

WANG ANSHI, SIMA GUANG, AND EMPEROR SHENZONG

The Song was in many ways the great age of the scholar-official. Economic growth, urbanization, and printing facilitated a flowering of poetry, painting, calligraphy, and appreciation of antiques. Opportunities for education increased, and the expanded civil service examination system brought scholars into government service in larger numbers than ever before. There was renewed interest in Confucian scholarship and renewed determination to use Confucian principles to reform the practice of government.

Scholars could, of course, disagree about which Confucian ideas were most relevant and how to apply them to current circumstances. When Emperor Shenzong (r. 1067–1085) took the throne at age twenty, he was impressed with the ideas of Wang Anshi (1021–1086), an experienced official admired also for his poetry and classical learning. Wang wanted thoroughgoing reform of fiscal administration down to the local level. Many other well-respected scholars and literati opposed his plans. The early stages of these disagreements are revealed in the three pieces below. The first is Sima Guang's (1019–1086) record of how he and Wang Anshi debated an issue of government expenditures in front of the emperor in 1067. It is followed by letters they exchanged in 1070 after the first of Wang's policies had been put into effect. The rift between these two continued to widen as Wang's opponents were forced out of office. For two generations, long after the deaths of the emperor, Wang, and Sima, scholar-officials were deeply divided on the appropriateness of these policies.

SIMA GUANG'S ACCOUNT
OF A DEBATE AT COURT

At the Yanhe Hall, Wang Kui, Wang Anshi, and I all presented petitions on the issue of the gifts granted to high officials at the occasion of the state sacrificial ceremonies. I said, "The country is cur-

rently short of funds and disasters occur repeatedly. Unnecessary expenses should be cut. The high statesmen who have access to the throne should set an example. Therefore, it is appropriate to let the two superior prefects have their wish in declining the gifts."

Wang Anshi countered, "Our country abounds

with resources. The gifts granted to high officials cost very little. To stop giving them out of stinginess will not help enrich the country but only damage the prestige of the government. Formerly, when Chang Gun declined a reward, his contemporaries assumed it was because he knew that his request would not be granted. The two superior prefects' declining the gifts granted them is exactly the same. The present shortage of funds is not particularly pressing."

I answered, "That Chang Gun resigned his post showed his humility. Wasn't he much better than those who keep their posts out of greed for salary? Our country has been short of funds since the end of Zhenzong's reign [997-1022]. The situation in recent years is particularly bad. How can you say it is not a pressing matter?"

Wang Anshi replied, "That the country is short of funds is because the government has not found someone good at finance."

"Financial experts," I said, "do nothing but impose heavy and annoying taxation on the people in order to drain their wealth. As a result, the common people are driven to poverty and end up refugees or bandits. How is this to the benefit of the country?"

"That does not describe a financial expert," he replied. "A financial expert raises more than enough revenue for the country without imposing heavy taxation on the people."

I countered, "These are exactly the words Sang Hongyang used to deceive Emperor Wu of the Han. Sima Qian only recorded them to show Emperor Wu's naivete. The things produced by Heaven or earth are finite. They are owned either by the people or by the government. The rich resources that Sang Hongyang got for the government must have been extracted from the people. Where else could he get them? If things had worked the way Sang Hongyang said, why near the end of Emperor's Wu reign were there so many uprisings that required troops to suppress? Wasn't it because the people had been so exhausted that they sank into banditry? How could you take Sang Hongyang's words as truth?"

"During the reign of Taizu," Wang Anshi re-

sponded, "men like Zhao Pu were the grand councillors. The gifts granted to them sometimes amounted to several tens of thousands of cash. Today the gifts granted to high officials come to no more than three thousand cash. This cannot be considered too much."

I answered, "Zhao Pu and his contemporaries devised the strategies that helped conquer the other states. Wasn't it appropriate to reward them with tens of thousands of cash? In the current case, the two superior prefects merely assisted in the sacrificial ceremonies. They did nothing but report to the throne, strictly carry out orders, prepare the water for hand washing, and offer towels. What service have they rendered? How could they be compared with men like Zhao Pu?"

My arguments with Wang Anshi went on and on. Wang Gui summed them up, "Sima Guang says that the policy of cutting expenses should start with the statesmen who have access to the throne. In this regard he is right. Wang Anshi says that the expenses for the gifts are slight and to save them might discredit the government. In this he is right. Only Your Majesty can make a final decision."

A LETTER FROM SIMA GUANG TO WANG ANSHI

dated 27th day of the second month of 1070

For a long time you and I have been debating issues at court and frequently disagreeing. I do not know whether you have given this much thought, but it has not changed my affection for you. You have enjoyed an excellent reputation for over thirty years. You are exceptionally talented and learned. . . .

The emperor selected you to participate in court councils because people had high expectations for you. But now that you have been in charge for nearly a year, scholars in and out of government all criticize you. Even poor villagers, petty clerks, and soldiers all resent you. . . . Scholars who are not your followers all say you have gotten control of the ruler and monopolized the

government. They commonly think that opposing you would just invite trouble and so is not as good as simply waiting two or three months for you to defeat yourself. These sorts are not merely disloyal to you, they are disloyal to the emperor. If you in fact carry out your plans for two or three years, the harm to the dynasty will be so serious that it will be hard to salvage the situation. . . .

Those who most detest you repeat all sorts of slanders about you. I know that much of this is false. You may not be a great sage, but your fault lies in trying too hard and having too much confidence in yourself. How can I put it? Since antiquity the way sages have governed has been by delegating specific responsibilities to each office and holding each official accountable for fulfilling his duties. The sages looked after the interests of the common people simply by lightening taxes, imposts, and other burdens. In your opinion, this is conventional Confucian blather, not worthy of attention. You want to achieve what the ancients never achieved, and so you do not entrust finance to the finance commission but manage it yourself. You have even set up a new commission on regulations and selected literary scholars and men who understand finance to discuss making profit. Confucius said, "The man of virtue talks about moral principles. Inferior men talk about profit." . . . These men who talk of profit all clamor to be heard, each competing to see how cleverly they can change the inherited ways. In all probability the gains will not make up for the losses, nor what is added compensate for what is destroyed. They just want to come up with some original idea to get a reputation. This causes enough harm in and of itself.

You have also set up the ever-normal granaries and sent out more than forty commissioners to institute the New Policies throughout the country. First the commissioners distribute funds for the "green sprout" loans, then they want to get the ordinary households to pay cash to commute their labor service, then they want to seek ways to promote irrigation. Although you tried to select talented men to do this work, among them are some who are weak or careless, who offend the local

officials or disturb the common people. Thus the scholar-officials are alienated and the farmers and merchants go bankrupt. Criticisms pour forth and complainants fill the roads. . . . Confucius said that a man of virtue should seek the fault in himself. You also ought to think about how this happened. You cannot lay all the blame on everyone else.

Overstepping official duties and confusing the organization of the government are policies that you deliberately adopted. You insisted on having the government get into the vulgar business of lending money. Since ancient times labor service is something the people have supplied, but you, wanting to get more cash from the people, had them sell their labor. Ordinary people all see that these three policies will not work; you alone thought they were workable. It is not that you are less intelligent than the average person, but that you want to achieve something extraordinary and have contempt for the opinions of ordinary people. . . .

You have always been firm in your views. Whenever you have debated issues in front of the emperor, you act just as you do in arguing with friends in a private home. You do not mince words, but rather hammer home your ideas. When colleagues call on you to discuss issues, only rarely do you agree with them. Those who try to bend to your ways, you treat politely. But if there is the slightest difference, if the caller hints at inconvenient aspects of the New Policies, you fly into a rage and curse him to humiliate him. Sometimes you bring the case up to the emperor to get the person dismissed from office. You do not even let the man get a chance to express his opinion fully. The emperor is broadminded and forgiving, but you resist all remonstrances. . . .

I know very well that the emperor values you more than any of the other officials at court or in the provinces. In deciding on policies, promotions, or dismissals, he trusts in you alone. If you say the policies ought to be abolished, then everyone in the world will benefit. If you say they should be retained, then everyone in the world will suffer. Today the people's happiness and the

security of the state all depend on a word from you. You must think of others. Is there anyone without fault? [As it says in the *Analects*], when a man of virtue is in error, it is as obvious as an eclipse: everyone sees it. When he changes, everyone looks up to him. How has his brilliance been damaged? If you could just suggest to the emperor that he abolish the commission on financial regulations and recall the ever-normal granary commissioners, the peace of the nation would be restored and your ability to correct your mistakes would shine forth. It would not hurt you at all.

I know that what I am proposing is directly counter to your aims. But although our directions are different we have the same goal. You wish to stay in office to carry out your plans to benefit the people. I wish to resign my post to carry out my goal of saving the people. This is what is called being in harmony while differing. Therefore I have dared to explain my concerns to you to fulfill the obligations of our friendship. Whether you accept them or not is up to you. . . .

WANG ANSHI'S LETTER OF REPLY TO SIMA GUANG

Yesterday I received your letter of advice. I see that although we have been on friendly terms for so long, our views on issues never coincide, probably because our approach to policy is so often different. Although I would like to reply at length, you probably would not want to read the whole thing, so I will be brief and not explain each and every one of my views. I hope you will read what I write carefully and thoughtfully and not be offended by it.

What Confucian scholars strive so hard to attain is a correspondence between what things are

called and what they in fact are. If names and realities are both clear, the world can be managed. Now it is your opinion that I have overstepped my authority, caused trouble, pursued profit, and blocked criticism to the point where everyone in the world is enraged. In my view, I received my orders from the ruler, the policies were discussed in court, and executing them was delegated to the officials. This is not overstepping the authority of my post. I have adopted the policies of the ancient kings to bring about prosperity and relieve distress. This cannot be called causing trouble. To manage the nation's finances cannot be called pursuing profit. Putting an end to malicious slander cannot be called blocking criticism. As for the abundance of resentment, this is something I expected. Customs cannot be changed in a day. Scholar-officials often prefer not to worry about the nation and merely content themselves with the status quo. The emperor wanted to change this. I wished to help him, undaunted by how many might oppose me. When Pan Geng wanted to move the capital [in ancient times], both the common people and the officials objected. Pan Geng did not change his plan because of those who were annoyed by it. Since the plan had been adequately discussed, he saw no reason to reconsider.

You charge me with having served in office for a long time without succeeding in helping the emperor bring real benefit to the people. For this I must accept responsibility. But your argument that what we need today is a policy of doing nothing at all and merely preserving the old ways is something I cannot accept.

My regrets that we could not meet in person to discuss these issues.

Translated by Patricia Ebrey