

## Golden 531

### Chapter 531-532 Appraisal

Although Fatty Jin and the others identified quite a few fake items, the knowledge derived from those items broadened Zhuang Rui's horizons and benefited him greatly.

In particular, the bloodstone gave Zhuang Rui the idea of visiting the place of origin to see it for himself. Although bloodstone is not as common as jade in the general public, there are quite a few people in the collecting circle who like to collect it, and its price is rising year by year.

Zhuang Rui had been to Zhejiang once with Uncle De, but they didn't go to Changhua. He had heard Uncle De say that the outer skin of chicken blood stone was similar to that of jadeite, making it impossible to see the inside. There was also a saying about gambling on stones.

The place in Changhua that produces chicken-blood stone has been almost completely mined out, so very little chicken-blood stone is available in the market. Moreover, like Tianhuang stone, chicken-blood stone is mostly used for seal carving, and there are not many ornaments made from it. Therefore, its reputation is not as well-known as that of jadeite, but its value is not much less than that of jadeite.

The items being appraised included both genuine and fake pieces. And it must be said, there are quite a few interesting items scattered among the people, including many exquisite pieces used by officials in ancient times, which are not even collected by some major museums.

By around 3 p.m., all the items brought in for appraisal had been authenticated, and Zhuang Rui and his team's work was essentially finished. The whole process had only taken a little over two hours.

More than 100 people brought their treasures to Beijing this time, which means that dozens more treasure owners will come to the site every day in the next two days. The appraisal of the antiques that were brought in will be postponed. If there are enough items coming to the site, we may be able to cancel the ones in the warehouse.

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The station arranged a car to take the experts back, but Zhuang Rui and Miao Feifei came together, so they didn't need to ride in their car. Ouyang Jun was also leaving. After saying goodbye to the host and several experts, Zhuang Rui changed his clothes and walked out of the CCTV building with Ouyang Jun and the others.

The snow had stopped falling sometime ago, but as far as the eye could see, the world was still a blanket of white. At the entrance of CCTV, a sign welcoming the Spring Festival was hung, adding to the festive atmosphere.

"You know what, you really do have the air of an expert, huh? By the way, my courtyard house is all set up, you'd better find me some nice things to put there..."

Just as Zhuang Rui was about to get into Miao Feifei's car, Ouyang Jun grabbed him. Zhuang Rui's behavior today made Ouyang Jun realize that his little cousin was no ordinary person.

"You should ask Brother Bai for help with this. He uses official kiln porcelain for drinking and dining. It wouldn't be difficult for him to assemble a set of tableware that Emperor Qianlong used when he dined with his concubines... uh, no, with the Empress..."

Zhuang Rui was joking with Ouyang Jun when he mentioned concubines. Xu Qing glared at him fiercely, which startled Zhuang Rui so much that he quickly changed his words. If this were ancient times, Xu Qing would be the Empress, and concubines... were just titles for mistresses or concubines.

"Hey, do you think your fourth brother buys just anyone's stuff? Okay, kid, stop joking with me, let's go take a stroll around Panjiayuan right now..."

Although Ouyang Jun and Bai Feng were childhood friends, he still had to be careful about his interactions with him. It was true that he should ask for a favor, but he couldn't be too greedy. So, apart from taking a set of screens from Bai Feng, Ouyang Jun didn't take any other advantage of him.

"Going to Panjiayuan now? Fourth Brother, your wife can't stand the crowds..."

Zhuang Rui preferred to go to Liulichang rather than Panjiayuan, because the antique shops in Liulichang, such as Rongbaozhai, are century-old establishments. Although they mainly sell handicrafts now, if you can afford the price, you can still find some good items.

But Panjiayuan is different. It's a fake goods market. There are all kinds of fakes you can't imagine, and they can make any item. It's a mixed bag of all sorts of people, and the number of people setting traps and scams is almost greater than the number of people actually wanting to buy things.

For true Beijingers, going to Panjiayuan is just a casual stroll; nobody's expecting to find bargains. The majority of buyers are tourists from other parts of China, and some are simply "fools"—the foreigners who speak a few words of Chinese and are hoping to snag a bargain.

"Let Miao take him to your house. The two of us brothers will go for a walk first, and then we'll have hot pot and some drinks when we get back tonight..."

It turns out that Ouyang Jun had planned this all along. He didn't want to go back to his own home because he had too many troublesome things to deal with. His grandfather was also extremely busy during the New Year, and he would probably have to visit and comfort him on New Year's Eve. Ouyang Jun just wanted to spend the New Year in Zhuang Rui's courtyard.

"Don't stop me, just go..."

Zhuang Rui shook his head helplessly. This older brother was usually quite composed in front of outsiders, but when he met his own family, he was not as sensible as his niece, Nannan. Zhuang Rui saw the way Ouyang Jun talked to his mother, and it was just like a child whining and acting like a rogue. He was almost forty years old, how could he have such a problem?

This was actually due to Ouyang Jun losing his mother at a young age. He had no maternal love growing up, so when he met his aunt, he immediately acted as if she were his mother. However, every time Ouyang Jun went to Zhuang Rui's house, he would carry large bags and small packages, showing his filial piety.

Xu Qing naturally couldn't do anything about her husband. As long as he didn't go out fooling around, Xu Qing was too lazy to pay attention to him. The four of them split into two cars and left the TV station.

After the heavy snow, some sunshine actually appeared, shining on the white snow and reflecting a bright light. The weather, which had been gloomy for several days, finally cleared up. It seems that we don't have to worry about it getting dark at four or five o'clock.

After the two drove to Panjiayuan, they found that the stalls were busy setting up and setting up. The roadside stalls had been cooped up for days, hoping to make some money during the Spring Festival, but the weather was not cooperating. The heavy snow for several days delayed a lot of business.

These street vendors have been in the market for a long time and are very familiar with the stalls. They don't need to take their goods home; they just leave them at familiar shops. Since they don't have anything valuable, they're not worried.

As soon as the heavy snow stopped, the street vendors suddenly appeared out of nowhere and set up their stalls, turning the once quiet market into a bustling place.

Besides the vendors, a construction team was also busy in the heavy snow next to Panjiayuan, setting up many frames and platforms, which also occupied the original parking lot. This forced Ouyang Jun to back his car out and find a parking space outside before he and Zhuang Rui trudged through the snow into Panjiayuan.

"Fourth Brother, what are these people doing? Why are they setting up all this stuff during the New Year?"

Zhuang Rui asked Ouyang Jun with some curiosity, "There are quite a few people doing this work. There are hundreds of frames of all sizes set up at the entrance of Panjiayuan, but they are all simple welds and it's hard to tell what they are for."

"You didn't know, did you? This is from the first to the fifteenth of the Lunar New Year, specifically for holding temple fairs. During that time, all the century-old shops and traditional crafts in Beijing will be invited to recreate the old Tianqiao charm..."

"Really? Then I'll have to take a look around..."

Zhuang Rui became interested upon hearing this. He knew that Tianqiao in Beijing was a well-known place both at home and abroad, with a long history of over 600 years. It played an irreplaceable role in the development of modern Chinese folk art.

Tianqiao was originally located in the south of Beijing, between Qianmen and Yongdingmen, with the Temple of Heaven to the east and the Temple of Agriculture to the west.

After the fall of the Qing Dynasty, with the development of the city's economy and culture and the expansion of the urban class, the old Tianqiao gradually became a gathering place for all walks of life, with all kinds of trades and professions.

For a period before and after liberation, Tianqiao was the birthplace of many folk arts. Performers would perform in Tianqiao, usually in the open air, a practice known as "laughing on the ground".

There were as many as five or six hundred folk artists who successively learned, performed, passed on their skills, and made a living in the old Tianqiao area. They were divided into two main categories: acrobatic performers and storytelling performers. Acrobatics included acrobatics, martial arts, and other items, while storytelling included drama, folk arts, and other items.

Back then, Tianqiao in Beijing was a famous place, on par with the Eight Great Hutongs of Beijing.

Don't know what the Eight Great Hutongs are? Uh... it's similar to those saunas that are all bark and no bite these days. They were commonly known as brothels because a certain emperor from the late Qing Dynasty visited them, which can be considered a celebrity effect at the time.

Zhuang Rui once saw a set of old photos in Zhonghai that De Shu had collected. These photos depicted the bustling scene of Tianqiao in Beijing in the 1920s and 1930s. The photos showed shadow puppet shows, puppet shows, and crowds of people. There were even photos of Manchu wrestlers Bao San and Man Bao Zhen wrestling. They were extremely precious.

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The snow had only just stopped, and there weren't many people in Panjiayuan yet. Most of them were street vendors, dressed in festive red cotton-padded jackets, breathing warm air on their hands as they chatted in groups. When they saw Zhuang Rui and his companion enter, they swarmed around them.

"Hey buddy, what are you looking to snag?"

"Brothers, come take a look here. I have everything: calligraphy and paintings by famous artists, ceramics and antiques..."

"Stay away, stay away from me, buddy, I have a bad temper..."

Zhuang Rui had been here many times before and knew that these people were not to be trifled with. If you were, they would definitely take advantage of you. Although they wouldn't force you to buy or sell, they would definitely annoy you to no end.

Upon hearing Zhuang Rui's fluent Beijing accent, the vendors immediately lost interest and went back to chatting and joking. Their customers were usually tourists from other parts of China and foreign idiots; it would be quite difficult to rip off Beijingers.

"Fourth Brother, what exactly do you want to buy?"

Zhuang Rui saw Ouyang Jun browsing around with great interest, wanting to touch and examine everything.

In this line of work, there are specific rules for handling items. For example, with a Zisha teapot, you need to cover it with the lid and turn it over to check the mark. When handling ceramic pieces, whether large or small, you need to hold them firmly with both hands. Those who set up stalls can tell whether you are a novice or an expert just by looking at your hand shape.

Ouyang Jun was a complete novice. Almost every time he picked up an item, Zhuang Rui would be bothered by the stall owner for half a day. Why? Because they were trying to rip off a fat sheep. Ouyang Jun rarely came to this place. Everything he saw seemed real. In the eyes of the stall owners, Ouyang Jun was just a "reckless fool".

Although it was the Lunar New Year, and people were all smiles and spoke politely, when it came to bargaining, Zhuang Rui felt like smashing the items in his hand over their heads, as they were all asking for exorbitant prices.

Ouyang Jun was standing by a ceramics stall when he heard Zhuang Rui's words. He said, "I want to buy them too, Wu'er. You know, this bowl looks almost the same as the one at Lao Bai's house, doesn't it? It looks even brighter than the one he uses..."

Upon hearing Ouyang Jun's words, the stall owner immediately perked up and said, "Hey, sir, you have a really good eye! This bowl you're holding was used by Emperor Jiaqing, the son of Emperor Qianlong. Look at the style on the back; it's definitely official kiln porcelain..."

The stall owner isn't foolish enough to claim that this item was used by Emperor Qianlong; that would be far too fake.

"How much does this thing cost?" Ouyang Jun asked casually.

"Fourth Brother, let's go. If you want these, I'll buy you a few dozen at the supermarket for 100 yuan each, so you can smash them and hear the sound, okay?"

Zhuang Rui had just seen many nice items on TV, so he had absolutely no interest in the things here and didn't even bother to use his spiritual energy.

Aside from the different design at the bottom, this thing is pretty much the same as the ones sold in supermarkets. Zhuang Rui figured it out; Ouyang Jun was just bored and looking for amusement.

"Hey, you can't put it that way. Do you even know what antiques are? Let alone the bowls that Emperor Jiaqing used for eating, even the emperor's chamber pots are priceless. How can you compare them to things from the supermarket..."

Zhuang Rui's words were a bit hurtful, and the stall owner was displeased. He saw that one of the two men was older but completely clueless, and the younger one didn't seem to be an expert either, so the stall owner tried his best to deceive him.

"A Tongzhi blue and white porcelain bowl, right?"

Zhuang Rui took the blue-and-white porcelain bowl from Ouyang Jun, turned it over and looked at it. He immediately lost his temper. The design clearly stated that it was made during the Jiajing period of the Ming Dynasty. This stall owner was far too unprofessional.

"Here, your Jiaqing blue-and-white porcelain bowl. Keep it safe. If it gets damaged, we brothers can't afford to pay for it..."

Zhuang Rui handed the blue-and-white porcelain bowl to the stall owner, who took it and realized he had made a mistake. He then fell silent, looking embarrassed.

"Dude, sell it to me for two bucks, how about I listen to the sound? Hey, Wu'er, why are you pulling me?"

Ouyang Jun was a bit cunning and wanted to provoke that person, but Zhuang Rui forcibly pulled him away.

"Brother Zhuang Rui..."

Just as Zhuang Rui left the stall, he suddenly heard someone call his name. Looking in the direction of the sound, he saw two girls standing together in front of a shop to his right, the older one waving at him.

"Qiuqian, what are you doing here all by yourself?"

Zhuang Rui was stunned for a moment, then quickly walked over. This was the precious granddaughter of his future mentor, but she had never been interested in these things before. Why had she come here today? Panjiayuan was no place to be trifled with.

"Hehe, Brother Zhuang Rui, I came with Grandpa. This is my cousin, Meng Xiyou. You can just call her Youyou..." Meng Qiuqian's cousin was only about eleven or twelve years old. The two looked somewhat alike. In Zhuang Rui's eyes, she was pretty, but they were both a bit quirky.

Following Meng Qiuqian's finger, Zhuang Rui saw Professor Meng in the shop, chatting with someone who looked somewhat familiar to Zhuang Rui.

"Hey bro, you're usually so quiet, but you know a lot of women. These two little lolis are pretty good..." Ouyang Jun looked Meng Qiuqian and Youyou up and down. Although his expression didn't change at all, the words he said made Zhuang Rui want to beat him up.

However, these two girls were quite eye-catching standing at the store entrance. The two girls were already quite pretty, and now they were wearing pink down jackets, making them look like two porcelain dolls. Many people would take a look when they passed by.

Especially Meng Qiuqian, who has big eyes and exceptionally long eyelashes. When she blinks, she looks just like a girl from an animated film. Every time Zhuang Rui sees her, he wonders if her eyelashes are real or fake.

"Why aren't you talking to me..." Ouyang Jun nudged Zhuang Rui with his elbow when he saw that Zhuang Rui was not speaking.

"Go away and play somewhere else. This is my advisor's granddaughter. The other one is probably still a minor, so don't talk nonsense..."

Zhuang Rui glared at Ouyang Jun with annoyance, called to the two maids, and went into the shop.

As Zhuang Rui walked to the shop entrance, he suddenly remembered that he had been to this shop before. He looked up and saw the signboard with the words "Ci Lai Fang" (瓷来坊). It was here that Zhuang Rui had restored the Longshan black pottery piece he had bought at a bargain price.

However, two large red lanterns were hanging at the entrance of the shop, and couplets were posted on both sides of the shop. The festive atmosphere of the New Year was evident from the inside out, which made Zhuang Rui not recognize it at first glance.

"You...you're Mr. Zhuang from last time, right?"

As soon as Zhuang Rui walked up to Professor Meng, the person who was talking to Professor Meng recognized Zhuang Rui at a glance.

"Hehe, boss, wishing you a prosperous New Year! I'm sending my New Year's greetings in advance..."

Zhuang Rui smiled and cupped his hands in greeting, then greeted Professor Meng. He had just left Professor Meng's house yesterday, so there wasn't much formality between them.

"I recently acquired a piece of porcelain and wanted to ask you for your opinion, but I couldn't get through to you on the phone. Fortunately, Mr. Zhuang can take a look at it today..."

"Just got back from Myanmar, what good stuff did that boss find?" Zhuang Rui asked with a smile.

"Brother Zhuang Rui, the beaded hairpin you gave my sister is so beautiful..."

The little girl named Youyou suddenly interjected. Zhuang Rui was taken aback and looked at Meng Qiuqian. However, the girl's eyes were looking around and she didn't dare to meet his gaze. It must have been Meng Qiuqian who made Youyou say those words.

Professor Meng said sternly, "Youyou, stop fooling around..."

"No, no, my sister has one, I don't have one, I want one too..."

The little girl wasn't afraid of her grandfather at all. She grabbed Professor Meng's clothes with both hands and shook him back and forth, making this leading figure in the field of archaeology in China quite embarrassed.

"Youyou, I'll get it for you later. I don't have it with me right now..." Zhuang Rui was a little annoyed. He wasn't Ximen Qing, who would casually stroll around with two women's jewelry.

Upon hearing Zhuang Rui's words, the girl immediately stopped bothering Professor Meng and started playfully fighting with Meng Qiuqian, making Professor Meng shake his head with an expression of utter dismay.

"Xiao Zhuang, come here, help me look at something. I haven't decided whether to accept it or not..."

Professor Meng's specialty is archaeology, and he also has a great passion for collecting; otherwise, he wouldn't have become friends with Uncle De.

Professor Meng was very happy to see Zhuang Rui. He knew that his apprentice had learned a lot about antique appreciation from Uncle De in Zhonghai. Although he was an archaeologist, his eye for antiques was not necessarily better than Zhuang Rui's. So he did not put on any airs of a teacher and directly pulled Zhuang Rui and the shop owner into the "Porcelain Workshop" private room.

"Please have a seat, everyone. I'll bring the things over..." The owner called a waiter to serve tea to the group and then went to the back room.

"Oh my, this stuff is really timely! As the saying goes, dumplings on the first day of the Lunar New Year, noodles on the second, and dumplings on the third. Well, boss, this is something we ordinary folks use all the time..."

Zhuang Rui noticed at a glance that the shopkeeper was holding a set of ceramic tableware and couldn't help but laugh. This was also a category of porcelain, but compared to those ceramic official kiln wares whose ornamental value outweighed their practical value, there weren't many people who collected these things.

"Mr. Zhuang has a good eye..."

After the shopkeeper put the items on the table, he gave Zhuang Rui a thumbs up. The words Zhuang Rui uttered were something most people had never heard before.

Zhuang Rui smiled and, without any ceremony, stood up and examined the set of tableware on the table. It was a complete tableware set, consisting of six pieces: a bowl for eating, chopsticks for picking up food, a plate for serving food, and a soup bowl, among other things.

"Mr. Zhuang, what do you think of this?" After Zhuang Rui had been looking at it for seven or eight minutes, the shopkeeper asked, his words clearly indicating that he was testing Zhuang Rui.

"Hehe, these items are indeed old, but they're from the late Qing Dynasty. And although they're all famille rose porcelain, they're not a complete set, which is a bit of a shame..."

Zhuang Rui had just examined the porcelain set with his spiritual energy. Although it contained spiritual energy, it wasn't very concentrated, and the amount of spiritual energy in each item was different, which led him to this conclusion.

"However, it's quite remarkable that this thing has been preserved for over 100 years and is still in relatively good condition. Moreover, judging from its style, it should be a set of utensils that the Huizhou merchants specially commissioned from Jingdezhen to be fired back then. Boss, am I right?"

Zhuang Rui got a little carried away with the CCTV treasure appraisal show today and couldn't hold back, blurting out the origin of the entire set of tableware, leaving the shop owner and Professor Meng speechless.

By this point, the shop owner had long since lost interest in investigating Zhuang Rui. He had already conducted extensive research and consulted numerous experts to ascertain the item's provenance.

To his astonishment, Zhuang Rui had pinpointed the exact words with just a glance.

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"Brother, these were custom-made by merchants from Anhui? I've never heard of them before."

Ouyang Jun, listening nearby, was somewhat puzzled. He only knew that after the liberation of the whole country, Jingdezhen specially made a set of porcelain for that old man, but the old man personally stopped him, saying that he was not an emperor and shouldn't do such things.

However, that set of porcelain is quite famous, and people like Ouyang Jun have heard of it. But when he heard Zhuang Rui say that people in Anhui also order porcelain from Jingdezhen, he felt a bit surprised. These people from Anhui are putting on airs even more than Chairman Mao.

"Fourth Brother, that happened more than a hundred years ago, did you hear me clearly?"

Zhuang Rui was left speechless by Ouyang Jun's question. This was simply a display of ignorance and incompetence. Zhuang Rui felt ashamed in front of these experts.

However, Zhuang Rui knew a lot about Anhui merchants when he was in Zhonghai. They were a huge force that could not be ignored in the economic system of the late Qing Dynasty for one or two hundred years, comparable to the salt merchants of Lianghuai. Many anecdotes about them also circulated.

"Anhui cuisine is one of the eight major cuisines of China. Its most distinctive feature is that it integrates Huizhou culture, the Huizhou merchants of that time, and the preparation of Huizhou cuisine."

Therefore, Anhui cuisine not only has its unique features in color, aroma and taste, but also pays special attention to the arrangement of tableware and drinking vessels.

We Chinese say that good food also requires beautiful tableware. Whatever we eat, it must be served in a certain kind of vessel, with different colors of glaze, patterns, and styles to suit different dishes and social statuses.

Since the Ming and Qing dynasties, many wealthy and official families in Huizhou have ordered their rice and dishes from famous porcelain-producing areas such as Jingdezhen. Moreover, the tableware set in front of us has a strong ancient Huizhou style.

Imagine, as you savor the delicacies of Huizhou cuisine through these tableware pieces imbued with the spirit of Huizhou, you can also appreciate the natural scenery, local specialties, and customs of Huizhou, and even witness the glorious and splendid Huizhou culture of a certain period..."

Fearing Ouyang Jun might ask some more outlandish questions, Zhuang Rui answered them anyway. Just as Zhuang Rui finished speaking, applause erupted in the room. It was Professor Meng and the boss who spontaneously clapped.

As for the two young girls, Ouyang Jun and Meng Qiuqian, they simply listened to it as a story. They didn't realize that Zhuang Rui's words were enough to serve as a textbook on Huizhou ceramics.

"Xiao Zhuang, you really made the right choice by studying archaeology. I think after your interview, you can become my assistant lecturer. That way, I can have more time to research some topics..."

Professor Meng looked at Zhuang Rui with admiration in his eyes. He had not expected Zhuang Rui to have such a strong cultural foundation and such a prodigious memory. He was able to extract the essence of Huizhou culture from this set of porcelain. Professor Meng felt that he had taken on an extraordinary disciple, and that Zhuang Rui's future achievements might even surpass his own.

"Teacher Meng, that won't do. I only know a little more about things related to antiques. You want me to go on stage and give a lecture? That's really not an option. I'd embarrass you..."

Upon hearing this, Zhuang Rui waved his hand repeatedly to decline. He was studying archaeology and wanted to learn more about the background and related knowledge of unearthed cultural relics from various dynasties in China through archaeological theory, which would be more helpful for his understanding and judgment of antiques.

As for lecturing and digging up graves, Zhuang Rui had absolutely no interest in those things. How much could a lecturer earn in a month? Back in the 1990s, there was a saying: "Professors don't earn as much as those who sell tea eggs."

While digging up graves could yield many genuine, firsthand antiques, the work often required spending three to five months in the wilderness, and the unearthed artifacts weren't truly yours—you could see and touch them, but you couldn't bring them home. Zhuang Rui had no desire for that kind of frustrating experience.

Professor Meng waved his hand, clearly not wanting to discuss this topic here. Instead, he looked at the shop owner and said, "Old Na, we're old friends. I've gotten quite a few items from you, but not all of them are genuine..."

The shop owner laughed upon hearing this. He was a businessman and wasn't bothered by such a small embarrassment. He said, "Professor Meng, you're in the industry too, so you know the rules. Actually,

there are some things that even I don't know if they're real or fake. But since I'm in business, I'm definitely selling them as if they were genuine..."

In front of Zhuang Rui, the shop owner dared not speak recklessly. Professor Meng was actually just a collector and was not afraid of anything, but based on what Zhuang Rui had just said, he was definitely an expert in the field. He was afraid of ruining his reputation, so he simply told the truth.

Professor Meng nodded slightly after hearing the shop owner's words. What the shop owner said was quite true. Nowadays, antique shops are mostly nine parts fake and one part genuine, and even that one part genuine requires the buyer's discerning eye.

Those who have the means to collect antiques are generally quite confident. They know that most items on the market are fake, but they are willing to rely on their own judgment to find the genuine article and enjoy doing so. Professor Meng is one such person. He has spent a lot of the money his children abroad send him on these fakes.

Some friends may wonder how Professor Meng, a leading figure in the field of archaeology, could not distinguish between genuine and fake antiques when buying them. Actually, this is quite normal.

Archaeologists are not necessarily collectors. They have their own specific research topics: one is the study of the social structure of the time through antiques, and the other is the study of the formation and structure of antiques and their current market economic value. These two can be said to be two related but completely different systems.

Therefore, it's not uncommon for Professor Meng to be fooled and pay tuition in the antique market. He can talk about the historical background of an antique, but he may not know whether the antique in his hand is genuine or fake.

People like that boss prefer customers like Professor Meng. They'll spend money without hesitation on anything that catches their eye, because they have the purchasing power to do so.

"Hey old man, name your price for this set of tableware. It's almost Chinese New Year, don't go overboard with the price cuts..."

Professor Meng has a very good attitude. As long as he likes something, he is willing to spend any amount of money. Unlike others who cry and wail when they buy fake items, Professor Meng believes that even fake things have research value.

"This... price, Professor Meng, how about this number?"

Upon hearing Professor Meng's words, the boss involuntarily looked at Zhuang Rui, a troubled expression on his face. He stammered, unable to make sense of what he was saying, and finally gritted his teeth and held up three fingers.

"Oh? Thirty thousand? Xiao Zhuang, what do you think?"

Professor Meng smiled noncommittally. With such a knowledgeable future student present, there was no need for him, a teacher who wasn't very knowledgeable, to negotiate the price.

"Boss, this is my teacher. I'm not breaking any rules..."

Zhuang Rui smiled at the shop owner, but the shop owner's face turned sour; he understood what Zhuang Rui meant.

In antique transactions, when the buyer and seller are negotiating the price, a third party should not interfere. Whether the antique is genuine or fake is a matter between the buyer and seller. If a third party intervenes, it violates the rules of the trade.

However, the current situation is different. The disciple is serving his teacher, and the boss is speechless.

"Mr. Zhuang, please give me a price. It's the New Year, so just a little something for my trouble would be fine..."

The shop owner gave a wry smile, implying that the set of tableware was not his, but rather consigned to him.

"Okay, boss, how does this price sound to you?"

Zhuang Rui extended his right hand, clenched it into a fist, then raised his thumb and little finger, shook it four times, and then smiled at the boss.

"Six thousand six hundred and sixty-six? Boss Zhuang, your price is quite auspicious, but I'm going to lose a fortune. Others are consigning their items to me for more than that..."

The boss's expression at that moment was one of utter grief and indignation, as if Zhuang Rui and his daughter had engaged in some improper relationship. He waved his hands and shook his head repeatedly, looking as if he couldn't continue the conversation.

"Hehe, this set of porcelain is not a set, and it's not very old. It's not official kiln porcelain. Only my teacher would buy it to study the historical forms of Huizhou merchants and Huizhou cuisine at that time."

If you keep it, I can say that even at 6,666, there's no guarantee anyone will pay that price..."

The price of folk porcelain has never been very high. Even the fine folk kiln pieces from the Kangxi period are priced hundreds or even thousands of times lower than those from the official kilns of the same period. Therefore, the price Zhuang Rui offered is quite outrageous.

"Mr. Zhuang, this price really isn't right. How about this, this amount is auspicious too. If you agree, we'll make a deal..."

After hearing Zhuang Rui's words, the boss also held up an eight-finger gesture, shaking it back and forth a few times with a resolute expression on his face, meaning that if you don't agree, then this deal is off.

"Teacher Meng..."

Zhuang Rui turned to Professor Meng. The price was about right. This set of porcelain didn't have much room for appreciation. Even if it was kept for a few years, it would only be worth about ten thousand yuan. So the owner's offer of eight thousand eight hundred and eighty-eight yuan wasn't unacceptable.

"Xiao Zhuang, I'll listen to you. If you say it's okay, then we'll sell it..." Professor Meng verbally signed the authorization letter for Zhuang Rui.

"Okay, this price is reasonable, I can buy it..." Zhuang Rui nodded, and the deal was done.

#### Chapter 535 Antique Shop (Part 2)

The last time Zhuang Rui saw Boss Zhao, he remembered him as a plump, healthy man with a very auspicious-looking face. But now, seeing him again, he looked completely different.

Boss Zhao's face was still quite pale, but it was deathly pale. He had also lost weight, his eyes were sunken, and his hair was long, like that of a literary youth from the late 1980s. It looked like he hadn't washed it for days, and it was almost tangled into little braids.

When Boss Zhao entered the house, he was taken aback to find the inner room filled with people. Looking around, he realized he didn't recognize any of them. He wasn't in the mood for small talk, so he looked directly at the shop owner and said, "Old Na, thank you so much for your help during this New Year's holiday..."

"It's alright, Lao Zhao. Here's the money from consigning your tableware set. It's eight thousand eight hundred and eighty-eight yuan in total. Please count it..."

Perhaps because Zhuang Rui and the others were present, the shop owner didn't accept the consignment fee but gave all the money to Lao Zhao, which made the people in the room feel more respect for the shop owner.

There are many people who add flowers to brocade, but very few who offer charcoal in the snow. Some people even enjoy kicking someone when they're down. The fact that the boss could do this shows he's a very kind person.

"No need to count it, Lao Na, consider this money as New Year's money for the kids..."

This amount of money was just a drop in the bucket for Boss Zhao and wouldn't solve his problems. It seemed that this guy was still a force to be reckoned with even when he was down on his luck, so he casually took out a small stack of money and handed it to the boss.

"No, old man, we've known each other for over 10 years. I was the one who introduced you to this shop. You should keep this money for yourself..."

The shop owner paused for a moment, then continued, "If you ask me, brother, you should sell this shop at a lower price. After paying off your debts, you'll still have several hundred thousand left, and you'll have a chance to make a comeback..."

This Mr. Zhao is quite shrewd; over the years, he's accumulated a fortune of four or five million. However, this one misjudgment wiped him out completely, leaving him with over two million in debt. This shows that gambling on jade is not only a matter of heaven and hell, but also playing with antiques is like walking a tightrope; one wrong step and you're on a precipice, your body gone.

"Brother, it's not that I don't want to sell it, it's just that the items in the shop are worth hundreds of thousands. If I lose this shop, how am I supposed to sell those things? What am I supposed to do with them if I don't transfer them all?"

After hearing the boss's words, Old Zhao shook his head helplessly and said, "I've been having a run of bad luck lately, so I won't add to your troubles. You guys are busy, I'll take my leave now..."

Although the man was down on his luck, he still maintained his manners. Old Zhao bowed to the surroundings and turned to leave.

"Hey, Mr. Zhao, please wait..." Since Zhuang Rui had already made up his mind, he wanted to ask more details, so he called out to Old Zhao.

"You are..."

When Boss Zhao turned around, the face seemed somewhat familiar. If it weren't for the fact that he had been so busy lately and saw so many people in the store every day, he really wouldn't have remembered who Zhuang Rui was.

"Haha, you have such a good memory! I once bought a set of stationery from your shop..."

"Oh...oh, it's you..."

Old Zhao also remembered this incident, but couldn't recall Zhuang Rui's name. He continued, "Is there anything else, brother? If you still want to buy those things, I'll open the shop door, and you can pick whatever you like..."

Boss Zhao didn't want to close down either. He could make money every day he opened the shop, but there were too many debt collectors. If he dared to open the shop, the threshold would be trampled to pieces.

"Brother Zhao, sit down and talk. Boss Zhuang is interested in taking over your shop..."

The shop owner pulled Old Zhao back, helped him to a chair, and brought him a cup of tea.

"Huh? Boss Zhuang wants to take over my shop?" Old Zhao looked at Zhuang Rui with suspicion.

Zhuang Rui waved his hand and said, "I have a similar idea. Let's not talk about the price for now. Mr. Zhao and that other boss are both seniors in Panjiayuan. Could you tell me how the business is in the shops in Panjiayuan?"

"That depends on what kind of items you're selling. For example, the stationery I used to sell was quite popular with foreigners, and I could earn several hundred thousand a year from them..."

Old Zhao paused here, glanced at the shop owner, who waved his hand, signaling him to continue. He then said, "This shop of yours mainly serves regular customers, and some foreigners also come. As for how much it earns, you'll have to ask him..."

"Hehe, my porcelain shop is mostly frequented by regular customers. Thanks to Professor Meng and others like him, they make up 60% of my revenue. As for the remaining 40%, they're mostly individual customers and foreigners. To be honest, the items I sell to them don't really cost much to begin with..."

The shopkeeper's words made Zhuang Rui and the others burst into laughter. The so-called "not costing much money" meant that he was selling fakes. Given the massive flow of people in Panjiayuan, it was not a small amount of business if individual customers brought in 14% of the revenue.

Hearing their conversation, Zhuang Rui was tempted. Taking over "Shuyazhai" wasn't a bad idea. The Four Treasures of the Study are different from porcelain. Porcelain exists abroad, but the Four Treasures of the Study are a unique aspect of Chinese culture, and in Panjiayuan, they are a point of interest for foreigners.

"Mr. Zhao, may I ask how this whole thing happened?"

After everyone had finished laughing, Zhuang Rui suddenly asked a question.

Old Zhao gave a bitter smile, thought for a moment, and then said, "Sigh, to be honest, this was a trap set by someone else. And those people prepared for it for two whole years. I guess I misjudged them and fell for it. I have nothing to say..."

It turns out that Mr. Zhao has many friends. They often get together to drink tea, chat, and discuss business. Two years ago, he met a friend named Nangong, who was into bronze Buddhist statues. Although his business didn't quite match Mr. Zhao's, they were both collectors and became acquainted over time.

Nangong later frequently visited Lao Zhao's shop to chat and drink tea. Coincidentally, once when Nangong was in Lao Zhao's shop, someone brought a bronze candlestick from the Warring States period to sell. The price wasn't too high, only 12,000 yuan. However, Lao Zhao wasn't an expert in this kind of thing and didn't want to buy it, since it wasn't his kind of product.

However, after Nangong saw the bronze artifact, he strongly urged Lao Zhao to pay for it, saying it was a bargain. Lao Zhao had known Nangong for over a year, and thinking that spending a few thousand wouldn't be a big deal, he paid for the candlestick on the spot.

A month or two later, Lao Zhao took the bronze artifact to an auction house for appraisal. To his surprise, it turned out to be quite good, and subsequently fetched a price of 200,000 yuan. Naturally, Lao Zhao was extremely grateful to Nangong, and the two became even closer.

In Panjiayuan, it's common to see people bringing items to sell at antique shops, which Mr. Zhao is used to. However, he used to never accept anything other than stationery.

Since meeting Nangong, whenever someone came to his door to sell bronzes, he would call Nangong to help him appraise them. Surprisingly, he managed to find several bargains and made a profit of over 300,000 yuan. Moreover, Nangong was extremely knowledgeable about bronzes and never made a mistake by buying a fake.

After two years of getting to know each other, Lao Zhao had come to regard Nangong as a close friend, and he greatly admired Nangong's connoisseurship of bronzes.

Just last month, someone brought another item to Lao Zhao's shop. Lao Zhao knew this person; he was said to have some connections and had sold him things twice before, both of which were genuine, allowing Lao Zhao to make a small profit. However, Lao Zhao was a little uneasy about the item he was selling this time because it was extremely valuable.

The man was holding a gilded Amitabha Buddha statue, in excellent condition. It wore a jeweled crown and was inlaid with various precious gems. The statue was seated in the lotus position on a lotus pedestal. The entire item was exquisite.

The item is good, but the person's asking price is not low either. He quoted 10 million RMB right off the bat, without any discounts.

Old Zhao had been with Nangong for the past two years and had learned some knowledge about bronzes. He suspected that the object came from the imperial palace, so he called Nangong to come and help him take a look.

After Nangong examined the object, it was confirmed that it was indeed an official Buddhist statue cast by the Imperial Workshop during the Yongzheng era.

Because Emperor Yongzheng had once become a monk in place of his father and was a devout Buddhist, the Buddhist statues he cast were all exquisitely crafted and of great value, with very few surviving to this day. They can be considered priceless treasures.

After examining it, Nangong pulled Lao Zhao into the back room and gave his estimate: if this item were to be auctioned, it would be worth at least 12 million.

Having known Nangong for over two years, and knowing that Nangong had never been wrong about bronze artifacts, Old Zhao trusted him implicitly. Furthermore, he had already recognized the object as a royal item, so he had a preconceived notion. Upon hearing Nangong's words, Old Zhao decided to buy it.

However, Lao Zhao still had some doubts about the price of the Buddha statue, so he called a friend at an auction house to inquire about the value of official Buddha statues made during the Yongzheng period of the Qing Dynasty. After asking, he was completely reassured, as the market price was slightly higher than what Nangong had said.

The item was genuine, and then it was time to negotiate the price. The seller was asking for an exorbitant price, but Old Zhao, having been in business for so many years, naturally decided to negotiate on the spot.

After a heated debate, with the help of his "friend" Nangong, Lao Zhao successfully lowered the acquisition price to 8 million RMB.

#### Chapter 536 Requirements

Although this gilded Buddha statue is priced at 8 million RMB, which is not cheap, high investment and high risk are necessary for high returns.

With 8 million in hand, and after a little promotion from the auction house, the auction price would be at least 12 million. In this way, his net profit would be more than 4 million, which is almost equivalent to Lao Zhao's total net worth from doing business all these years.

Moreover, his previous successful finds of bronze artifacts had given Mr. Zhao a lot of confidence, and once he made his decision, he immediately started raising money.

It just so happens that the Chinese New Year is approaching, and everyone is relatively well-off. They've almost finished making money throughout the year. Old Zhao usually has good interpersonal

relationships, so borrowing money went very smoothly. He lent each person 100,000 to 200,000 yuan, and in half a day, he actually managed to raise 8 million yuan.

In private antique transactions, there are no contracts or formalities, and no notarization is required. Of course, no taxes are paid either. After Lao Zhao took the person to the bank to transfer the money, the official gilded Buddha statue from the Yongzheng period was considered to belong to him.

After acquiring the gilded Buddha statue, Old Zhao secretly rejoiced at home. Of course, before he started celebrating, he treated Nangong to a big meal and promised him 200,000 yuan as commission after the statue was auctioned off.

Nangong naturally thanked him profusely, but after the meal, he told Lao Zhao that he was going back to his hometown in the south for the New Year. Lao Zhao didn't think much of it at the time, drove Nangong to the mall, and bought a lot of gifts, saying that he should take them back to show respect to his elders.

After Nangong left, Lao Zhao started looking around. There was no point in keeping this thing, and besides, he still had several hundred yuan in debt, so he should hurry up and sell it.

Having decided to sell, Old Zhao took the item to a familiar auction house. As per regulations, the item needed to be appraised by the auctioneer first. Upon examination, the problem arose: the item... was a fake.

Old Zhao felt as if he had been struck by lightning. He couldn't believe it at all. After leaving the auction house in a daze, he went through a series of connections and found a master appraiser of bronzes living in Beijing. After the master appraised it, his conclusion was the same as that of the auction house: five words: modern crafts!

This expert's expertise in bronze ware authentication is nationally recognized. During the authentication process, he pointed out the forgery, explaining that the gilding was actually just molten copper, and the design differed significantly from that of the Yongzheng period pieces, making it a genuine modern imitation.

Old Zhao had given up hope, but for the time being, he didn't think of Nangong. He thought Nangong had also misjudged him. However, after calling Nangong's phone for several days, it was always

switched off. When he checked the address Nangong left with his friend at the police station, there was no such place at all.

If Lao Zhao still didn't know what was going on by this point, he might as well just kill himself. Thinking back to their first meeting two years ago and their interactions over the past two years, he finally came to a conclusion: this whole thing was a trap that had been set up for two years!

From the moment he met Nangong to the several bargain-hunting incidents at the store, it was all a carefully planned scheme. After thinking through the whole story, Lao Zhao couldn't help but admire how flawlessly the whole thing was done.

Moreover, the people who set this trap were really willing to invest. The bronze artifacts they brought out were worth over 300,000 yuan. This is like fishing by first setting up a baiting spot and then adding bait. Once you smell the aroma of the baiting spot and come over to eat the bait, they have basically scammed you without any hesitation.

It's said that good news doesn't travel far, but bad news travels fast. The news of Lao Zhao being cheated quickly spread throughout the antique circles in Beijing. With the New Year just around the corner, no one's money comes from thin air, and the creditors who lent Lao Zhao money all came knocking on his door.

To raise this money, Lao Zhao took out all the working capital in the store, even the money he had prepared for purchasing goods, as well as his family's savings. Now, he's not exactly penniless, but he's close to it. His car and house are still worth a little money, but if he sells them, will his whole family have to sleep on the streets?

Helpless, not only did the shop in Panjiayuan close down, but Old Zhao also took his entire family and went into hiding, planning to sell the shop and return to pay back the money. He had also entrusted the shop owner with consigning some of his antique collection.

After Lao Zhao finished recounting the whole story, Zhuang Rui and the others were dumbfounded. Even the boss was hearing such details for the first time, and his face was full of astonishment. These days, scammers really will stop at nothing.

The boss quickly recalled the friends he had made over the past two years. He was afraid that he might have fallen into a trap like Old Zhao's. It was truly impossible to guard against such a thing. As the saying goes, there is no such thing as a thousand days of thievery, but there is no such thing as a thousand days of guarding against thieves.

The trap was set two years ago, meaning that someone has been plotting against you every moment for the past two years, and there's really no way to escape it.

Moreover, Nangong had thoroughly investigated Lao Zhao's assets, even calculating exactly how much money he could borrow. Didn't you hear that Nangong helped negotiate down the final price of 8 million?

The scheme that was set up over two years meant that even if Lao Zhao didn't buy the bronze artifact, there would definitely be other tricks up his sleeve. Lao Zhao realized that even if he didn't fall for it this time, he wouldn't be able to avoid it next time.

"This...this really is not unjust..."

Even the boss, who frequents Panjiayuan all day, was shocked by this story. These swindlers really have perseverance. They managed to rake in 8 million yuan in just two years, so they didn't lose out.

Furthermore, there's no way to seek redress for this, let alone report it to the police. There's no contract or witnesses, and given the established rules of the antique trade, even if you spent 80 million, you'd still have to swallow your pride and bear the loss.

"I've learned so much, I've really learned a lot..."

Ouyang Jun was also captivated, and then said, "Wu'er, now that we've taken over this shop, I'll be here to keep watch for you. Let's see who dares to cheat me!"

"Come on, Fourth Brother, I'm not trying to be mean, but someone like you wouldn't last three days. They'd probably steal your underwear..."

Zhuang Rui scoffed at Ouyang Jun's words, showing him no respect whatsoever, which made everyone laugh. Even Old Zhao smiled slightly. If an expert could be fooled like this, then an amateur could be easily fooled by a fabricated story.

"However, Mr. Zhao, the price you're asking for this shop is indeed a bit high. If it were more reasonable, I'd like to consider..."

Zhuang Rui changed the subject and looked at Lao Zhao. He genuinely sympathized with Lao Zhao's experience, but he wasn't a philanthropist, so naturally he wanted to take over the shop at the lowest possible price.

"Boss Zhuang, you're an expert in this business, and we're in front of that guy, so I can't just lie, can I?"

There isn't a single vacant shop in Panjiayuan now, let alone one in such a good location like mine, even though it should normally be worth 450,000 yuan a year.

However, the goods in my shop are still worth about a million. I earned 600,000 a year, and I'm transferring the shop and all the goods. This price is really not high..."

After listening to Lao Zhao's words, Zhuang Rui fell into deep thought. 600,000 a year, with seven years left on the lease, that's 4.2 million. Zhuang Rui didn't really care about the money, but there was one problem: he didn't have a suitable master to sit in. He certainly couldn't stay there all day by himself.

"Mr. Zhao, to be honest, I don't plan to continue selling stationery. I don't know anything about that stuff, and I don't have the right people to manage it..."

As soon as Zhuang Rui spoke, a look of disappointment appeared on Old Zhao's face. This wasn't the first time someone had said this to him; so far, no deal had been reached with any of them.

"It's not impossible for me to buy all your goods as well, and the price is what you said. But I have one condition. If you can agree to that, Mr. Zhao, then our deal is done!"

Zhuang Rui's next words surprised and delighted Old Zhao. He was delighted that Zhuang Rui was actually willing to take over, which meant his urgent problem was solved. He was surprised because he didn't know what demands Zhuang Rui would make, and if he couldn't meet them, the matter would fall through again.

Old Zhao took a deep breath, calmed himself down, and said, "Boss Zhuang, please tell me..."

Zhuang Rui lowered his head to organize his thoughts, and after a minute or so, he raised his head and said, "After I take over this shop, I will divide it into two parts. One half will sell stationery and other items, and the other half will sell antique jade and other jadeite items. As for the requirements, Mr. Zhao, you must work as my resident chef for a full year."

I will arrange two people to assist you. After a year, these two people should be proficient in the sourcing channels for stationery and in the basic identification of related items. In other words, you need to train two resident tutors for me.

"Of course, I'll offer you a salary of 30,000 yuan a month. While it's much less than what you'd earn running your own business, it's not low for a resident manager at Panjiayuan, is it?"

Zhuang Rui made this request out of necessity. He knew nothing about stationery and writing implements. If he didn't let Lao Zhao continue to control the business, he wouldn't be able to figure it out at all, let alone open a business.

As for the jadeite, Zhuang Rui plans to display the jadeite he brought back from Myanmar in the shop to sell. There are many antique jadeite pieces there, and just a few pieces would be worth more than the 4 million yuan transfer fee.

"Well... Mr. Zhuang, I need to think about this carefully. I can't give you an answer right now. Could you give me a day?"

After thinking for a while, Lao Zhao said to Zhuang Rui that he originally had other plans for selling the shop, but he did not expect that Zhuang Rui's request would tie him down.

"Okay, take your time to think it over. I'm not in a hurry. Just give me a call when the time is right..."

Zhuang Rui wasn't in a hurry about this. Even if he paid to take over the shop, he would first hand it over to Lao Zhao to manage. He didn't have time to deal with these things this month.

Chapter 537-538 Celebrating the New Year with Joy

"Huh? What's going on?"

When Zhuang Rui and Ouyang Jun returned to the courtyard house, they found that it wasn't Peng Fei who opened the door, but a stranger. They couldn't help but call out loudly, "Peng Fei, Peng Fei..."

Hao Long went home for the New Year, leaving Peng Fei as the only security guard at the house. How could they let strangers in during the holidays? Zhuang Rui couldn't help but feel a little angry.

"Alright, stop calling. Look, the old man's coming to stay..."

Ouyang Jun pulled Zhuang Rui along. He had lived with his grandfather since he was a child and was familiar with the man in the black leather jacket in front of him. Although he did not know the man, Ouyang Jun could tell from his demeanor and expression that he was from the security bureau.

Upon hearing Ouyang Jun's words, Zhuang Rui remembered that his mother had told him a few days ago that his maternal grandparents would be coming to celebrate the Chinese New Year, and his second and youngest uncles would also be coming. As for his eldest uncle, he wouldn't have time; at his level, he was always busier during holidays like the Spring Festival.

This year, Zhao Guodong and Zhuang Min will also be coming to Beijing for the Spring Festival. Along with several cousins, the advantage of Zhuang Rui's large yard is fully demonstrated. All of the dozen or so bedrooms are occupied. These past few days, Ouyang Wan and Li Sao have been tidying up the rooms.

Zhuang Rui was happy to hear that his maternal grandparents had come to stay. In his memory, the Spring Festival was just the three of them: his mother, his sister, and himself. Although they could wear new clothes and set off firecrackers, it always felt a bit lonely. He envied other families with seven or eight members together.

"Brother Zhuang, they've given me a day off..."

Peng Fei, who lives in the front yard, ran over after hearing Zhuang Rui's shout. He said helplessly, followed by a snow-white figure. It was Bai Shi who had run over after hearing Zhuang Rui's voice. The guard standing next to him was very wary of Bai Shi, fearing that the Tibetan Mastiff might suddenly attack and hurt someone.

"Hey, you're having a snowball fight with those little devils again?"

Since the beginning of winter, the white lion has been much more active than before. Now it is covered in snow, which must have been done by those two little girls.

The white lion shook its long fur, instantly smearing Zhuang Rui's face with snow. After playing with the white lion for a while, Zhuang Rui saw Peng Fei still standing there and said, "If you're on holiday, then enjoy the New Year. By the way, did you go to Zhang Qian's house?"

As Zhuang Rui spoke, he led Bai Shi and Ouyang Jun into the house. The guards knew the composition of the family and did not stop the two.

"I went there. I had lunch there..."

Peng Fei smiled sheepishly. Zhuang Rui pursed his lips upon hearing this. These days, raising a girl is really worthless. It's all about getting pregnant first and buying a ticket later. Then you have to go to your mother-in-law's house to eat and drink for free. You'll definitely have to have a son later.

"Wu'er, go inside and call your sister-in-law out. We're going home..."

When Ouyang Jun saw the old man there, he didn't want to go in from the bottom of his heart. It wasn't that he was disrespectful to the old man, but that he had been afraid of him since he was a child. Standing in front of the old man, he felt like ants were crawling all over his body, and he just couldn't feel comfortable.

"Fourth Brother, Grandpa has already eaten. Let's go to the restaurant for a few drinks. You can have your wife drive you home tonight..."

Ouyang Gang has a very regular schedule. He eats dinner at 6 p.m. every day, then exercises for a while, watches the news at 7 p.m. sharp, and goes to bed at 9 p.m. sharp.

Because we spent quite a while in Panjiayuan today, it was almost 7 o'clock when we got home, so Zhuang Rui said that the old man was definitely not in the restaurant.

Ouyang Jun thought about it and agreed. He followed Zhuang Rui toward the central courtyard, but as soon as he stepped through the hanging flower gate, he saw his aunt helping his grandparents take a stroll in the yard. Ouyang Jun's face immediately fell.

"Grandpa and Grandma, you two have such good legs and can walk on your own, why do you always make my mom help you?"

Zhuang Rui, however, wasn't afraid of the old man. He leaned over and joked around, patting the white lion's head as he went to play. The white lion and Ouyang Gang didn't seem to click; the old man would bare his teeth whenever they met. The old man, on the other hand, enjoyed teasing the white lion. If Zhuang Rui hadn't told it beforehand, the white lion wouldn't even know what a grandfather was.

"How can this child talk to his grandparents like that..."

Ouyang Wan raised her right hand and slapped Zhuang Rui, but her face was full of smiles. Everyone said that the elderly suffer in winter, but her father's health was getting better and better, which made all of them, his children, very happy.

"You little rascal, you're never home. Come here, help me to the pavilion for a walk..."

Ouyang Gang stood up straight, and he felt that he was in good spirits over the past few months, so he spent more time outdoors.

“That’s right, it would be good if you settled down soon, instead of running around outside all the time...” the old lady chimed in.

"What do you know? A good man should have ambitions beyond his hometown. Besides, this kid isn't just going out to mess around. He's much more promising than that scoundrel..."

The old man could scold his grandson, but he wouldn't let his wife say it, and he even dragged Ouyang Jun into the scolding.

But after scolding his grandson, the old lady wouldn't have it. The old couple glared at each other, which made Zhuang Rui chuckle to himself. Only when his mother glared at him did Zhuang Rui help his grandfather walk towards the pavilion over the pond.

"You did a good job with what happened a few days ago..."

"What's up?"

Zhuang Rui was taken aback by the old man's sudden words.

"Regarding the gold, although our country ranks among the top in the world in terms of gold reserves, the gap is still too large compared to the two countries mentioned above. It's good that you're thinking of the country..."

Ouyang Gang was very satisfied with his grandson. Apart from Ouyang Lei, he thought Zhuang Rui was the best. The boy was smart but not pedantic, and he handled things very well. Moreover, since they had been reunited, he had never used his name to do anything. He was much better than his own grandson.

Unfortunately, Zhuang Rui did not pursue a career in politics; otherwise, with his abilities, he was fully confident that his grandson would be in charge of a region by the age of thirty.

"Grandpa, the Japanese stole so much from our country back then, this is like getting some interest back. Did Brother Lei tell you about this?"

Although the old man was praising him, Zhuang Rui was still a little uneasy. He didn't know what Ouyang Lei had said. But judging from the situation, Ouyang Lei didn't seem to have mentioned his past. Otherwise, if the old man knew that there were a total of 10 tons of gold, he probably wouldn't be praising him anymore, but would start hitting him with his cane.

"Yes, the country will not forget what you have done for it. I heard you're going to pursue a master's degree next year. How about finding a job in a government department? We have Xiaojun, who runs a business, and that's enough for us..."

Although the old man lectured Ouyang Jun all day long, he knew very well that the reason why the younger generation in the family were able to avoid making financial mistakes was entirely due to Ouyang Jun's financial support. His attitude towards Ouyang Jun was mainly because he was used to scolding him and couldn't change his ways.

"Working in a government department?"

Zhuang Rui was stunned for a moment after hearing his grandfather's words. Two or three years ago, being a civil servant would have been exactly what Zhuang Rui longed for—high salary and a leisurely life. But now he didn't want to get involved in that mess. He saw those officials who were accused of corruption when they had money and were called incompetent when they didn't. He wasn't going to suffer that kind of fate.

"Grandpa, I think I'll just start a small business. By the way, I'm going to open a shop in Panjiayuan soon, and then I can just sit and do business from opening to closing. I won't have to run around anymore. As for getting a job, let's just forget about it..."

"Come on, help me back inside, the news is about to start..."

The old man showed a hint of disappointment on his face, but he didn't say much. It was all his fault. Years ago, he didn't acknowledge his daughter and grandson because of his pride. Now, he couldn't interfere too much in Zhuang Rui's life.

...

The next day, Zhuang Rui set his alarm for 6 a.m., got up early, and drove himself to the TV station. Since he had promised, he wanted to do it well—that was Zhuang Rui's principle. Besides, chatting with the experts there was a very enjoyable experience.

The treasure appraisal program was recorded smoothly. It only took a little over two hours to record the items brought by the treasure owners on site. Then some staff members dressed up as treasure appraisers and brought some items from the warehouse for appraisal. By noon, the seven-day special program had been recorded for more than half a day. If they came for another half day tomorrow, it would be completely finished.

After returning to the courtyard house in the afternoon, Zhuang Rui saw that Zhao Guodong had also arrived in Beijing and brought him an Audi. Zhuang Rui still preferred his own Grand Cherokee, so he tossed the Audi keys to Peng Fei.

Zhuang Rui was thinking about buying another car. After Xuanbing arrived, she would need a car too. But there was no rush. They would wait until Qin Xuanbing arrived and see what kind of car she liked.

After more people moved into Zhuang Rui's courtyard house, it became lively. Although Ouyang Lei was busy, his wife and son also moved in, leading a group of children to play in the courtyard, with a white lion following behind them.

This was Zhuang Rui's special instruction: as soon as that girl Nannan ran to the pond, the white lion would grab her by her clothes and drag her back. The way the chubby girl danced around in the white lion's mouth often caused the busy people in the courtyard to burst into laughter.

Zhuang Rui and the others were doing a thorough cleaning of the courtyard house and pasting couplets and the character "福" (good fortune) on all the doors. For an ordinary family, this work would be easy, but Zhuang Rui's courtyard had more than twenty rooms and they had bought more than two hundred "福" characters. They were very busy.

On the morning of Lunar New Year's Eve, Zhuang Rui came to the TV station for the last time, as the festive atmosphere in Beijing grew stronger.

As Zhuang Rui drove along the road, he could see that many people were wearing festive red silk cotton-padded jackets that were only worn during the Chinese New Year. Although the weather was still cold, everyone's face was filled with happy smiles.

"Happy New Year, Teacher Jin! I'm sending you my early New Year greetings..."

"Happy Chinese New Year, Teacher Sun..."

"Xiao Zhuang, Happy New Year, Happy New Year..."

Upon entering the CCTV lobby, all I could hear were New Year's greetings.

Although tomorrow is only the first day of the Lunar New Year, Chinese people have a custom that the 30th of the year is the most important. Look at those people who have been busy outside all year, rushing home before the New Year, just so they can have a reunion dinner at home on the 30th.

"By the way, Teacher Liu, did you know that someone bought a fake official Buddha statue from the Yongzheng era at Panjiayuan a while ago?"

While the experts took their seats and the host was talking outside, Zhuang Rui asked Liu An'an a question.

Before Liu An'an could answer, Fatty Jin interjected, "Teacher Zhuang, are you talking about Xiao Zhao, the stationery seller, who got set up?"

Seeing Zhuang Rui nod, Fatty Jin laughed and said, "You really asked the right person. Teacher Liu knows the most about that matter; he was the one who handled the appraisal..."

Fatty Jin also knew Boss Zhao, and they were quite familiar with each other. He himself studied under that master of Chinese studies surnamed Aisin-Gioro, learning calligraphy and appreciation of paintings and calligraphy. He often went to "Shuyazhai" to buy brushes, ink, paper and inkstones, so he was very clear about this matter.

"Well, it's been about 20 days since then. The quality of that Buddha statue's casting is still quite good. Some novices can easily be fooled. These days, people will stop at nothing to set up fakes..."

Liu An'an spoke of this matter with some emotion, but Zhuang Rui was relieved because he was also afraid that this might be a trap. What if Old Zhao transferred the shop for some other reason, and it caused other trouble after he took over?

The morning's program was filmed quickly, and the experts each received a gift bag. In addition to some snacks and gifts on top, Zhuang Rui noticed a large red envelope at the bottom, which he assumed was their payment for the event.

Actually, Zhuang Rui didn't know that there was no budget for expert expenses for this CCTV treasure appraisal program. However, after Zhuang Rui joined and that incident happened, the station director specially approved 300,000 RMB as expenses for hiring experts, 50,000 RMB per person. Jin Pangzi and his team still benefited from Zhuang Rui's influence.

"Wishing you prosperity and good fortune, give me a red envelope!"

After saying goodbye to the experts and the host, Zhuang Rui had just gotten into his car when his phone, which he had reset, rang.

"Hello, is this Mr. Zhuang? This is Zhao Hanxuan..."

"Is this Boss Zhao? Hehe, so, have you made up your mind?"

Although Zhuang Rui was unfamiliar with the name Zhao Hanxuan, he recognized the voice. It was the same Zhao Boss who had been tricked and raised for two years before being slaughtered like a fat sheep.

"Boss Zhuang, please call me Lao Zhao. I don't deserve that title..."

Zhao Hanxuan's voice came through the phone. After a pause, he continued, "Boss Zhuang, I've thought it through. As long as you agree to take over Shuyazhai, I'll be your resident chef for a year..."

When Zhao Hanxuan spoke on the other end of the phone, his face was somewhat bitter. He was a native of Beijing and quite famous in the field of collecting scholar's objects. However, he never expected that he would make a wrong move in middle age, not only losing his own shop but also having to work for someone else.

However, the situation was pressing, and he had no choice. After considering it for two days, he finally made a decision. Before making the call to Zhuang Rui, he had already notified all the creditors that they must repay the borrowed money before the Lantern Festival. Otherwise, Zhao Hanxuan would not be able to get through the New Year.

"Okay, Lao Zhao, I'll be waiting for your call..."

Zhuang Rui was overjoyed to hear Zhao Hanxuan agree. To be honest, Zhuang Rui didn't care at all about how much money he could make from those stationery items. He was thinking about how he finally had a place to sell the jewelry he had obtained from Myanmar.

In his spare time these past few days, Zhuang Rui sorted out the jewelry he acquired from Myanmar and divided it into several categories. One category is nephrite ornaments, mostly small ornaments. The jade material is of high quality, the carving is exquisite, and they are all quite old, mostly from before the Xianfeng period, and there are also quite a few from the Ming Dynasty.

These genuine antique jade pieces cannot be sold at the price of ordinary jade. These are antiques. Zhuang Rui roughly estimated that the value of these jade ornaments and pendants alone is over 50 million. This is Zhuang Rui's conclusion without including a few exquisite pieces in his calculations.

Other items are all gemstones, including Burmese rubies, turquoise, agate ruyi (a type of scepter), and other similar objects, all of which can be categorized as antiques.

Then there are the pearls, including a string of top-quality black pearls with a diameter between 9mm and 10mm, which are priceless treasures. Zhuang Rui doesn't know why black pearls from Polynesia are in Myanmar, but these black pearls are definitely not dyed. They are natural black pearls that are expensive and only appear at auctions.

Zhuang Rui would naturally not sell this. With Qin Xuanbing's fair skin, she would definitely look even more beautiful and charming if she wore this pearl necklace. Zhuang Rui had already decided to give it to Qin Xuanbing as a gift when they got engaged.

"Hey, Mr. Zhuang, are you listening?"

Zhuang Rui was lost in thought and his mind wandered when Zhao Hanxuan's voice came through the phone.

"Yes, yes..." Zhuang Rui quickly replied.

"Mr. Zhuang, I can agree to your conditions, but I hope you can complete the transfer of Shuyazhai before the fifteenth of the first lunar month. You...you know, I'm counting on this money to save my life..."

Zhao Hanxuan wasn't in the mood for anything else. He just wanted to pay off his debts first, and then work for Zhuang Rui for a year. No matter what, a monthly salary of 30,000 yuan wasn't low. After a year, he would think of a way to start a business related to stationery.

"Hehe, Mr. Zhao, please keep that shop open as usual for now. I'll be there before the third day of the Lunar New Year. There are some specific things I'll need to ask for your opinion on then..."

Zhuang Rui smiled. He had a different plan in mind, but it was just a vague idea. He needed to think it over carefully and would talk to Zhao Hanxuan about it when they went to the temple fair during the New Year.

Back at the courtyard house, it was already bustling with preparations for the New Year. Ouyang Jun and the others gathered in one room to play cards, while the children played in the yard. Fortunately, the yard was big enough for them to keep running around.

Ouyang Wan, along with Zhang Ma, Li Sao, and Zhuang Rui's cousins, busied themselves in the kitchen, steaming New Year's cakes, frying meatballs, pan-frying ribbonfish, potato slices, and crispy leaves, among other New Year's foods. The chef who was supposed to be serving the old man was given a day off by Ouyang Wan, because the New Year's Eve dinner was always the one she made herself.

A few children would occasionally sneak into the kitchen, grab a few treats, and run off, followed by the laughter and scolding of several women. Jiang Ying and the others had all come from an era of material scarcity. Although they had hired a nanny to do the work for them all these years, they were now doing it with great enthusiasm.

As night fell, the sound of firecrackers gradually rose outside. Zhuang Rui turned on all the lights in the courtyard, and even the artificial hill in the courtyard was illuminated with colorful lights. The entire house was brightly lit in the night.

"Time for New Year's Eve dinner..."

The children in the yard shouted in unison, and at Ouyang Wan's call, they swarmed into the dining room, their chattering filling the large room.

The New Year's Eve dinner was divided into five tables. The old man's guards and Zhang Ma and others sat at two tables in the front yard, while three tables were set up in the dining room in the middle yard.

There were so many people that the women and children alone filled one table. Zhuang Rui and his brothers, along with Zhao Guodong and others, sat at another table, while Ouyang Gang, Ouyang Zhenwu, and others sat at a separate table. Of Zhuang Rui's generation, only Ouyang Lei was among them.

"Zhuang Rui, come here, sit over here..."

Ouyang Gang's loud voice rang out, and the room fell silent. Everyone's eyes turned to Zhuang Rui, and the Ouyang brothers' eyes were filled with envy.

You should know that being able to sit at that table is equivalent to being able to participate in the core affairs of the family. Although Ouyang Long and Ouyang Lu have now reached the level of department-level cadres, they are still not qualified to sit at the table.

"Come here, Xiao Rui. The old man is testing you to see how much you, as a collector, know about New Year's customs."

Ouyang Zhenwu smiled and waved to Zhuang Rui, dispelling the doubts of his brothers. However, everyone could see that Zhuang Rui was greatly favored by the old man.

"Fire the cannons, then eat!"

The old man waved his hand, and Ouyang Lei's son took an incense stick and lit the "Ten Thousand Firecrackers on the Earth" hanging on the big tree at the entrance of the restaurant. Immediately, the sound of firecrackers crackling and popping rang out.

"It's Chinese New Year! Time to set off firecrackers..."

Amidst the deafening sound of firecrackers and the dazzling sparks, everyone's face was beaming with joy. The children were especially excited, shouting with delight. It took a lot of effort to get these little ones, who wanted to keep setting off firecrackers, into the restaurant.

"Dad, Mom, I wish you both boundless happiness and longevity..."

After the old man waved his hand to indicate that everyone could start eating, Ouyang Zhenwu and Ouyang Wan's children all stood up and toasted the old man and the old woman with a glass of wine.

"Grandpa and Grandma, Grandpa and Grandma on the other side, wishing you both a Happy New Year..." Behind them, Ouyang Lei and Zhuang Rui, the third generation, lined up to offer their New Year's greetings.

Finally, it was the children's turn. They all knelt down on the ground, kowtowed, and then scrambled to their feet, chattering as they reached out to ask the old folks for their New Year's money.

"Okay, I have them all, I have them all..."

The old man and woman were all smiles as they handed out red envelopes prepared by their daughter to the children.

"It's Chinese New Year..." Zhuang Rui felt a warm feeling flow through his heart as he looked at this scene of four generations living together.

#### Chapter 539 New Year Customs (Part 1)

After kowtowing to the old man and woman, the group of children, starting with Zhuang Rui's second uncle, bowed one by one. After kowtowing, they stood up and immediately reached for red envelopes. Wearing many winter clothes, their clumsy antics brought laughter to the adults.

"Uncle, give me a red envelope!"

Among all the people in the room, Zhuang Rui was the youngest, so he was the last to kowtow to him. Looking at his niece's chubby little hand, Zhuang Rui took out the red envelopes he had prepared and handed them out one by one, both amused and exasperated.

Before leaving, Zhuang Rui hugged Nannan and said, "Nannan, how about your uncle keeps your red envelope for you?"

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"No, Mom said this is for Nannan's dowry when she grows up..."

The little girl shook her head repeatedly, and what she said immediately caused a burst of laughter in the room. She didn't know what a dowry was; she was just repeating Zhuang Min's words.

"Okay, when you get married in the future, your uncle will give you a big red envelope..."

Zhuang Rui flicked the little girl's nose and let her go. Children eat together and it tastes better. Normally, you have to follow them around with a bowl to get these little devils to eat.

After Ouyang Gang picked up his chopsticks, the New Year's Eve dinner officially began. Their family didn't have any rules about not talking while eating, and the dining room was filled with laughter and joy. At this moment, there were no ministers, no governors, and no generals; there was only deep family affection.

The old man and woman didn't eat much. About half an hour later, the doctor who was eating in the front yard came over and, together with Ouyang Wan, helped the two elderly people to take a walk in the yard.

The children had almost finished eating, and a bunch of them took their firecrackers and went to the yard to set them off. The crackling sounds from outside added to the festive atmosphere of the New Year.

"Alright, you guys come over here too..."

After the old man passed away, Ouyang Zhenwu called his son and Ouyang Lu's brothers to the main table. Except for Zhuang Rui's eldest uncle, who was still out of town, this meant that two or three generations were all present. •】 ••'ǒ'•» 6⑨sHŪX.©0M «•'o'••【•

Hearing the firecrackers outside, Zhuang Rui raised his glass to his two uncles and said, "Now that firecrackers aren't banned, it finally feels like the New Year again. A few years ago, these New Year traditions were almost completely lost..."

"That's true, but there are pros and cons. Setting off firecrackers during the Lunar New Year increases the city's fire rate by 60% compared to normal times. If we don't allow them, we'll lose our tradition..."

The speaker was Ouyang Long, who was now in charge of a region and knew these things very well. The Spring Festival was also the busiest time for them. Ouyang Long finished his New Year's Eve dinner today and flew back to work tomorrow.

Of course, being busy doesn't mean they're trying to get promoted. On the contrary, many people with higher official ranks might even visit them instead.

"We shouldn't talk about national affairs during the New Year, Xiao Rui. You're a collector, this is related to our country's traditional culture. Can you explain the customs and traditions of the New Year?"

Ouyang Zhenwu often heard his son praise Zhuang Rui for his expertise in appraising antiques, but now he wanted to investigate Zhuang Rui to see how much he knew about traditional Chinese culture.

"Uncle, you can give us a challenge, but we need to offer a prize..."

The most important thing during the Chinese New Year is to have a good time. Seeing that his uncle was in a good mood, Zhuang Rui started joking around too.

"You little rascal, what kind of prize do you want? Just say it. I don't have any money..." Ouyang Zhenwu said with a smile.

"Uncle, how about this: you give me a question, and if I answer it correctly, you, my second uncle, and my cousins will each drink a cup of wine. If I don't answer it, I'll drink six cups by myself. How about that?"

Zhuang Rui's words left the group exchanging bewildered glances. They couldn't fathom where he got the confidence to make such a boast. Each of them drinking one cup was fine, but if Zhuang Rui lost, he'd have to drink six! They used seven-qian (approximately 35 grams) cups, so six cups would be about four liang (approximately 200 grams).

Ouyang Jun gave Zhuang Rui a gloating look, saying, "Wu'er, no one's stopping you from drinking. My dad's questions were really tricky..."

"A bet is a bet. Whoever loses drinks. Second Uncle, Little Uncle, how about it? Are you in or not?"

Zhuang Rui's grinning face made the others a little unsure. Who knew what this kid was up to? However, Ouyang Zhenwu was still a bit skeptical. At Zhuang Rui's age, how could he understand these traditional customs?

"Let's do it your way. Whoever loses drinks. Here's the first question: tell me about these melon seeds and peanuts on that table over there. Is there any particular custom or significance to them?"

Ouyang Zhenwu smiled and gave the question: After the children finished eating, they cleared away the leftovers and replaced them with some snacks and peanuts.

"Hehe, Uncle, this is no problem for me. Sunflower seeds used to be called 'poor man's snacks,' which means that ordinary people didn't have money and couldn't afford expensive things. Sunflower seeds were cheap, so they were something that poor people would eat for fun when they had nothing to do."

But now, during the Lunar New Year, eating sunflower seeds isn't called "eating to get rid of poverty," it's called "eating to get rid of poverty." It's about getting rid of all the bad luck at the end of the year, Uncle, am I right?

Zhuang Rui's words made the Ouyang brothers prick up their ears. Although they celebrated the New Year every year, they really didn't know that there was such a thing about melon seeds.

Ouyang Zhenwu smiled and nodded, saying, "That's right, you even know this, kid. What about peanuts?"

"Peanuts are also called 'longevity fruit,' and they are eaten during the Lunar New Year to symbolize longevity and good fortune..."

Zhuang Rui wasn't intimidated at all and blurted out that when he first started working at the pawnshop after graduating from Zhonghai, he didn't go back to Pengcheng for the Spring Festival but spent it at Uncle De's house.

Uncle De came from the old society and was a folklore expert. He had always thought highly of Zhuang Rui and wanted to take him on as an apprentice. So he shared a lot of his knowledge with Zhuang Rui and later taught him a lot of miscellaneous things, all related to folklore. The questions Ouyang Zhenwu asked were really no challenge for Zhuang Rui.

"I told you so, didn't I? Let's all drink..."

Zhuang Rui smiled smugly. There are many things in folk customs that can be applied to the appraisal of miscellaneous items. When he was learning to appraise miscellaneous antiques, he practically wore out a book on Chinese folk customs.

Folklore, or folk customs, refers to the life culture created, enjoyed, and passed down by the general public in a country or nation. Chinese folklore has a long history and includes customs such as eating glutinous rice balls, dumplings, and zongzi and attending temple fairs.

"Okay, you're right, I'll drink this glass of wine..."

"I drank some too, it was worth it..."

"Yeah, we eat this stuff every day, I really didn't know there was such a thing..."

Ouyang Zhenwu took the lead, and the others drank the wine in front of them. Zhuang Rui smiled and took the wine bottle, refilling the wine for each of them. Judging from this, he was thinking of getting his two uncles to drink a few more cups.

Zhuang Rui's second uncle, Ouyang Zhenshan, also became interested. Pointing to the twelve plates on the table in front of him, he said to Zhuang Rui, "Xiao Rui, let's talk about these dishes. Why are there twelve dishes in total? Is there any significance to them?"

Zhuang Rui laughed upon hearing this and said, "Alright, let's talk about the dishes. Twelve dishes, four cold and eight hot. Four represents peace and stability, and eight represents stability. Put together, it means that we should have a peaceful and stable last meal of the year to welcome the New Year..."

"Alright, Uncle, you can't stump me. Now, have a drink with me..."

Ouyang Zhenshan nodded repeatedly. This time, Zhuang Rui didn't need to urge them to drink. Everyone at the table consciously drank the wine that had just been poured.

"Fifth brother, let's talk about food. What are the rules for chicken, duck, fish and meat?"

Ouyang Jun chimed in, but was immediately interrupted by Ouyang Lei, who said, "Forget about the chicken. It's just for good luck, it doesn't count. Even a child knows that..."

Ouyang Jun wholeheartedly agreed with his boss's words, and then quickly added a few more sentences: "Right, right, the chicken doesn't count, the other three dishes count as three items. If you can't name them, you have to drink six cups of each, that's eighteen cups of wine..."

"You idiot, if he tells us, we'll have to drink three cups too, won't we?"

Ouyang Zhenwu was speechless at his son's cleverness. He couldn't seem to put it to good use. He was only thinking about harming Zhuang Rui and didn't realize that there was a give-and-take involved.

"Haha, Second Uncle, Youngest Uncle, you two should go and teach Fourth Brother a lesson. Let him drink all this wine..."

Upon hearing his uncle's words, Zhuang Rui burst into laughter and then said, "We don't count as chickens. Brother Lei just said that chickens are for good luck, which is true, so I won't say anything more."

Let's talk about ducks first. The reason why the Spring Festival is called the Spring Festival is because spring is coming soon. Su Shi wrote in his poem "Evening View of Huichong's Spring River": "Two or three peach blossoms outside the bamboo, the ducks know first when the spring river warms." Eating duck during the Spring Festival is a way of looking forward to the arrival of spring...

"Alright, you've said one. I'll drink this first..." Ouyang Jun consciously drank the wine in front of him. In the spirit of celebrating the New Year, Ouyang Zhenshan and the others also raised their glasses.

"As for the fish..."

"Wait a minute, Xiao Rui, everyone knows that fish symbolizes abundance year after year, right? You don't need to tell me that meaning. But you need to explain why there are two fish dishes on the table."

Ouyang Zhenwu stopped Zhuang Rui from speaking. Goodness, a group of people couldn't stump this little guy. Ouyang Zhenwu also felt that he was going to have a hard time. The difficulty of the test questions needed to be increased a bit.

"Alright, let's leave aside the 'May you have abundance every year' thing. Now let's talk about the second fish. This fish isn't eaten on New Year's Eve, but on New Year's Day. It's meant to symbolize not only abundance every year, but also continuous abundance, wishing for an even better year to come!"

Chapter 540 New Year Customs (Part 2)

This book is being published for the first time, providing you with a reading experience free of errors and disordered chapters.

"Alright, you guys, the questions you come up with are so low-level, let's drink..."

Zhuang Rui explained the nuances of fish, and starting with Ouyang Zhenshan, everyone downed another cup of wine. This was already the third cup, each weighing over two ounces, and the atmosphere at the banquet became increasingly lively.

"The meat in this chicken, duck, fish and meat dish is braised pork, which symbolizes prosperity and good fortune, so let's have a prosperous and joyful Chinese New Year!"

Zhuang Rui's words left the others unsure whether to nod or shake their heads. Zhuang Rui was right; let's continue drinking.

"Alright, you guys keep fooling around, we're going to take a break..."

The Ouyang brothers, Zhenshan and Zhenshan, were both close to sixty years old. After several drinks, they were feeling the effects of the alcohol and left the restaurant to talk in the main room.

"You little rascal, you had a good time pouring us drinks, huh? Now drink up..."

After the elders left, Ouyang Jun got excited and pulled Zhuang Rui to drink several glasses of wine in succession.

It must be said that alcohol really is a catalyst for relationships. After a few drinks, the Ouyang brothers loosened up, and the five cousins ended up drinking two more bottles of Moutai before finally concluding their New Year's Eve dinner.

"Uncle, uncle, set off fireworks for me..."

As soon as Zhuang Rui stepped out of the restaurant, he was stopped by the little girl. She was the youngest among the children. Although she had a lot of firecrackers in her pocket, she didn't dare to set them off. She was so anxious watching others do it. When she saw Zhuang Rui, she quickly clung to her uncle.

"Okay, let's set off firecrackers with our precious princess..."

Seeing the lively scene in the courtyard, Zhuang Rui's childlike spirit was also awakened. It seemed that he hadn't let go of these things for more than 10 years. Memories of running around with a bag of firecrackers during the New Year when he was a child came to mind.

More than 20 years have passed in the blink of an eye, and Zhuang Rui is about to enter the hall of marriage. He felt a surge of emotions, and took his daughter's little hand, leading her to play in the yard.

Zhuang Rui's action of holding the bean sprout cannon drew gasps from a group of children, reminding him of the time when he was a child and his fingers were blown up like carrots just to show off.

After making a fuss in the courtyard for a while, Zhuang Rui went to the front yard and saw Zhang Ma and the guards. Except for the different place where they were eating, all the dishes were the same today. There were also TVs in the front yard and the gatehouse. The Spring Festival Gala had just started, and Zhang Ma, Li Sao, and Peng Fei were all watching it together.

Back in the main room of the courtyard, Ouyang Wan waved to Zhuang Rui and said, "Don't set off firecrackers at 12 o'clock. Your grandfather is a light sleeper, don't wake him up..."

Hey, the old man wasn't having any of it. He glared at me and said, "What's there to be afraid of! Back in the day, I used to fall asleep to the sound of gunfire. What's there to be afraid of? Go ahead and set them off, the louder the better..."

"Okay, I know you're not afraid, Dad, but Mom is..."

Ouyang Wan was both amused and exasperated. This guy was really like a child in his old age. Despite his past as a warrior, he was no different from any other old man in his old age.

"Your mother wasn't afraid at all. She was on the front lines carrying a stretcher back then. Otherwise, would I know her?"

The old man seemed to realize he had let something slip and quickly shut his mouth, while Ouyang Jun and the others were secretly laughing. It was a rare treat to hear about the old man's love life.

Around 9 o'clock, the old man started to feel unwell and went back to his room to sleep.

"Fourth Brother, come on, sit over there and help me soothe the baby. Look at those dumplings, you might as well call them steamed buns..."

The family watched TV while making dumplings. These Ouyang brothers might be good at academic papers, gunplay, bird-keeping, and poetry, but this was something they really couldn't do. Each dumpling they made was crooked and uneven; the filling would probably spill out before they even hit the pot.

The wives of those brothers weren't very good at manual labor, but Zhuang Rui's family did it very efficiently. Zhao Guodong rolled out the dough, while Zhuang Rui, Ouyang Wan, and Zhuang Min wrapped the dumplings. Their movements were very skillful, and the dumplings they made were almost all the same size. Before long, the table was full of dumplings.

Zhuang Rui also put a few pieces of candy inside the dumpling wrappers, which is a custom in Chinese New Year. If someone can eat a dumpling with a special filling on the first day of the Lunar New Year, it means they will have good luck in the coming year. Originally, coins were supposed to be placed inside, but there were too many children, so Zhuang Rui could only use candy instead.

New Year's Eve always seems to pass by too quickly. Amidst the laughter and joy brought by the skits and crosstalk performances, the Spring Festival Gala is about to end. A group of children have already hung up firecrackers outside, ready to welcome the New Year with the sound of firecrackers.

These little guys usually stay at home during the Lunar New Year, but today they all went crazy playing. None of them wanted to go to bed. Little Nannan's eyes were almost closed, but she was still following Yaya around like a little shadow.

"We'll set off the firecrackers later. I'm going to check on Grandpa..."

Zhuang Rui gave instructions to Ouyang Lei's son, then went into Ouyang Gang's room. The old man was already fast asleep, so Zhuang Rui quickly used his spiritual energy to cleanse his body. He then did the same thing in his grandmother's room before leaving the room.

The most taboo thing for the elderly is extreme joy or sorrow. Although Zhuang Rui often helps them with their health, they are already at the age limit. Perhaps a pleasant surprise or a sad event could take their lives. Zhuang Rui has to be careful.

As the clock struck midnight on the television, and the song "Unforgettable Tonight," sung by Li Guyi for twenty years, began to play, the deafening sound of firecrackers outside also rang out.

Not only in Zhuang Rui's courtyard house, but at this moment, it seemed that the entire world was filled with the sound of firecrackers. Even if people were close by, it was difficult to hear each other's voices. This was a sign that the New Year had arrived!

The older children took out fireworks and set them off. The fireworks flew high into the night sky and exploded, flashing colorful lights that illuminated the entire night sky. Beijing was a city that never sleeps!

Zhuang Rui was on the phone with his future mother-in-law to wish her a Happy New Year when the call suddenly cut off. He couldn't hear anything coming from the phone. Taking advantage of the fact that he had nothing else to do, Zhuang Rui quickly went back to his room and video-chatted with Qin Xuanbing.

The white lion was startled by the sudden sound of firecrackers. It leaped onto the artificial hill by the pond, roared to the sky, displaying the majesty of a mastiff king, which made a group of children clap their hands.

Around 11 a.m., Ouyang Wan and her nieces-in-law, who had been waiting in the kitchen, put the dumplings they had made while watching TV into the pot of boiling water.

The elderly couple were also woken up by the sound of firecrackers. They got up and ate two dumplings before going back to sleep. Coincidentally, each of them ate a dumpling with sugar in it, which is a sign that they will be in better health in the coming year.

Amidst the congratulations of his children and grandchildren, the old man, as if he had won a battle, went back to his room to sleep. However, this gave the two doctors quite a headache. The environment was simply too noisy. If it weren't for the old man's insistence, they would never have come here for the New Year.

...

We stayed up quite late on New Year's Eve, and on New Year's Day, we all slept in. Luckily, all our relatives stayed together, so we didn't have to go out to visit them.

Zhuang Rui's house was quite large. After getting up, the children played games, while Ouyang Zhenwu and Ouyang Zhenshan left for work, and Ouyang Long even took a plane and left Beijing early in the morning.

Zhuang Rui stayed in the courtyard house on the first and second days of the Lunar New Year. He planned to return to Pengcheng with his brother-in-law on the fifth day and then return to Beijing on the tenth day to prepare for his engagement.

When Zhuang Rui returned to Pengcheng this time, he also wanted to deliver the invitations to some elders, neighbors, and classmates he had frequent contact with. As the saying goes, a close neighbor is worse than a distant relative. Zhuang Rui had never been naughty in other people's homes since he was a child, so the relationships with those people were no different from those with relatives.

On the morning of the third day of the Lunar New Year, Zhuang Rui, who was feeling a bit bored at home, received a call from Zhao Hanxuan. It turned out that Zhao was unsure of the situation and was calling to ask Zhuang Rui when he would take over the shop. Of course, what he meant was that he was asking when Zhuang Rui would pay him.

Since he had nothing else to do today, Zhuang Rui simply called Ouyang Jun, Zhao Guodong, and Ouyang Lei's son Ouyang Ya, who lived here, and together with his daughter, they went to Panjiayuan to attend the temple fair.

On the third day of the Lunar New Year, Beijing was filled with a festive atmosphere. Whether they knew each other or not, everyone greeted each other with smiles and said the same two words: "Happy New Year!"

At the Panjiayuan Temple Fair, the crowds were immense. If it weren't for the little girl sitting on Zhuang Rui's shoulders, she probably would have been pushed apart long ago.

After wandering around the various stalls for a while, the little girl's hands, mouth, and pockets were already full of food and toys. The little one was holding Guan Yu's Green Dragon Crescent Blade in her hand and making babbling noises, really treating Zhuang Rui like a big horse to ride.

"Boss Zhuang, Happy New Year! Happy New Year..."

Upon entering the reopened "Shuyazhai," Zhao Hanxuan, dressed in a bright red silk mandarin jacket, immediately bowed. His complexion was much better than a few days ago, presumably because Zhuang Rui's promise had relieved much of his psychological pressure.

Happy Chinese New Year!

Ouyang Jun also cupped his hands in greeting to Zhao Hanxuan, but was kicked from behind by Zhuang Rui. There are rules to this cupping gesture: the left hand should be on top and the right hand on the bottom, forming a fist. This is considered an auspicious gesture, while the opposite is considered an inauspicious gesture. If someone with a sense of propriety had encountered Ouyang Jun's gesture, they would have immediately turned him away.

However, Zhao Hanxuan knew that Ouyang Jun was not in the industry, so he didn't pay any attention to it and invited the group to sit down in the inner room.

"Old Zhao, I've been quite busy lately. Let's sign the transfer agreement. I'll have to rely on you to handle the paperwork..."

After Zhuang Rui sat down, he didn't stand on ceremony and took out two copies of the contract that he had printed at home from his bag and placed them in front of Zhao Hanxuan.