Letter from Hui-Xun, Chinese scribe, to his son Wen Hung in 212 BCE under the reign of Qin Shi Haung.

My dearest Wen Hung (the brave and learned one),

As I write, my dear sweet boy, are resting on your mat. Already, you have kept true to your name and are becoming learned, studying hard each day. I hope that watching me copying the ancient texts has inspired you to continue to learn. Copying the classical words of Confucius, I feel as if I am doing my own small part in expanding the human mind and improving our future.

My life has been in danger for the last year since Emperor Qin Shi Huang began his burnings of these great works. What I am about to write will only further endanger my life, but write I must. Once I did my work in the open, but now I am writing in secret, hiding my work, every day fearing for my life. No longer can I deliver my copies to the library or work by the light of day. Emperor Qin Shi Huang has no interest in the free thought of his people. The ideas of Confucius and others make him feel threatened — as they should, for they propel ideas that are antithetical to his own ideas of government. Rather than rely on the punitive legalism of Qin that is based in the assumption that mankind is evil, Confucius advocated that warnings and education will lead to goodness. Only those writings that agree with Qin’s ways can survive, he has ordered all others burned. Rumors are that scribes have been killed for voicing dissent and trying to protect the ancient writings. My cleverness has kept me alive.

That brings me to the matter at hand. If you find this letter, I will likely be dead or banished to work on that blasted wall that Qin Shi Haung believes will keep invaders out. But I
know that humankind is too clever, as am I, to be held back by a wall. Man’s creative mind and
determined spirit are no match for such a barrier, as impressive as he claims it will be.

I am enclosing the most precious of texts in this wall — hidden from clear view — for its
preservation. For the ideas contained therein are too important to be wiped out from human
consciousness. They contain the words of Confucius himself. I have spent countless hours
copying this text. In the wall is the original. I cannot return it now to the library or it will
certainly be destroyed. I smuggled the copy I carefully crafted to my friend, the scribe Xue.
True to my name, I traveled quickly and cleverly, returning home unscathed. Xue most certainly
has hidden that copy as securely as he can.

However, the original, penned by Confucius himself, Wen, my learned one, I am leaving
for you, hidden in the wall of our home. If you have found this letter, then you will have found
the ancient text. Handle it with tenderness. Do not let it near the sun, water, or oil. I and
mankind are counting on you to ensure the preservation of this most important work of
philosophical thought. As you find this, you may be overwhelmed and weighted by such a
monumental responsibility, but take hope my son, for not only have I taught you to read and
write but also how to be clever, like me. Think and remember my ways. Assess the situation at
hand. I also named you Hung – live up to this too – be courageous. Timing is everything. You
alone will be able to tell when the time is right to carry the text to its next home. What home that
will be, I do not know, but it must be in the care of one who will preserve it until such time as it
can safely be made public.

I put my full faith and confidence in you that someday, whether soon or distant, you will
find this text and complete the task I have set before you.

Forever you have my love, devotion, and gratitude,
Your Father,

Hui-Xun (the fast and clever one)

References


