

Rise 190

Chapter 190: The Examination

Wielding the brush and splashing ink, time flies like a shuttle; as the pen glides, time quietly slips away. Unknowingly, October 20th has arrived.

Early this morning, a large area in the northern part of Yingtian was cordoned off. All business activities came to a halt, and a long row of well-constructed exam sheds was set up. These sheds were fully enclosed on all sides, sturdy and solid, providing protection from wind and rain. Only one side was left open to allow examiners to observe the candidates.

Zhu Ping'an, wearing a scholar's headscarf and a blue long robe, carried his brush, ink, and inkstone, as well as a wide bamboo water cup. Following the notice issued by the education officer a few days ago, he lined up at the front of the Anqing Prefecture queue. According to the yamen officers, students receiving government stipends were arranged at the very front of the line.

The fat man had also gone to queue in the Fengyang Prefecture line to await entry. Despite having successfully sent a gift, he still felt nervous and uneasy.

Before the students entered, yamen officers carried several baskets of cakes and small dishes into the sheds—this was the meal provided for the candidates during the imperial examination. It was quite frugal.

Education Officer Zhao Wenhua, along with several officials, sat on a high platform at the northernmost part of the shed. They wore official robes, and the area in front of them was brightly lit, with tea and seasonal

fruits placed before them. Zhu Ping'an, standing far away, could not make out the features of this historically infamous treacherous official. After glancing twice, he gave up—too far to see clearly.

Outside, over twenty soldiers wielding sabers were stationed around the western side of the exam sheds, standing guard. More than ten yamen officers stood at the entrance, checking the candidates. Apart from writing tools and a water container, no other items were allowed.

As per regulations, Zhu Ping'an and the other candidates untied their long robes, exposing their inner garments. They held their writing tools and water containers in one hand and their socks in the other, waiting for two yamen officers to conduct a search. Zhu Ping'an was near the front of the line, and once the five candidates ahead of him had been searched, it was his turn.

To be honest, having two grown men frisking him all over was somewhat unsettling.

After passing the inspection, Zhu Ping'an put on his socks and shoes and entered the exam shed. Inside, an official verified his identity. Once confirmed, a yamen officer led him to his assigned seat.

The seating arrangement was extremely simple—just a table and a chair, with nothing else. All candidates faced south, their backs to the education officer. The distance between tables was about four feet.

A narrow aisle ran between the rows of seats. On either side of the aisle, there were two large waste buckets—fortunately, they were far from Zhu Ping'an's seat.

Once most candidates had entered, the exam papers were distributed. The yamen officers handed out the papers one by one. Each exam paper bore the education officer's official seal and a serial number. Zhu

Ping'an's paper was marked "Stipend Candidate No. 7." This serial number was randomly assigned by the education officer. Below it was a blank space for the candidate's name.

Following the instructions from the notice, Zhu Ping'an wrote down his name and personal information:

Zhu Ping'an, Government-Sponsored Student of Huaining County Academy, Age 13, Yet to Take the Imperial Exam.

The imperial exam required candidates to write their names, distinguishing it from the children's exam and the provincial exam. Because names were recorded, there were bound to be some hidden dealings. However, such matters were generally kept in check—the Embroidered Uniform Guard and the Eastern Depot were not to be trifled with. Even if corruption existed, it would be confined to a minimal extent, as the education officer had his own head to protect. If all exam slots were unfairly assigned, it would provoke the outrage of the scholars, risk attracting the attention of the secret police, or even escalate to the censorate or the Emperor himself—consequences no one could afford.

After three beats of the yamen drum, officers walked around holding placards displaying the exam questions. Several clerks also read the questions aloud, ensuring that even those with poor eyesight or hearing could clearly understand the topics.

There are only two exam questions: one on eight-legged essays and one on policy discussion. Zhu Ping'an neatly copied both questions onto scratch paper at once.

Although Zhao Wenhua's character is quite poor, his literary cultivation is rather high. After all, the gazetteer he compiled was even included in the Complete Library of the Four Treasuries. As for these two exam questions, they are of quite a high standard.

The eight-legged essay topic is as follows: Confucius said to Yan Yuan, "If used, then act; if dismissed, then retreat and hide. Only you and I can achieve this."

This is a topic from the Four Books, and it is not an obscure or difficult one—rather, it is a very standard subject. However, writing a good eight-legged essay on this topic is no easy task. The quote comes from the original text of the Four Books, where Confucius and his disciple Yan Hui discuss the two life choices of ancient scholars—whether to engage in public service or withdraw into seclusion. However, coming up with a strong and insightful argument on this topic is not easy.

Essentially, this quote is Confucius boasting while simultaneously praising Yan Hui. Its specific meaning is:

Confucius said to Yan Yuan, "If someone recognizes my abilities and appoints me, I will implement the great principles of governing and bringing peace to the world. If no one appoints me, I will keep these great principles hidden within myself. Only you and I are capable of such a thing."

In eight-legged essays, the topic serves as a strict boundary for the content. The entire essay must revolve around the given topic; one cannot arbitrarily expand or narrow its scope. It is like digging a well—its width must remain the same from the opening to the bottom. This particular topic can only discuss "engagement and withdrawal" (use and concealment), Confucius and Yan Hui, and Confucius' words to Yan Hui—nothing else.

Therefore, standing out among thousands of candidates and writing a compelling eight-legged essay on this topic is no easy feat.

After comparing it to some top-ranked eight-legged essays from his previous life and integrating his own understanding, Zhu Ping'an pondered for a moment before curling his lips into a confident smile. Then, he swiftly wrote down the first sentence:

"The sage's choice of engagement or withdrawal is only subtly revealed to those who are capable."

This first sentence is called the proposition statement in eight-legged essays, and it is the most crucial part of the entire essay. Whether the essay is considered well-written and how high the score will be depends largely on this statement. The proposition statement must not simply repeat the exam topic but must concisely capture its essence.

Zhu Ping'an was extremely satisfied with his proposition statement. Just based on this sentence alone, he felt that passing the exam was almost a certainty.

"The sage" refers to Confucius, and "the capable" refers to Yan Hui. "The appropriate choice of engagement and withdrawal" indicates a perfectly measured approach to public service and retreat. The phrase "subtly revealed" not only reflects the teacher-student relationship between Confucius and Yan Hui but also highlights Yan Hui's wisdom—like a resonant drum that does not need a heavy strike to produce sound. This proposition statement made Zhu Ping'an very pleased.

After completing the proposition statement, Zhu Ping'an dipped his brush in the inkstone and proceeded to write the explanation of the proposition, introduction, argument, and conclusion.

"The sage's engagement and withdrawal are not easily defined; only when one like Yan Hui appears can such discussions take place."

"Thus, Confucius specifically said: 'Throughout my lifetime, I have encountered only one or two who could truly understand this choice, yet those who seek a way to avoid difficulty are rare. When one reaches a level of self-assurance but has no one to share it with, when one finds solitude but has no one to converse with—perhaps this sentiment is best entrusted to self-composed verses. But now, at last, I have someone to speak with.'"

"Only you and I can achieve this, and at that moment, Yan Hui, too, was content and silently comprehended."

Zhu Ping'an wrote this eight-legged essay in a state of complete flow, his thoughts pouring onto the paper effortlessly. He completed the essay in one seamless draft without needing to revise a single word.

By the time he finished, many candidates around him had not even started writing.

At this moment, he felt slightly thirsty, but he resisted the urge to drink water. He had heard from other scholars that drinking water during the imperial examination was absolutely forbidden. Though there were attendants providing tea in the exam hall, one must never drink it—no matter how thirsty. If you drank water, the examiners on the high platform would record it. Even if they didn't consider it cheating, they would still lower your essay's score by one grade, no matter how well you wrote.

Thus, despite his thirst, Zhu Ping'an merely licked his lips with the tip of his tongue and endured it. He reminded himself: Hold on a little longer. I can drink water during the meal break. I must not seek temporary relief and risk ruining my path in the imperial examination.