

Rise 107

Chapter 107: The End of the Provincial Examination

The provincial exam was like a thousand troops crossing a single-plank bridge; at this very moment, it was the sprinting moment. The final exam of the provincial exam began amid the complex emotions of the students.

At the beginning of the provincial exam, more than nine hundred students participated. After the first formal exam, about six hundred were eliminated. After the second round of selections, over a hundred more were dismissed. Now, in the final exam, only about two hundred students remained, and by the end, over a hundred would still be eliminated.

The final exam was a strategy essay. "Strategy" refers to selecting a current issue and proposing a solution. For example, if the topic is "Flood Control," you must offer ideas, propose methods, and present them in a reasonable and concrete manner. "Essay" refers to discussion and commentary, such as debating whether black cats or white cats catch mice more effectively, or commenting on a historical figure. These are easy in one sense and hard in another. As long as you can argue logically and support your points, you are fine.

A total of over two hundred students participated in the final exam. Since Zhu Ping'an had ranked first in the last essay judgment, his seat was near the front, and the environment was particularly good. His seat number was "Jiazi". Of course, in this last exam, seat numbers did not matter much because the final results would be based on comprehensive performance, with the official list announced under real names.

The exam papers were handed out, and the proctor held up a wooden board covered with red paper, which displayed the topics for the strategy essays. There were three topics in total. It is said that the imperial exam and future strategy essays will have five topics.

The three topics covered a broad range: one was about flood control, another was about securing the peace of the people and managing the herders, and the third was about governance and integrity.

For the strategy essays, it was not only important to present solutions but also to sound impressive and praise virtues. For the flood control topic, Zhu Ping'an began with a discussion of Yu the Great's flood control efforts. For the topic on securing the peace of the people, he started with the emperor's role in overseeing the people, officials being appointed by the emperor, and distributing land for the people's welfare. For the integrity topic, he began with the idea of "worrying about the troubles of the world before they come, and rejoicing in the happiness of the world after it is resolved." His writing was brilliant, like a beautiful flower, the article splendid and magnificent...

First, he mentally brainstormed his ideas, then wrote a neat draft in small script. By the time he had finished writing the three drafts, it was time for the mid-exam meal break. The food wasn't very good, just barely edible. After eating, he drank a bowl of hot water, tidied up the table, and laid down for a brief rest.

After about half an hour, he woke up feeling refreshed, as if fully recharged.

He carefully reviewed the drafts from start to finish, making sure there were no mistakes. After confirming everything was correct, he dipped his brush in ink and began copying the drafts onto the exam paper, word by word, in a neat and serious manner. His writing was like a dragon swimming through the sea, adding beauty to the article. Zhu Ping'an felt increasingly grateful to the elderly fisherman who had earlier guided him.

He promised to repay the kindness of the book gift, and when the opportunity arose in the future, he would surely repay the elderly fisherman well.

When Zhu Ping'an had carefully copied all three essays onto the exam paper, some people had already started handing in their papers. Zhu Ping'an double-checked his paper twice to ensure everything was correct, then rang the small bell beside him to signal that he was done.

This time, he handed in his paper a bit earlier than usual. About forty to fifty percent of the students had already submitted their papers. Leaving the exam hall, he once again saw his fellow students from Tongcheng, such as Xia Luoming, and from Sushong, Feng Shanshui, among others. Some of the other students were familiar, but he couldn't quite place their names.

"Zhu Xian-di, how did it go this time?" It was Feng Shanshui from Sushong who first raised his folding fan and greeted him.

It seemed that, throughout history, every time they left the exam hall, fellow exam-takers would ask how they had done. This was probably the second time they had asked him this question, and there was an underlying sense of his own lack of confidence.

Zhu Ping'an cupped his hands in return and smiled faintly, "It was okay."

Feng Shanshui was slightly stunned upon hearing this. Last time, when he had asked Zhu Ping'an, he simply replied that he had finished all the questions. When asked further, he said he only hoped to make the Sun Mountain list. But when the results came out, Feng heard that Zhu Ping'an had made the Jia list. That answer meant a lot more than it seemed. But this time, Zhu Ping'an had said "okay," which clearly indicated a much more confident tone than before. Of course, "okay" still sounded humble, but it was clearly different from last time.

Over there, Xia Luoming from Tongcheng, listened to Zhu Ping'an's response. His proud expression shifted slightly before returning to his self-assured demeanor. This time, he was certain the first place in the imperial exam was his for the taking. The only people who could compete with him were Feng Shanshui from

Sushong, Wang Jin from Taihu, and other prominent figures from various counties who had secured spots among the top ten. As for Zhu Ping'an, although young and somewhat talented, he was still not in the running for first place.

"Brothers, what do you think of this exam?" After answering, Zhu Ping'an asked.

Xia Luoming from Tongcheng didn't speak, only slightly lifting the corners of his mouth.

The others also smiled but said nothing.

Only Feng Shanshui, standing in front of Zhu Ping'an, opened his fan, waved it a few times, and smiled slightly. "I'm in the same position as Zhu Xian-di last time. I won't fail."

"You're too modest, brothers," Zhu Ping'an shook his head and laughed innocently. Then he cupped his hands and said, "I wish you all success in the exams. I'll take my leave now."

"Hehe, go ahead, go ahead..."

Feng Shanshui and the others laughed, likely reminiscing about the nickname "Zhu Xian-di" that Zhu Ping'an had earned for himself, as well as his reputation for hurrying to leave after exams to seek food. It wasn't an exaggeration—during the last two exams, people had seen him slip out to haggle with street vendors.

Naturally, this time was no different. After leaving the exam hall, Zhu Ping'an found a fragrant shop on the street, went inside, and after a brief moment of thought, ordered two of the most popular dishes: two meat pies, and a jar of wine to go. He packed it all up and took it back to the inn.

When he pushed open the door of the inn, he found that the vixen was still there.

As usual, as soon as Zhu Ping'an opened the door, a gust of fragrant air swept toward him, and his hands were empty before he even realized it.

"Wine and meat, hehe... Looks like little benefactor did well on the exam..." The demoness sat at the table, holding the wine jar, smiling as she looked at Zhu Ping'an.

"Mm, not bad," Zhu Ping'an nodded.

"Such a pedantic scholar..." The demoness teased with a playful laugh.

After dinner, Zhu Ping'an began his late-night study session, which caused the vixen lying in bed to pout in displeasure.

"You bad person, you finished all three rounds of the imperial exam, but you still won't let me sleep peacefully..."

Zhu Ping'an merely shrugged slightly, saying nothing, and continued reading his book.

Without a response, the vixen pouted and, bored, went to sleep.

The night deepened, and everything was quiet, with only the sound of a cuckoo bird outside the window and the rustling of the vixen turning in bed. Hearing the sound, Zhu Ping'an slightly curled the corners of his mouth.

It should be soon.