

## Golden 15

### Chapter Fifteen: The Incense Ancestor's Notes (Part Two)

Four of the poems in Zhuang Rui's manuscript are recorded in the book "Biographies of Qing Dynasty Figures," all written by the same person. After carefully memorizing this person's life and background, Zhuang Rui finally put the book down.

The author of these poems is Wang Shizhen, who lived in the early Qing Dynasty. Wang Shizhen's original name was Shizhen, his courtesy name was Zizhen, and his pen names were Ruan Ting and Yuyang Shanren. Therefore, some people also call him Wang Yuyang. As a Han Chinese, he was posthumously honored as Wenjian by Emperor Kangxi after his death, which can be described as a great imperial favor. He was from Xincheng (now Hantai County, Shandong Province) and was the most outstanding poet in the early Qing Dynasty.

Wang Shizhen was born into a family of officials for generations. His grandfather, Wang Xiangjin, was the Provincial Governor of Henan Province during the Ming Dynasty. Wang Shizhen began studying at home at the age of five and read the Book of Poetry at the age of six or seven. In the seventh year of the Shunzhi reign, he took the imperial examination for children and won first place in the county, prefecture, and circuit examinations. This was equivalent to the top scorer in the national college entrance examination in elementary and middle school today. In the fifteenth year of the Shunzhi reign, he passed the imperial examination and became a Jinshi. His literary reputation gradually spread.

At the age of 23, Wang Shizhen traveled to Jinan and invited famous literary figures in Jinan to gather at a pavilion on the surface of Daming Lake. There, he composed four poems on the autumn willows. These poems spread and became famous throughout the country. Many people wrote poems in response, and the literary world called it the "Autumn Willow Poetry Society". From then on, it became famous all over the world. Later generations named a small alley on the northeast bank of Daming Lake "Autumn Willow Garden", which refers to the place where Wang Shizhen composed the poem "Autumn Willow".

He took the manuscript out of the box and compared it with the book. To Zhuang Rui's delight, the manuscript contained several of Wang Shizhen's famous poems, as well as some miscellaneous poems and short lyrics from the Qinhuai River. Furthermore, the manuscripts with poems all bore his personal seal. Although he didn't know much about calligraphy and painting, Zhuang Rui knew that works with signatures were much more valuable than those without. However, to his embarrassment, he still couldn't recognize the names on the seals, who had left them, or whether they were Wang Shizhen's personal seals.

Wang Shizhen's achievements did not stop there. In the fourth year of the Kangxi Emperor's reign, he was promoted to the position of Vice Minister of the Ministry of Revenue and went to the capital to serve as an official. At that time, the capital was full of talented people, which provided a stage for Wang Shizhen to display his talents. He proposed the theory of "spiritual charm" in his poetry, which opened up a new style of poetry. Many of his famous works have been passed down to posterity. His poems and prose describing scenery are especially praised. The line "Green willows and city walls are Yangzhou" in his short poem was used as the subject of many famous painters at the time. The Kangxi Emperor praised him as "excellent in both poetry and prose" and "learned and good at poetry and prose".

In the seventeenth year of the Kangxi Emperor's reign, Wang Shizhen was summoned by the emperor. He "composed a poem that pleased the emperor, and was appointed as a lecturer in the Hanlin Academy, then promoted to reader, and entered the Southern Study." He became the first Han Chinese official in the Qing Dynasty to be appointed as a literary official from a department.

Zhuang Rui often read historical biographies. He knew that the Southern Study was where the Qing emperor's literary attendants were on duty. Qing scholars regarded it as an important place, and it was an honor to be able to enter. Sometimes, they would even draft imperial edicts and decrees on behalf of the emperor. Emperor Kangxi even issued an edict ordering Wang Shizhen to present his poetry manuscripts, which was a very rare honor at the time. Wang Shizhen was at the height of his fame in the court.

Wang Shizhen was a learned scholar with a passion for antiquities. He was skilled in appraising books, paintings, and ancient bronzes, and was an expert in seal carving. His poetry was considered masterful, often mentioned alongside Zhu Yizun. His calligraphy was elegant and refined, reminiscent of the Jin dynasty, and highly praised by later generations. Wang Shizhen's early poems were clear and serene, while his later works became more vigorous and powerful. He excelled in various styles, especially the seven-character quatrain.

Moreover, this person was very fond of talent. During the Kangxi era, after Wang Shizhen succeeded Qian Qianyi as the leader of the poetry world, he became the recognized leader of the literary world in the early Qing Dynasty. For a time, new poets and junior writers would go to the capital to seek guidance from famous teachers for their works, and they would often visit Wang Shizhen first. If they could get a word or two of praise from him, they would become famous.

Zhuang Rui also read a very interesting anecdote in the book. Pu Songling was a down-on-his-luck scholar who was full of knowledge but was not appreciated. After writing his famous "Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio", he could not be recognized by the world. In desperation, Pu Songling went to Wang Shizhen.

After reading the first draft, Wang Shizhen greatly praised Pu Songling's "Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio," wrote many annotations, returned the first draft to Pu Songling, and even gave him a poem: "Let's just say it casually and listen to it casually. The rain on the bean trellis and melon vines is like silk. I guess he's tired of human language and loves to hear ghosts singing poems in the autumn graves." This shows Wang Shizhen's support and affection for Pu Songling.

To facilitate the publication of "Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio," Wang Shizhen wrote "Wang Ruan Ting's Appraisal" on the manuscript, which caused various bookstores to vie for the manuscript, considering it an honor to publish "Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio." The celebrities of the time praised this matter, saying, "The nation's literary achievements will surpass those of a thousand years, and the elegant style will be promoted. Great figures will emerge one after another, and the most orthodox of this generation must be Wang Shizhen of Xincheng."

Wang Shizhen's works have been published and preserved, spanning from the Kangxi era to the Republic of China. The book in Zhuang Rui's hand is actually a handwritten copy of "Xiangzu Notes" with a brush, and there is a high probability that it is Wang Shizhen's original manuscript. If it is Wang Shizhen's handwriting, then it is truly worth a thousand pieces of gold per word.

It is worth noting that although Wang Shizhen's poems are widely known to later generations, very few of his calligraphic works have survived. A domestic auction house once sold Wang Shizhen's "Handbook of Life Mirror and Manuscripts," which consisted of only a few pages of manuscripts, for a staggering 1.57 million RMB.

Of course, Zhuang Rui was still completely unaware of all this at the time, but through this information, he felt a little more confident. Just based on Wang Shizhen's status as the literary leader during the reign of Emperor Kangxi, the manuscripts he left behind would be worth more than 20,000 yuan. Even if they were handwritten by Wang Shizhen's descendants, they would still be considered rare and valuable ancient books.

Zhuang Rui had already made up his mind that he would take the manuscript with him when he returned to Shanghai and have Uncle De appraise it. If it was genuine, he would entrust Uncle De to auction it off. For Zhuang Rui, he had already fully explored the greatest use of the manuscript, so of course he wanted to make use of its economic benefits. After all, the 20,000 yuan spent on the manuscript accounted for one-third of Zhuang Rui's current net worth.

After carefully placing the manuscript back in the camphor wood box after getting out of the warm quilt, Zhuang Rui lay back down on the bed. Suddenly, an idea popped into his head: if he could absorb the spiritual energy from these calligraphic works, could he also absorb the spiritual energy from other antiques? After all, both of these items came about quite by chance. The couplet was his grandfather's heirloom, and obtaining the manuscript was entirely due to his own luck. If that old lady had taken the manuscript out of another shop, he probably wouldn't have had a chance to buy it. Zhuang Rui didn't believe that those who specialized in the antique business would think of it as just a tattered book, like Liu Chuan did.

"With this ability, what can I do? Become a calligraphy and painting appraiser? I don't even know seal script. Using X-ray vision to look at instant lottery tickets? If I get caught on the spot, I'll definitely be sent for autopsy. Is this superpower only good for peeping at women's bodies?"

Zhuang Rui's mind was in a state of confusion, and he started to have all sorts of wild thoughts. The events of today had a huge impact on him. Not to mention that his spiritual energy had been upgraded, spending a huge sum of 20,000 yuan at once was a first for Zhuang Rui, who usually only carried a few hundred yuan in his pocket.

"By the way, there are many people like Grandma Zeng who don't recognize a treasure. I can buy low and sell high to make a profit..."

Zhuang Rui had a sudden inspiration and decided to position himself as a middleman. Little did he know that with the rising living standards, the antique trade was booming, and all sorts of fakes, imitations, and shoddy goods were flooding the market. Even the experts and professors in Beijing's Forbidden City dared not say that they had never been fooled.

As the saying goes, ignorance is bliss, and Zhuang Rui drifted off to sleep with the blissful feeling of having found a purpose in life.