

Rise 191

Chapter 191: Something Happened Suddenly

After taking a brief rest, Zhu Ping'an continued to look at the second policy essay question. Compared to the provincial examination, this imperial exam had about four-fifths fewer questions, which was evident just by looking at the second policy essay question. In the provincial examination, there were generally four policy essay questions, sometimes three or five, but in this exam, there was only one.

This policy essay question was also relatively short, unlike the lengthy ones in the palace examination. The question was as follows:

"Use laws to instill deterrence; when the law is enforced, people will recognize its benevolence.

Restrict with ranks; when ranks are granted, people will understand honor."

This policy essay question was taken from Zhuge Liang's "Reply to Fa Zheng". It means: Using laws to instill deterrence, when the law is enforced, people will feel its benevolence. Using ranks to define status, when people are promoted, they will feel honored.

This essentially speaks of the principle of clear rewards and punishments, which has been thoroughly analyzed in later generations. Zhu Ping'an could easily write several versions of an answer upon seeing the question. However, precisely because he had too many ideas in mind, it was difficult to choose the best one. After mentally refining and merging multiple answers, he picked up his brush and carefully wrote on the draft paper:

"Rewards and punishments are the great powers of a ruler. Only when they are clearly defined can good and evil be distinguished, and order be maintained. If a ruler does not grant minor favors, the people will not harbor unrealistic expectations. Such is the way of governance. In times of prolonged decline and weakness, if one wishes to establish clarity and rigor in the government and among the people, then the system of rewards and punishments must be strictly defined. How excellent is Marquis Wu's response to Fa Zheng, stating: 'Using laws to instill deterrence, when the law is enforced, people will feel its benevolence. Using ranks to define status, when people are promoted, they will feel honored.'"

Without a single revision, he completed it in one go.

After finishing, Zhu Ping'an became increasingly satisfied with his essay. There were hardly any flaws. He slightly curled his lips into a smile—barring any surprises, he felt confident in this exam.

The ink on the desk was almost used up. Zhu Ping'an placed his brush on the stand beside the table, picked up the inkstone set aside, and began grinding ink. Regarding grinding ink, the ancients had a saying: "Grind ink lightly, but moisten the brush heavily." Light grinding meant one should not be impatient or press too hard on the ink stick. It was said that the best people for grinding ink were young women from the inner chambers, precisely for this reason.

Zhu Ping'an took up the inkstone, placed his index finger on the top of the ink stick, and pinched its sides with his thumb and middle finger. He started grinding, applying slightly more pressure when pressing down and easing up when rotating it, using an even force throughout.

"When fine ink is lightly ground, its fragrance lingers;

A newly bathed inkstone gleams with radiance."

The ink Zhu Ping'an brought was a special purchase—Hui ink, a high-quality variety he usually hesitated to use. Good ink grinds smoothly and silently, whereas poor ink produces a rough sound. Zhu Ping'an completed the grinding process without making a single sound, except for the faint fragrance of ink spreading through the air.

Once the ink was ready, Zhu Ping'an set the inkstone aside, rested briefly to adjust to his optimal state, then picked up his brush and began transcribing his draft onto the answer sheet. His mind was clear, fully focused.

With each stroke of his brush, the writing flowed—

Like an untethered steed leaping into the sky, leaving dust behind;

Like a soaring dragon, weaving and turning through the heavens,

Emerging from the void and returning to boundless emptiness.

In this near-manic surge of raw vitality, it contained the essence of heaven and earth.

An eight-legged essay. A policy essay. Completed in one smooth motion.

After transcribing his answer, Zhu Ping'an reviewed it twice. He couldn't be more satisfied. There wasn't a single mistake, and his handwriting was at its peak form.

By this time, some candidates had already submitted their papers. From the high platform in the north, the examiner, Zhao Wenhua, seemed to be asking something, but Zhu Ping'an dared not look around or even glance backward. Just like the annual academic evaluations, the imperial examination had strict regulations. Any improper actions, such as looking around, stretching, or yawning, would be noted by the examiner or the proctors. Regardless of how well one's essay was written, such actions would result in a grade deduction.

After completing the inspection and confirming that everything was in order, Zhu Ping'an reached out to request permission to submit his exam paper.

Moments later, a minor official arrived to collect the paper. After verifying Zhu Ping'an's personal information on the exam sheet, the official stamped it and then gathered it up, signaling for Zhu Ping'an to follow him to the northern platform to submit the paper.

Since Zhu Ping'an was submitting his paper early, only three to five others had done so at this point. The examinees present all turned to look at him. At that moment, another candidate was ahead on the platform submitting his paper, so the official leading Zhu Ping'an guided him to a spot at the side of the platform to wait for the previous candidate to finish.

It was only then that Zhu Ping'an got a clear look at the Grand Examiner Zhao Wenhua, the official overseeing the examination. Historically known as a notorious traitor, there was nothing outwardly treacherous about his appearance. He was a middle-aged official in his fifties, with a square-shaped face and a neatly groomed beard, appearing both gentle and stern—exuding an air of fairness and responsibility.

However, Zhu Ping'an was not fooled by his appearance. He knew that Zhao Wenhua was merely good at disguising himself.

Because only a few people had submitted their papers so far, Zhao Wenhua was personally reviewing them on the spot. The candidate ahead of Zhu Ping'an had approached the platform with confidence, but he descended with a pale face. Zhao Wenhua had pointed out errors in his paper on the spot and graded him as a second-tier candidate. Though second-tier was still a respectable score, it meant he had no chance of advancing to the provincial examination—only first-tier candidates had a real shot.

After stepping down, this candidate was led to the entrance, where he joined others who had already submitted their papers, waiting for a sufficient number of examinees before being dismissed together.

Once this candidate finished, it was Zhu Ping'an's turn. Following the official, he stepped onto the platform, bowed respectfully, and knelt before Zhao Wenhua's desk.

This damn feudal society—kneel, my foot! And to a treacherous official at that!

Despite his inner complaints, Zhu Ping'an maintained a respectful expression as he knelt.

Huh? This examinee is so young?!

Zhao Wenhua was slightly surprised upon seeing Zhu Ping'an. Such youth! However, his initial reaction carried a hint of disdain—this boy must be a student admitted through family donations, rather than genuine talent. His actual abilities were probably lacking. Giving him a second- or third-tier score should suffice.

But when he received the exam paper from the official, Zhao Wenhua's surprise deepened. The paper indicated that Zhu Ping'an was the top scorer in this year's county-level exam! This young man hadn't bought his way in—he had earned his place through merit, and he was the top candidate!

Opening the exam paper, Zhao Wenhua's breathing became slightly unsteady.

The moment he began reading, a sharp and imposing energy emanated from the words.

The handwriting seemed almost alive—flowing like a dragon and serpent, forceful like iron hooks and silver strokes, as if the ink could pierce through an iron inkwell.

Just based on the handwriting alone, a first-tier ranking would be well-deserved.

As he read further, Zhao Wenhua unconsciously picked up his teacup and took two sips. By the time he finished Zhu Ping'an's eight-legged essay and policy argument, the minor official beside him had already refilled his tea twice.

Zhao Wenhua read the exam paper twice, stroked his beard, and then scrutinized Zhu Ping'an, who was kneeling below. Setting down the paper, he asked:

"How old are you?"

Zhu Ping'an, who had been inwardly cursing the situation, heard the question and respectfully replied:

"Reporting to my lord, this humble student is thirteen years old this year."

Zhao Wenhua nodded, then suddenly asked, "What is the meaning of 'rituals that are not proper rituals'?"

Hearing this, the other examiners and instructors on the platform were taken aback. Normally, such questioning only involved basic recitations of classical texts—a mere formality. But now, Zhao Wenhua had suddenly posed a difficult philosophical question.

The surrounding people couldn't help but look at Zhu Ping'an with sympathy.