A Failed Reformation—
Wang Anshi

Wang Anshi’s style name was Jiefu. He lived during the Northern Song Dynasty and was from Linchuan county of Jiangxi Province. Even though he was a political genius, he was impulsive and tended to let his emotions get the better of him. Inspired by Fan Zhongyan’s Ten-Point Proposal [to the emperor], he advocated political reforms to shape up the country.

After becoming the prime minister under the reign of Emperor Shenzong, he boldly pursued his ideas and started a series of reforms. He was later conferred the title Duke of the State of Jing. One day, he asked Chan Master Fohui, “Which sutra does the phrase ‘the Buddha held up the flower to the assembly’ come from?” The Chan Master replied, “It is not sure.” Wang Anshi said, “When I was in the Imperial Academy, I happened to find it in the Sutra of the Great Brahma King’s Questions to the Buddha for Resolving Doubt. This sutra contains questions posed to the Buddha by kings and emperors, and so it was not included in the Tripitaka.”

During his eight years as prime minister, he pushed for results too quickly on his reforms and did not choose people wisely, which resulted in flawed governance that brought much misery to the people. He finally resigned and retired to Jinling to live in seclusion and reflect on his mistakes. One day, he met Chan Master Kewen. While discussing sutras and the cultivation of the Way, they realized that they shared similar interests. Wang Anshi made an offering of his house, which then became Baoning Monastery, and invited Master Kewen to be the first abbot.

Later on, upon hearing that his reform had been abolished, furious and devastated, he passed away at the age of sixty-six, leaving behind The Anthology of Linchuan as his legacy.
Wang Anshi was a strange person. Why? Because he did not act like a normal human being; instead, he was content with a neither fish nor fowl existence. Why do I say this? First, throughout his life, he did not wash his face. Second, he never combed his hair. At the time, men had long hair, and because he did not take care of his hair, it was filthy and became infested with lice. People referred to him as being "as unkempt as a man in prison." Would a normal person act like this? The lice in his hair were so well fed they became round and fat. Whenever guests came, he would have his lice jump over to their heads and suck their blood too. He probably said to the lice, "You've stayed here too long, so you should move somewhere else." Elder Scholar Su (Su Xun, Su Dongpo's father) hated him the most. He said, "He [Wang Anshi] is a treacherous person who has a lot of power." Why did he say so? Because Wang Anshi was unrealistic and ruthless.

Wang Anshi did have some degree of scholarship, as one cannot be devious without some talent. Because he was crafty and insidious, he made the people and the country suffer. This is why I call him a freak. What kind of person would be content with not combing his hair or washing his face, letting himself get so dirty that he was infested with fleas and lice? He liked to do things the unconventional way just to highlight his uniqueness. Consequently, he harmed many people and later died frustrated and angry. If he was really a wise man, he would never have died from anger. When trying to fulfill ambitions, if plans are achievable, then carry them out; if they are not possible, then stop. Confucius also had many aspirations, so he traveled to many different states, but he was not welcome. Why? He was not opportunistic; he did not fawn or try to make friends with the elite. I do not think Wang Anshi became the prime minister in an honest and noble way. If he had, he could not have gotten the job. All of the old officials were quite honest and straightforward and did not guard against people or get jealous of others. Taking advantage of their unawareness, Wang Anshi took them by surprise and became the prime minister.

His surname was Wang, his name Anshi, and his courtesy name Jiefu. He lived during the Northern Song Dynasty in Linchuan County, Jiangxi Province. To call him a political genius would be a great stretch of the imagination; all he wanted to do was to come up with new and odd ideas to distinguish himself. In order to realize his aspirations, he did whatever was necessary. Because of his voracious scheming, he was able to become the prime minister during the reign of Emperor Shenzong, and was appointed the Duke of Jing. Anyone who did not agree with him was sidelined or removed; he struck down many old loyal ministers, banishing them to remote regions far away from the capital; those who did not listen to him were locked up as political prisoners. He pursued his dream of political reform, but little did he know that it would fail, forcing him to retire in disgrace to Jinling.