

## Rise 151

### Chapter 151: One Word, Nine Criticisms

The Flower Hairpin Banquet is both an honor and a welcoming ceremony for scholars entering the scholarly world. Here, people either try to make a good impression in front of the education officials and academic leaders, or they display their literary talents by composing poems and essays in front of groups of three to fifty people. Even the scholars seated at the long tables in the corners find ways to draw attention to themselves.

The whole banquet was harmonious, except for one person: Zhu Ping'an, who was sitting at the last row of tables. He was busy tasting a dish from each plate—eating more if it tasted good, eating less if it didn't. In the end, it was just about eating... and eating in various styles.

While others were reciting poetry or performing literary games, Zhu Ping'an simply ate and ate. Not just eating, but eating in different ways: big bites, small bites, sipping, sucking, chewing, biting, pulling...

This drew curious glances from those around him. How could someone who was being encouraged by the education official be such a glutton? This person's indulgence in food would surely prevent him from achieving greatness. What a waste of the opportunity to get close to the education official! If it were me, I would naturally thank the official for his encouragement, raise a glass of wine, and then recite a poem or an essay, asking the official for some feedback. Only then would my name rise to prominence.

What a hopeless case.

Of course, not everyone thought that way. For example, Wang Jin from Taihu and others had a lot of praise for Zhu Ping'an. If Zhu Ping'an hadn't been so focused on eating and was seated so far away, they would have gone over to get to know him.

The whole Flower Hairpin Banquet ended in a harmonious atmosphere. The education official gave a few words of encouragement and then left. As he passed by Zhu Ping'an's table, he saw the shrimp shells and crab shells on Zhu Ping'an's plate, and his eye couldn't help but twitch: "This young man really has a good appetite; it's quite enviable..."

At this time, it was still only around noon. Zhu Ping'an, with his full stomach, leisurely made his way back to the inn.

"Zhu, you finally came..."

As soon as Zhu Ping'an reached the upstairs, he heard a wailing sound that was like a pig being slaughtered. Then he saw the chubby Xue Chi, who was in ragged clothes, bouncing out of the corner, with tears streaming from his eyes.

Zhu Ping'an was stunned by the sight of Xue Chi. If it weren't for his voice, Zhu Ping'an's first reaction would definitely have been to kick him and then run away.

How could Xue Chi have turned into this in just over a day? It looked like he had been robbed and roughed up. But with Xue Chi's appearance, could anyone really go so far as to drop a bar of soap?!

"Zhu, why did it take you so long to come..." Xue Chi cried out after bouncing over, his round face full of grievances, with tears rolling down.

"Hold on, what's going on with you? Are you experiencing life or breaking through your limits?" Zhu Ping'an looked at Xue Chi's ragged clothes and filthy face and didn't know how this had come to pass.

"It's all my father's fault," Xue Chi complained, his chubby face full of dissatisfaction as he mentioned his father.

"Did your father beat you?" Zhu Ping'an's eye twitched.

"No," Xue Chi shook his head, his fat cheeks wobbling. "But it's all his fault. He just promised to get me a scholar's position. But when I got home, he kept humiliating me, always comparing me to you." When he said this, Xue Chi shot a dissatisfied glance at Zhu Ping'an.

"What did he say? He kept going on about how you were thirteen and accomplished all these great things, being top of the class and all. He kept saying how I can only eat and do nothing else. Of course, I couldn't take it. Before I even had a chance to say anything, he started cursing me with 'one word is worth nine'."

"One word is worth nine?"

Zhu Ping'an's mouth twitched. How is that supposed to be an insult?

"My father said: 'When I say one word, you counter with nine.' And then he went on about how you were invited to a meal by the education official and that I only live off him. My mother couldn't stop him! He doesn't even think—he spent eighteen years to pass the examination and become a student, while I passed in just three years. And he still curses me as useless..." Xue Chi was sobbing, his face wet with tears.

"Scolding you a few times shouldn't lead to this kind of behavior, right?" Zhu Ping'an was speechless.

"Filial piety comes first in everything, but I couldn't say anything to him, so I had to go out of the city alone to clear my mind, not even daring to return at night. Early this morning, I woke up with nothing to do, thought I'd go up the mountain to watch the sunrise and clear my mind, so I climbed a small hill and waited for over an hour. In the end, the sun rose behind me..." The fat man continued, his tone growing more melancholic.

"That still doesn't warrant this kind of result, does it?" Zhu Ping'an was quite impressed by the fat man, who could even get the direction wrong when watching the sunrise.

"After watching the sunrise, I started descending the mountain. It was so early and I had been hiking for more than an hour, I was starving and just wanted to find something to eat. But the foot of the mountain was completely deserted. After a long search, I finally found someone selling buns. I bought three and ate them, but they tasted terrible. I ate two and couldn't eat any more, so I asked the bun seller how much they were. And then, and then this bastard tried to raise the price on me, asking for 100 wen for three buns. Of course, I refused and tried to reason with him, 'Three buns for 100 wen? Why don't you just rob me?' The fat man still had the anger from the encounter on his face.

"And then?" Zhu Ping'an asked.

"Then, then he really did rob me... And that's how I ended up like this. The next time I see that bastard, I'm going to make him pay. How dare he rob Fat Lord? Brother Zhu, quickly open the door, I've been mocked by passersby several times. Let me in, and maybe get me something to eat. Also, buy me a set of clothes. I can't go back like this. Who knows how my father will humiliate me when I return." The fat man wiped his nose, stood at the door, urging Zhu Ping'an to open it.

"Truly cursed," Zhu Ping'an could only sigh in sympathy for the fat man's misfortune.

When Zhu Ping'an opened the door, the fat man sighed, "A brother shows his true colors in times of hardship," and slinked in like a lost dog. He had truly had enough of the contempt from passersby. He wasn't bothered by being scolded by his father, but just a few stares from others felt like his soul was being tortured.

After Zhu Ping'an opened the door, he went downstairs to the main hall, asking the innkeeper to send a bucket of hot water to his room. He also ordered two dishes, one soup, and two buns, to be delivered as well.

After paying, Zhu Ping'an left and went to the cloth store where he had tailored his clothes before. He randomly picked out a large-sized outfit. It didn't matter if it fit or not; it was better than what the fat man was wearing.

On the way back to the inn, Zhu Ping'an ran into his uncle and several other villagers. It seemed that after one day, his uncle and the others had already been comforted by the courtesans, and their heartbreaks were soothed.

"Zhi'er, what a coincidence. Your uncle was just thinking of looking for you at the inn," Zhu Shouren, his uncle, had regained his usual charm, no longer the despondent figure from the day the list was posted.

"Uncle, other uncles, have the arrangements for returning to the village been made?" Zhu Ping'an cupped his hands and asked.

"Your uncle was just going to talk to you about that. We won't be returning tomorrow, but the day after is the annual flower contest by the Qinhuai River, where the flower queen is selected. Your uncle and the others have been entrusted with a small task during this event, so our return to the village will be delayed for a few days," his uncle replied, a joyful expression spreading across his face.

The other villagers were also full of springtime cheer.

No wonder they're the masters of failure at the exam—so experienced in dealing with rejection. They really bounced back quickly.

Zhu Ping'an was already too tired to complain about his uncle and the others.

"Well, I'm just a little homesick, so I'll head back first," Zhu Ping'an cupped his hands and said lightly. "I hope Uncle and the uncles don't mind."