

Rise 135

Chapter 135: Re-examination

Every scholar coming out of the Jiangnan Gongyuan was holding their noses and walking around a fat man; the smell emanating from him was simply unbearable.

Zhu Ping'an, standing three meters away from the tearful and snot-covered man, couldn't bear to see him in such a state and said,

"Brother Xue, what's done is done. Feeling sad is of no use now. Let's fill our stomachs first; my treat."

As soon as Zhu Ping'an finished speaking, the sobbing fat man three meters away let out a howl and started vomiting by the roadside again.

Uh... It seemed mentioning food wasn't the best idea.

Under the fat man's tearful pleas, Zhu Ping'an eventually didn't leave him alone. However, he did kick the fat man into an inn, instructing the inn's staff to take him to his room and have him scrub himself clean from head to toe. Zhu Ping'an advised against resembling a walking biological weapon.

While the fat man was upstairs washing, Zhu Ping'an sat by the window in his room, reading a book. The topics for the civil service exams' eight-legged essays were confined to the Four Books, so the more he read, the more confident he became in tackling the questions.

When the fat man finished cleaning up and changed into fresh clothes, Zhu Ping'an put away his book and joined him downstairs for dinner in the inn's main hall.

However, the fat man seemed to have developed a psychological trauma. He didn't eat a single bite, not even a sip of soup. Zhu Ping'an could do nothing about it. You can't wake someone pretending to sleep, nor can you feed someone who vomits at the sight of food.

The inn's main hall gradually filled with scholars, gathering in small groups of two or three to have dinner while critiquing the day's exam questions. The primary target of their complaints was a question based on Confucius said. Many seemed utterly baffled, not knowing where to start.

The night was quiet. Moonlight was hazy, starlight dreamy, and a gentle breeze rustled the window curtains. Zhu Ping'an sat by the window until the watchman struck the third watch before he packed his things. After extinguishing the oil lamp, he climbed into bed and fell into a deep sleep.

The next day, before dawn broke, Zhu Ping'an got up early to prepare for the final exam of the academy test—the re-examination.

As usual, the fat man was the first to wake Zhu Ping'an for the exam. After a night's absence, the fat man seemed much thinner, and his forehead appeared unusually bruised.

"Your forehead..." Zhu Ping'an looked at the fat man's bruised forehead and was speechless.

"Oh, I deliberately bumped it against the top beam of the gate. It's for good luck!" The fat man looked rather pleased with himself.

Fine, you win.

As they reached the bridge connecting both sides of the Qinhuai River, they ran into Zhu Ping'an's uncle and others coming from the opposite bank. Zhu Ping'an was at a loss for words.

"Zhi'er, how did yesterday's exam go?" Uncle Zhu Shouren yawned and asked with concern.

"Yesterday's question..." Zhu Ping'an hadn't finished his sentence before his uncle interrupted.

"You also found yesterday's question quite difficult, didn't you? Hmm, no matter. You're still young. Just take the test a few more times," Uncle Zhu Shouren stroked his beard and comforted him. "It's a pity, though. If the question had been more ordinary, your ranking as the top student in the government exam would have ensured a secure passing. This time, the difficulty was higher, so it's a bit unfortunate."

Zhu Ping'an: ...

Today was the second session—the re-examination.

The entry procedure was the same as last time. After roll call and identity verification, the candidates were led by officials to their exam rooms.

Yes, it was still the same exam room as before.

Zhu Ping'an couldn't help but feel a bit sorry for Xue Chi. That guy was probably going to vomit again.

Compared to yesterday's main session, the re-examination was slightly less significant. The Ming Dynasty had strict time constraints for grading academy exams, with about ten days allocated. To speed up the process, graders primarily focused on the candidates' first-session essays, which were often only reviewed briefly. Typically, if a candidate performed well in the first session and received high marks (good reviews), graders would assume the candidate was competent, making it unlikely for their second-session scores to be poor. Conversely, if a candidate bombed the first session, graders might approach their second-session essay with bias.

Of course, this didn't mean the re-examination was unimportant. Graders still assessed the quality of answers, especially for eight-legged essays, which had a fixed format, making it easier to judge writing quality objectively.

After the cloud board was struck, the exam papers were handed out. Several officers held up boards with the exam questions pasted on them in the corridor in front of the candidates' rooms, so the students could see the questions.

Today's exam questions were fewer than yesterday's. There were two questions on the Four Books and Eight-Legged Essay, along with one less common question on writing a model poem. In fact, the Ming Dynasty's provincial, metropolitan, and palace exams did not test model poems. Even in the Children's Examination, it was rare because Emperor Taizu disapproved of it. However, after his influence weakened in the middle period of the dynasty, model poems occasionally appeared in the Children's Examination, though rarely. Grading was mainly focused on the Four Books and Eight-Legged Essays.

The two Four Books and Eight-Legged Essay topics were more orthodox compared to yesterday's "Zi Yue" and were quite standard. The first question was "If you make a mistake, don't hesitate to correct it," from The Analects of Confucius: "A gentleman is not revered if he is not serious. His learning will not be solid. He is loyal and trustworthy, and has no friends who are worse than himself. If he makes a mistake, he is not afraid to correct it." The second question was a long sentence, "A virtuous man in a village is the friend of another virtuous man in the same village, and a virtuous man in a country is the friend of another virtuous man in the same country," from Mencius.

These two questions were rather standard and not too difficult for scholars accustomed to writing Eight-Legged Essays. How well one performed in the Eight-Legged Essay would depend on their foundation.

However, the last question, the model poem, was a trap. The question was "Yellow flowers like scattered gold."

There is a sentence in the Book of Rites that reads, "In the last month of autumn, chrysanthemums have yellow flowers." Many candidates might write about autumn scenery or chrysanthemums when composing their model poem based on this, but that would be completely off-topic.

When Zhu Ping'an saw the question, he felt some gratitude toward the scheming, sharp-tongued girl from Shanghe Village. If it weren't for her, he would have gone off-topic as well.

The last time he went home, he borrowed books from the Li family to copy, mostly the Four Books, Five Classics, and Eight-Legged Essays. That boisterous girl once mocked him as a "toadish bookworm." After Zhu Ping'an teased her with words, she used this line from the poem to ask him, and he, now the subject of her ridicule, became the "chrysanthemum" of her mockery. She handed him a poetry collection and teased him, saying, "Chrysanthemum, canola flower, Ping'an the stupid toad, too silly to tell the difference."

The poetry collection included two ancient poems: The Wenxuan by Xiao Tong of the Liang Dynasty and Duwang by Simao of the Tang Dynasty. Both had lines like "The green stems seem to be made of emeralds, yellow flowers like scattered gold" and "The green trees dim the village, yellow flowers sparsely appear among the wheat." Because of this, Zhu Ping'an knew that the yellow flowers did not refer to chrysanthemums but to the spring rapeseed flowers. This model poem was meant to describe a spring scene. He wondered how many candidates with poor academic foundation would fall into this trap.

Zhu Ping'an dipped his brush in ink and first copied the three questions onto a draft paper before starting to draft his response.

As time quietly passed on the tip of his pen, from the morning sun to the evening sun, the fading glow of the sky gradually dimmed. The deep red turned to pink, and the vibrant red turned to light red. Finally, when all the red light had disappeared, Zhu Ping'an walked out of the Jiangnan Examination Hall.

"Come, come, come, Brother Zhu, appreciate my poem 'Yellow Flowers Like Scattered Gold, Golden Wind Blows Chrysanthemum Petals'..."

Just as Zhu Ping'an exited the Examination Hall, he heard a familiar shout. Looking up, he saw Fatty Xue Chi, with two cotton balls stuffed in his nose, his chubby face grinning like a chrysanthemum, waddling toward him.

Chrysanthemum petals?

Zhu Ping'an looked at the fatty with a speechless expression. Alright, Fatty, you should go home and let your father help you get a scholar's post.