

Rise 192

Chapter 192: Responding Calmly

Hearing Zhao Wenhua's question, Zhu Ping'an was somewhat surprised. Just now, for the previous candidate, Zhao Wenhua had only asked him to recite a passage from Spring and Autumn Annals.

Despite his surprise, Zhu Ping'an quickly adjusted his mindset, his brain working rapidly as he calmly responded.

Zhao Wenhua's question came from Mencius, Li Lou II: "A ritual that is not in accordance with propriety, and a righteousness that is not truly righteous—such things a great person would not do."

The key point of "a ritual that is not in accordance with propriety" is not about propriety itself, but rather about distinguishing true propriety from false propriety. When answering, one must clearly separate genuine propriety from improper rituals. Only by doing so can one truly grasp the meaning of this topic and fully understand Mencius' intent.

Zhu Ping'an quickly grasped the essence of the question. Almost as soon as Zhao Wenhua finished speaking, he calmly replied:

"The ancients considered this to be propriety, and we must follow it today—but this may not necessarily align with the propriety of the past. The ancients considered this to be righteousness, and we must follow it today—but this may not necessarily align with the righteousness of the past."

Zhu Ping'an approached the question from the perspective of time, highlighting the differences in propriety and righteousness between ancient and modern times. He pointed out that if people today blindly adhere to what the ancients considered to be propriety and righteousness, it may no longer align with true propriety and righteousness. Instead, it could become improper propriety or false righteousness.

According to the Eight-Legged Essay format, when answering a question like "a ritual that is not in accordance with propriety," one should only address that specific phrase and avoid discussing the following phrase, "a righteousness that is not truly righteous." The most taboo mistake would be addressing both phrases together. However, Zhu Ping'an chose to address both because propriety and righteousness are too closely intertwined to be separated. There were precedents for this approach in the Eight-Legged Essay format.

After finishing the first sentence, Zhu Ping'an barely paused before continuing:

"Mencius said: 'A ritual that is not in accordance with propriety, a righteousness that is not truly righteous—such things a great person would not do.' This refers to cases where the outward form appears the same, but the true essence is different. For example, if a man were to marry a wife and then bow to her morning and evening, this would be an improper ritual. If one were to repay a favor by seeking revenge on another's behalf, this would be false righteousness. Such actions are things that even ordinary people would not do—how much more so for a great person? To assume that only great individuals could refrain from these behaviors would be to misunderstand Mencius' intent."

"These are my humble views, and I hope my lord will not hesitate to correct me."

Zhu Ping'an succinctly completed his answer on the topic of improper propriety, cupped his hands, and spoke respectfully.

"Excellent!" exclaimed an instructor nearby, unable to hold back his excitement after hearing Zhu Ping'an's response.

The moment he spoke, the instructor realized his outburst was inappropriate. He immediately cupped his hands and apologized to Zhao Wenhua.

"It's fine. A fine piece of writing is meant to be appreciated," Zhao Wenhua waved his hand dismissively, displaying a refined demeanor.

After reassuring his subordinate, Zhao Wenhua stroked his beard and addressed Zhu Ping'an, "You may rise and speak."

"Thank you, my lord," Zhu Ping'an stood up and cupped his hands in gratitude.

"Propriety is founded upon righteousness, and righteousness is the essence of propriety. When something is unjust, its true nature becomes evident. Your argument on adaptability is quite insightful. Your response was eloquent and well-structured—it pleases me greatly," Zhao Wenhua commented as he stroked his beard, clearly satisfied with Zhu Ping'an's answer.

"It is all thanks to my lord's excellent guidance in education," Zhu Ping'an replied insincerely.

Although this man was a treacherous official, he still held power over the imperial examination process. Zhu Ping'an was not a rigid or foolish person—he understood when to say what. In life, it is best to be outwardly flexible while maintaining firm principles within.

As the saying goes: Be as warm as the spring breeze, yet as stern as autumn frost; take inspiration from a coin—round on the outside, but square within.

Zhu Ping'an's words were quite effective. At the very least, after he finished speaking, Zhao Wenhua's gaze toward Zhu Ping'an became noticeably more amiable.

"How can it be that this official has supervised studies well? It is all due to His Majesty's grace. You must remember this well. Go back and prepare earnestly for the Imperial examination—do not let His Majesty's great favor be in vain."

Zhao Wenhua solemnly corrected the mistake in Zhu Ping'an's words. However, there was a smile in his eyes. After seriously correcting him, he then shifted the conversation, taking on the demeanor of an elder as he earnestly advised Zhu Ping'an to focus on preparing for the Imperial examination.

Preparing for the Imperial , huh? Hearing the stringed instrument and knowing the elegant meaning.

Zhu Ping'an's face lit up with joy, and he cupped his hands in salute. "I will respectfully follow your guidance, my lord."

Zhao Wenhua nodded and picked up a brush to write a comment on Zhu Ping'an's exam paper:

"A composition rooted in profound reasoning, refined and elegant in style;

The writing is pure and graceful, distinctly different from the mundane;

Both essays express thoughts harmoniously, with beauty in both words and meaning.

The responses during the oral exam demonstrated deep insight and meticulous thought.

This deserves the highest first-class rating."

A first-class rating would mean a secure pass in the provincial exam for the Imperial exam. A highest first-class rating? There was no need to even mention it.

After Zhu Ping'an cupped his hands to thank Zhao Wenhua, he followed the clerk's lead to walk down from the platform. Standing there waiting was none other than his chubby friend, Xue Chi. The guy was still trembling in his thighs, his plump face looking overly serious. But the moment he saw Zhu Ping'an come down, his expression turned into a mix of laughter and crying.

Zhu Ping'an gave him an encouraging look before following the clerk toward the main gate.

There were already eight people gathered at the gate. Including himself, that made nine. Once the fatty submitted his paper, they would likely be allowed to leave.

Zhu Ping'an waited at the gate for about ten minutes before the fatty came trotting along under the clerk's guidance, his chubby face grinning like a bulldog. The way he walked, he was just short of floating off the ground.

Due to examination rules, even while waiting for release, they couldn't speak. But standing beside Zhu Ping'an, the fatty kept grinning, winking, and making faces.

There was no need to ask—just by looking at him, one could tell he had passed smoothly.

Indeed, Zhao Wenhua was still the Zhao Wenhua of history. No matter how well he played his act on the surface, he could never hide his nature as a treacherous minister.

With the fatty's arrival, the number of examinees waiting at the gate reached ten. The instructors near the entrance counted the people, reported to the high platform, and with the sound of a gong, the gate's barrier slowly opened. The instructor in charge of the gate then verified each examinee's identity against the submission records before allowing them to leave.

Once outside, the fatty mysteriously pulled Zhu Ping'an to a secluded corner. Slapping a bear-paw-like hand on Zhu Ping'an's shoulder, he grinned with his bulldog-like mouth and exclaimed in excitement:

"Brother Zhu, you are truly godlike! First-class rating, hahaha! Let's see what my old man can say now! Hahaha..."

"Damn it, lighten up!" Zhu Ping'an sucked in a sharp breath and rubbed his shoulder.

"Oh, oh, my bad, my bad! I just couldn't help myself when I thought about my dad's sour face," the fatty grinned apologetically.

"Brother Zhu, what rating did you get? It must be first-class too, right?" Only then did the fatty remember to ask about Zhu Ping'an's results.

Zhu Ping'an shook his head.

The fatty's expression changed drastically, his plump face shaking in disbelief. "Impossible! You must be joking!"

Zhu Ping'an solemnly shook his head. "I'm not lying to you."

The fatty looked as if he had been struck by lightning, mumbling, "How could this be? With Brother Zhu's talent, how could you not be first-class?"

"I got one more 'shang' than you." Zhu Ping'an spoke calmly.

Upon hearing this, the fatty's chubby face instantly twisted into an expression of deep grievance. "Damn, I'm doomed... You're still better than me!"

"Be content, will you?"

Zhu Ping'an found the fatty's reaction somewhat contemptible.

"That's true." the fatty thought for a moment and then grinned like a bulldog again. "Although the results haven't been officially posted yet, we brothers are already secured. Let's go! My treat—let's drink till we drop at the tavern across... ah, no, the one on this side!"