I had, and I was sure recovery was impossible.

On the evening of the eighth day of the ninth month, Mother Wang dreamed of a group of people sitting in the middle of a hall, facing south. Servants lined the hall on the east and west sides. In the right corner were Grandfather and Father, in attendance on the people who faced south. There was loud talk, but she could not make out what was being said. Those standing on the east and west sides of the hall were tall and thin and wore hats, and some had mustaches. They bowed to those facing south and said, “We should save Scraps!” Some people who had been crying then left the hall. My father and grandfather, appearing very happy, went forward and kowtowed to those facing south.

When Mother Wang told me of her dream the next morning, she said, “There is no need to worry about your illness worsening, because your ancestors have protected you.” That afternoon, Xu Yiting came to examine my pulse. He told Mother, “He has no disease. The reason for his present weakness is water vapor, which entered his body when it rained heavily during his examination. This prevented the food and drink that he consumed from circulating. I suggest a heavy dose of cinnamon bark as a cure.”

As soon as I drank the dose, I fell asleep. When I woke up, I urinated voluminously, and then could turn over. After the second dose, I could sit up. Not long afterward, I recovered, and on the first day of the tenth month, I went back to work for Mr. Hu.

In my family, everyone from my great-grandfather down to my three uncles and nine cousins had been healthy and strong except me. Because I was weak and sickly, my two mothers were worried that I would not live long. Yet from the tenth month of this year to the second month of the following year, my uncles and cousins all passed away, except for one uncle who lived elsewhere. By contrast, after this sickness I gradually grew strong and healthy and seldom got sick. This probably was due to the chastity and devotion of
my two widowed mothers. But the saving of “Scraps” was due to the spiritual protection of my ancestors.

Because I had debts, had been ill, and did not want to borrow any more, I needed a better salary. However, I could not bargain over my pay with Mr. Hu, with whom I had been associated for so long. Thus, at the end of the year, I decided to resign my post and accept the invitation of Zheng Yuxian, magistrate of Changzhou County [Jiangsu]....

THE TWENTY-FIFTH YEAR OF THE QIANLONG REIGN [1760],
MY THIRTY-FIRST YEAR

I worked at Changzhou County....

I resigned from Changzhou and returned home....

THE TWENTY-SIXTH YEAR OF THE QIANLONG REIGN [1761],
MY THIRTY-SECOND YEAR

Teacher Sun filled the vacancy as magistrate of Xiushui County in Zhejiang, and I became his adviser....

THE TWENTY-SEVENTH YEAR OF THE QIANLONG REIGN [1762],
MY THIRTY-THIRD YEAR

I still worked in Xiushui. On the seventeenth of the third month, Mother Xu, my birth mother, passed away.

In the past, each time I had taken the provincial examination, she had said, “Our family has had no degree holder for generations. If you make a career of being a private secretary, your preparation for the degree will interrupt your work as a secretary, and you will probably make a great many mistakes. On the other hand, if you concentrate on your job and study for the degree only on the side, you probably won't have enough energy to accomplish anything.”

After I had recovered from that serious illness three years earlier, Mother had advised me not to take the examinations again. On the fourteenth day of the third month of that year, I hurried back to my office. When I returned home this time, she was critically ill. On the morning of the seventeenth, she suddenly said, “If by any chance I don’t live to the ninth month, you will be delayed in the examinations.” From this I realized that she actually was very
eager to see me pass. What she had said earlier was just her way of being kind to me. After that, I was determined to study hard and keep attempting the examinations.

**THE TWENTY-EIGHTH YEAR OF THE QIANLONG REIGN [1763], MY THIRTY-FOURTH YEAR**

Sometime earlier a commoner named Jiang of Xiaofeng County [Zhejiang] was robbed while traveling by boat, and we were ordered to catch the culprit. Then during the New Year recess when I was on my way home, a runaway soldier called Big Sheng was arrested for collecting a gang and committing violence. On questioning, he proved to be the robber. Mr. Liu asked me to return to investigate and draft the confession. It turned out that there was almost no law that this man had not violated—conspiracy to gather a gang to commit robbery, injuring the owner, stealing his goods, and so on. Moreover, the thief had a blue cotton quilt, which the victim recognized.

That night I asked Mr. Liu to question the man again while I listened to each item of the confession from outside the courtroom. The suspect did not appear nervous, and his confession came out smoothly, as though he was reciting something from memory. Moreover, the eight members of the gang used exactly the same words, arousing my suspicions. The next night, I asked Mr. Liu to purposely change the charges and question the suspects separately. This time some confessed and others did not, and the eight each gave different versions, some of them even protesting that injustice had been done. At that point, we stopped the hearing and bought or borrowed twenty new and old quilts like the one recognized by the victim in his accusation to the magistrate. I secretly marked the one the victim had originally identified. Mr. Liu continued the investigation in the courtroom, and this time the suspects could not pick out the quilt. Moreover, on close questioning, they would not confess.

The explanation for all of this turned out to be that when Big Sheng first came to court, he knew that as a violent deserter he would face certain death, so when he was questioned about the robbery, he made a false confession, and his followers all went along with him. In reality, they were being sacrificed for his sake. Some of them had offenses of their own, but these did not merit death. Subsequently, we let them go…

From this time on, I was increasingly unwilling to rely on draft confessions.
Whenever the offense merited a punishment of exile or heavier, I always personally listened to the judicial examination from outside the room.

It was this year that I petitioned the governor to honor my mothers as chaste widows. In the twelfth month, I received his permission to send a memorial to the emperor requesting this honor.

_The Twenty-Ninth Year of the Qianlong Reign [1764], My Thirty-Fifth Year_

I still worked in Pinghu [Zhejiang]. In the twelfth month, I received an order from the Board of Rites stating that the emperor had approved the honoring of my two mothers as chaste widows.

_The Thirtieth Year of the Qianlong Reign [1765], My Thirty-Sixth Year_

In the first month, I received a communication from the Board of Rites granting me permission to erect a memorial to my two widowed mothers. I recorded their merits so that whoever might read of them would praise them.

In the second month, I returned to work in Pinghu. Zou Yingyuan, from Jinkui, the prefect of Jiaxing [Jiangsu], had a great deal of respect for me and spoke of me to Mr. Liu, saying, “When Secretary Wang handles legal cases, he gives the accused some leeway, and his judgments are fair and impartial. Someday he will hold an official position and command a large salary.” This led to the other secretaries envying me and trying to get me fired. I did not get along well with them and felt isolated. Fortunately, I had Mr. Liu’s confidence, and after it became well-known that Mr. Zou had praised me so highly, my coworkers stopped bothering me.

_The Thirty-First Year of the Qianlong Reign [1766], My Thirty-Seventh Year_

I still worked in Pinghu.

In the twelfth month, Mr. Liu was promoted to the post of prefect of Jiujiang [Jiangxi]. Zou Yingyuan, who had been transferred from his position as prefect of Hangzhou to prefect of Taiwan, offered me a salary of sixteen hundred taels to work with him in Taiwan. I asked Mother Wang for permis-
A PRIVATE SECRETARY’S ITINERANT LIFE 199

sion, but she advised me not to go. . . . Soon I accepted the invitation of Li Xueli in Renhe [Zhejiang].

THE THIRTY-SECOND YEAR OF THE QIANLONG REIGN [1767],
MY THIRTY-EIGHTH YEAR

In the first month, I returned to Pinghu. In the second month, Mr. Liu had imperial business, and I went to Renhe. In the tenth month, Mr. Li was dismissed due to anonymous letters accusing him of wrongdoing. I was then asked by Mr. Jiang Zhiduo to work for him in Wucheng [Zhejiang]. . . .

THE THIRTY-THIRD YEAR OF THE QIANLONG REIGN [1768],
MY THIRTY-NINTH YEAR

I worked at Wucheng. In the fourth month, I built the memorial arch for my two mothers on the north bank of Jukui Bridge in Great Righteousness Village. As I was preparing to buy the piece of land for the arch, Mother Wang said, “We don’t have an inch of land to grow food for our meals. Why not save these hundreds of taels for food?” I replied, “This is an event that immortalizes you, and besides, it will only be ten mu. Being an unfilial son, I haven’t been able to provide adequately for you and Mother Xu. But through your virtuous protection, we will be able to survive even though we haven’t any land.”

When the memorial arch was completed, I accompanied Mother Wang to thank the god of the earth. She performed the kowtow, touching her head to the ground numerous times. When she stood up, her forehead was swollen and red. On my asking why she had done it, she said, “Your mother and I have been unfortunate, living much of our lives in widowhood. Such was our destiny. Now you have been so good as to request imperial permission to build this arch in our honor. When I prayed I told the gods of your virtuous behavior and kindness toward us and asked them to allow you to pass the examinations this next time. Now I can close my eyes and die in peace.”

We both wept for several hours. As I was returning to my office, she told me, “You should make a point of studying hard for the upcoming examinations.” . . .

In the seventh month, I took the provincial examination. . . . After I had finished, I heard that Mr. Hu, the Guangdong provincial treasurer, had been transferred to Jiangsu and that my old friend, Teacher Sun, had accompanied
him. I went to Mr. Hu’s office to see Mr. Sun. When he read my essays, he praised me and said that I was sure to win first place. After I had returned to Wucheng on the eighth of the ninth month, I saw the roster of successful candidates. I had taken third place.

I went to Hangzhou to see Zeng Dongzhuang of Xiangyin, the Xiangshan magistrate who had been one of the examiners. He told me, “It was well into the night of the sixteenth of the eighth month before I finished reading your examination papers. I then put them on the right side of the table and was resting my eyes when suddenly a piece of tile dropped onto the table against your papers. The tile was not even as thick as a finger and was covered with moss. I immediately reexamined your papers, then put them in a case. When I went to sleep, I heard a noise coming from the table. The piece of tile had disappeared, and your papers had come out of the case and were lying on the tabletop again. The next morning, I recommended you to the two chief examiners. However, they said that the first candidate had already been selected. On the tenth day, Lu Ershan put you in third place, as he wanted to have you as his disciple.” He then asked me how I had merited such heavenly intercession, and I answered that it must have been my ancestors who had helped me.

Later I met the top candidate in the examination, and together we went to call on the two chief examiners. . . . I learned that the poems of my second test and the essays on government from my third test had been submitted to the emperor and that all the court officials had been greatly surprised at the story; no one could understand where the flying tile had come from, in the deep of night, with all of the doors and windows closed. Everyone said it was a reward for my two mothers who preserved their chastity despite difficult circumstances.

Twenty-three men passed the Zhejiang examinations that year. As we were trying to set a date for the celebration banquet, I said, “There’s no need to set aside a separate date for the party. The twentieth of the twelfth month is my mother’s birthday. Please come to my home to drink a cup of wine in her honor.”

Seventeen were able to come. After they had left, Mother Wang said, “Today is the first time in twenty years that I have been able to relax my brow. I now feel that I have not failed your father. When I didn’t approve of your going to Taiwan, I worried that you might have difficulty getting a job with a good salary. But if you had gone, you wouldn’t have been able to pass the examination this year. Thus, everything has worked out well in the end.”
Over the course of twenty-one years, I had tried nine times to pass but only succeeded after Mother Wang prayed for me. It is indeed amazing that, although Heaven is high, it hears even the lowest.

**THE THIRTY-FOURTH YEAR OF THE QIANLONG REIGN [1769], MY FORTIETH YEAR**

In the first month, I set out to take the metropolitan examination [in the capital]…

**THE THIRTY-FIFTH YEAR OF THE QIANLONG REIGN [1770], MY FORTY-FIRST YEAR**

… On the fourteenth of the fourth month, a messenger came from home and told me that my wife was critically ill. When I arrived home on the fifteenth, I found she had died two days earlier. She had fallen ill on the eighth but before that had made a shirt for me. I wrote four poems … and made a drawing to mark the event. Mr. Pan Tingyun of Qiantang, a secretary in the Grand Secretariat, wrote my wife’s biography and also painted a picture on the same subject as mine. Many of my colleagues wrote poems on both of the pictures.

After the funeral, I continued my work in Qiantang…

On the twenty-third of the seventh month, there was a great storm and a tidal wave. The sea flowed over West Prosperity Lake up to Song Family Village [Zhejiang], a distance of over eighty li… Ten thousand people died, their bodies clogging the waterways… My house had two feet of water in it, which didn’t retreat until the next day.

In the tenth month, I married my successor wife, Madame Cao, the daughter of Mr. Cao Yunqi, a tribute student from my hometown. At the end of the year, I resigned my position to get ready for the metropolitan examination.

**THE THIRTY-SIXTH YEAR OF THE QIANLONG REIGN [1771], MY FORTY-SECOND YEAR**

In the first month, I went to take the metropolitan examination…

In the ninth month, I conducted a burial ceremony for my father and my mothers at the foot of Mount Xiu in Shanyin County [Zhejiang]. I also purchased a plot of land at the foot of Hangwu Mountain and buried the coffins.
of two grand-uncles and their wives and the wife of my father’s cousin and performed the sacrifices to them.

Many years earlier, Mother Xu had told me that her family lived in Yincheng [Ningbo, Zhejiang] and that her house was close to a stone bridge. I had often asked friends to make inquiries, but no one had found it. This time I went there myself for four days and visited each bridge. I met a man named Xu, but he did not recognize my uncle’s name. It was with great disappointment that I returned home.

At the end of the year, I quit my job to begin preparing for the metropolitan examinations once more.

THE THIRTY-SEVENTH YEAR OF THE QIANLONG REIGN [1772],
MY FORTY-THIRD YEAR

In the first month, I went to take the metropolitan examination with Jiang Gao. When the results were released, I saw that Jiang Gao had passed but I had failed yet again.

THE THIRTY-EIGHTH YEAR OF THE QIANLONG REIGN [1773],
MY FORTY-FOURTH YEAR

I was still at Haining [Zhejiang].

THE THIRTY-NINTH YEAR OF THE QIANLONG REIGN [1774],
MY FORTY-FIFTH YEAR

I was still at Haining. In the seventh month, my uncle died and was buried at Hangwu Mountain.

THE FORTIETH YEAR OF THE QIANLONG REIGN [1775],
MY FORTY-SIXTH YEAR

In the first month, I went to take the metropolitan examination. When the results were posted on the ninth day of the fourth month, I found that I had passed in the forty-sixth place.
On the twenty-first, I took the palace examination. Four days later, I learned that I had passed as the twenty-eighth person in the second group and had become a jinshi. The next day, I was presented with pieces of blue brocade and white silk at the main entrance of the Forbidden City; the day after, a party was given by the Board of Rites. On the second of the next month, the successful candidates exchanged their rough clothes for official robes in a ceremony at the Directorate of Education. On the eighth, I took the court examination, and six days later, I was received by the emperor and informed that I was a candidate for office.

Two days later, on the sixteenth, I received a letter from home informing me of Mother Wang’s death on the twenty-sixth of the third month. I memorialized for permission to go into mourning. The next day, the examiners and fellow graduates, knowing my mother was a chaste and filial person, encouraged me to put on mourning and accept their condolences, so I stayed a few days more and began the mourning rituals. To compose my late mother’s biography, I asked Mr. Zhou Huang of Haishan to write the tomb record and Mr. Shao Eryun to write the funerary biography. . . .

On the seventh day of the sixth month, I left the capital, taking the road to Tai’an [Shandong]. On the fifteenth, I reached Wangjiaying [Jiangsu], where I crossed the river and hired a boat [to travel down the Grand Canal], traveling fast by starlight. On the second of the seventh month, I reached home. . . . In the eleventh month, having returned home, I managed my mother’s joint-burial on the slopes of Xiu Mountain, then went to Haining. At year’s end, Liu Xianpu of Pinghu extended the previous agreement, so I resigned working for Mr. Zhan. . . .

THE FORTY-FIRST YEAR OF THE QIANLONG REIGN [1776],
MY FORTY-SEVENTH YEAR

I worked in Pinghu. I brought my son Jifang along and began to guide him in his studies. . . .

THE FORTY-SECOND YEAR OF THE QIANLONG REIGN [1777],
MY FORTY-EIGHTH YEAR

I still worked in Pinghu. . . .
THE FORTY-THIRD YEAR OF THE QIANLONG REIGN [1778],
MY FORTY-NINTH YEAR

I was still working in Pinghu….

THE FORTY-FOURTH YEAR OF THE QIANLONG REIGN [1779],
MY FIFTIETH YEAR

I still worked in Pinghu….

In the bingshen year [1776], I had entered on a project dear to my two mothers, collecting stories of outstanding examples of chastity and filial piety among the people of Shaoxing [Zhejiang]. Now the work was completed… I presented it to the lieutenant governor, who ordered it recorded and the names of the virtuous people, 305 in number, placed on a large plaque for public display at their respective county offices.

THE FORTY-FIFTH YEAR OF THE QIANLONG REIGN [1780],
MY FIFTY-FIRST YEAR

I worked in Wucheng…. In the sixth month, Mr. Xu had to leave office to mourn a parent, so I returned home…. In the ninth month, Wang Qingchuan, of Longyou, came to Zhejiang. He was a kinsman of Teacher Wang Xingyuan. Magistrate Xing had been a subordinate of his uncle Wang Yuanting. It happened that Teacher Wang Xingyuan came to inspect the Zhejiang schools, and he asked Magistrate Xing to let me work for his kinsman Wang Qingchuan. In the tenth month, I moved with him to Longyou [Zhejiang]….

THE FORTY-SIXTH YEAR OF THE QIANLONG REIGN [1781],
MY FIFTY-SECOND YEAR

I worked in Longyou…. In the first month, Wang Qingchuan went to Hangzhou [for a legal case]….

THE FORTY-SEVENTH YEAR OF THE QIANLONG REIGN [1782], MY FIFTY-THIRD YEAR

I went to Hangzhou…. Wang Qingchuan was transferred to Gui’an [Zhejiang]…. This year, because of the Longyou case, I spent a lot of time in the provincial
capital [Hangzhou]. It happened that Teacher Wang Xingyuan was there as an examiner, and we would often visit. If a few days went by without a visit, he would send someone to get me, and we would spend the rest of the day together, our conversations ranging widely. I learned a great deal from him about the principles of cultivating oneself, which I took to heart. He thought I was someone he could talk to and didn’t get tired of admonishing me, so my understanding of moral cultivation greatly benefited.

THE FIRST YEAR OF THE QIANLONG REIGN [1783],
MY FIFTY-FOURTH YEAR

I worked at Gui’an [for Magistrate Wang Qingchuan]. It had become customary in Gui’an for people to frequently file complaints and accusations against one another, more out of their quarrelsome nature than out of a desire to seek justice, causing many innocent people to be unjustly implicated. Once I fully grasped the situation, the magistrate and I took the following steps to rectify it. Written charges were to be kept secure within the inner office of the yamen. The principals in each case and any necessary witnesses were to be summoned to the yamen and questioned right away. Many accusations turned out to be false, in which case the plaintiff would be punished for defaming an innocent person.

An element of the Gui’an population thrived on gambling, fraud, misappropriation of the water conservation funds, shady brokerage agencies, and the like. The officials and clerks made lots of money by taking bribes from these people. I tried to get the magistrate to crack down on such practices and thereby aroused the ire of many of the clerks and officials. . . .

THE FIRST YEAR OF THE QIANLONG REIGN [1784],
MY FIFTY-FIFTH YEAR

I continued to work at Gui’an. . . .

THE FIRST YEAR OF THE QIANLONG REIGN [1785],
MY FIFTY-SIXTH YEAR

I still worked at Gui’an.

In the fourth month, an edict came down from the Hunan governor Lu Yao instructing officials who were only sons of elderly parents to go home to
take care of them. As Magistrate Wang’s mother was seventy-one years old and he had no brothers, he complied with the order and resigned his post to take care of his mother. Consequently, in the eighth month, I left office and returned home.

Since the *renshen* year [1752], I had worked for thirty-four years as a private secretary, spending nine years in Jiangsu and twenty-five years in Zhejiang. I chose whom to serve under and had sixteen good superiors. By nature unable to compromise, I could not put up with official injustice and had sometimes resigned my post over a point of principle. Fortunately, most of my superiors respected me, and we got along well the whole time.

Among the private secretaries I knew, there were upright, self-respecting individuals and mean, petty men who were concerned only with lining their own pockets. Even though I worked with many secretaries, I seldom was able to develop friendships with them based on a genuine meeting of minds. Often they would try to sabotage my projects. . . .

When I began my career as a private secretary, the annual salary for a legal secretary was not over 260 taels; that for a financial secretary, not more than 220 taels. These were considered good incomes in those days. Mr. Dong of Songjiang would not accept a salary under 300 taels, so was called Dong Three Hundred. After the *reнуу* year [1762], the salaries of private secretaries improved; by the *jiachen* and *yisi* years [1784, 1785] some were getting as much as 800 taels. But the efficiency and integrity of private secretaries could not compare with what it had been in the old days.

A good government official should understand people and know the customs of the place where he serves. His private secretaries and advisers should help him achieve these goals. . . . If a private secretary intends to serve the magistrate well, he takes the magistrate’s responsibilities as his own, concerning himself with local affairs and the people’s welfare. In this way, he makes his superior look good, and the people consider the magistrate wise and virtuous. If a private secretary can do this, he may be considered to have fulfilled his role. A secretary who does not concern himself directly with the general well-being of the populace and merely handles issues and problems as they arise, who keeps his mind on how he will be evaluated and fails to coordinate with the other secretaries, may still be a moderately efficient secretary. The worst kind of private secretaries are ones who have no sense of shame or propriety, take every opportunity to enrich themselves, and blame the magistrate when things go wrong.
Over the course of twenty years, I saw many private secretaries of the last sort. With their profits from bribery and extortion, they would act like big shots for a while, but invariably their evil ways would bring their downfall. They would fall ill or die young, their children would die tragically, or their families would suffer separations. It chills the heart to see how the net of Heaven extends everywhere.

At this time, as a jinsbi degree holder from the yiwei year [1775], I petitioned for official appointment. . . . I went to Hangzhou, where Liu Xianpu, recently promoted to prefect of Nanning [Guangxi], invited me to stay with him. He said to me, “When I first became friends with you, none of the people in my yamen, high or low, really liked you, because you were so aloof and stern. I was the only one who admired you and was able to learn from you. When you are with someone who understands you, you can talk all day without growing tired. When you are with someone you don’t like, you would not say a word to him. I would like now to tell you that in my opinion you are better suited to being a private secretary/adviser than an official. The ways of the official and the private secretary are quite different. An official cannot speak his mind as openly as a private secretary; he must take account of the situation and the interpersonal relations in his yamen.” Such was his sincere advice.

This year I wrote Precepts for Local Administrative Officials (Zuozhi yaoyan) in two chapters. Bao Yiwen published it in part 12 of Collected Works of the Know-Your-Deficiencies Studio (Zhibuzu zhai congshu).


Further Reading


Sommer, Matthew Harvey. “The Uses of Chastity: Sex, Law, and the Property of Widows in Qing China.” Late Imperial China 17, no. 2 (1996), 77–130.