

## Rise 196

### Chapter 196: Beginning the Journey of the Imperial Examination

On the fourth day of the eleventh month, in the middle of winter, the law corresponds to Huangzhong.

At this time, the sky had just begun to brighten, and the north wind, carrying traces of winter, started howling. The air outside was piercingly cold, and the sky was somewhat gloomy, as if the weather was about to change.

In November, Yingtian was unexpectedly cold today—so cold that it felt unusual, as if the temperature had suddenly dropped overnight.

On this chilly morning, the Imperial examination officially began. The examination was divided into three sessions, each lasting three days and two nights. In total, the three sessions took nine days, including six nights. This exam was a comprehensive test of intelligence, endurance, and physical strength. For the candidates, this test began as soon as they queued up outside the examination hall in the morning. Some had even arrived the night before because all the candidates for the Imperial Examination had to take their test at this examination hall. With over ten thousand participants, the queue stretched endlessly. Everyone wanted to enter the hall as early as possible—partly to familiarize themselves with the environment and partly because staying outside was unsafe.

With such a large crowd, disorder was inevitable. Even though there were yamen officers and fully armed soldiers maintaining order, the entrance of the examination hall remained congested and chaotic. The exam had not even started, yet last night, over a dozen candidates had been injured in the crush, their heads bleeding.

Zhu Ping'an and the chubby Xue Chi arrived around midnight to queue up. Upon arriving, the two of them separated to line up in different spots. Before the crowding became severe, Zhu Ping'an quickly dodged into a corner to avoid the chaos. Only after reinforcements arrived to control the crowd did he return to his place in line.

The weather was bitterly cold. Zhu Ping'an was dressed warmly in a fur coat made from rabbit pelts, sewn by his mother, Chen. Compared to other candidates, he was much better off in terms of warmth. In addition to his coat, he had also brought two rabbit fur blankets—one to sleep on and one to cover himself with. Naturally, he had also packed food, exam supplies, and other necessities, with his food provisions being particularly abundant.

Around 3 a.m., the sound of drums echoed from Mingyuan Tower in the Jiangnan Gongyuan (Examination Hall), signaling the beginning of the candidate inspections by the yamen officers and soldiers.

It was not until about 6 a.m. that Zhu Ping'an's turn came. Since he had brought many items, the yamen officers took a long time inspecting them. Those behind him in the queue were growing impatient, thinking he had brought too much—two blankets, an excessive amount of food. The officers spent quite a while feeling and checking his belongings, and his food was so plentiful that the officers jokingly said they felt like chefs, slicing up his cakes and meat jerky with their waist knives.

This kind of complaint was nothing new to Zhu Ping'an—he had long since grown used to it.

After about fifteen or sixteen minutes, the inspection was finally completed, and the officers allowed Zhu Ping'an to enter.

However, just as he was about to enter, a problem arose.

At the entrance, an examiner named Hu, who was responsible for verifying the candidates, stopped Zhu Ping'an. This examiner was known for his meticulousness—perhaps "rigid" would be a better word. During the exam, he cross-checked each candidate's details with the official records, verifying their age and appearance with strict accuracy.

"The records state that you are short, slightly chubby, and have a simple, beardless face. However, upon seeing you today, where is the 'slightly chubby' part? Are you an impostor?" Examiner Hu stopped Zhu Ping'an and questioned him sternly.

To be honest, Zhu Ping'an had not anticipated this issue at all. He had never encountered such a problem in previous county, prefectural, or academy examinations. However, despite the unexpected situation, he remained completely unfazed.

"Not at all. I am indeed Zhu Ping'an. After the academy examination, I have been studying day and night, which led to my weight loss. Furthermore, in Zhu Xi's commentary, the term 微 (wei) means 'none'—so 'slightly chubby' also implies 'not fat.' I ask the esteemed examiner to judge fairly." Zhu Ping'an calmly clasped his hands and answered steadily. After all, he was Zhu Ping'an—there was no mistake about that.

"Hmm, that explanation makes some sense. But what about your 'simple' face?" Examiner Hu nodded slightly but immediately followed up with another question.

Zhu Ping'an had no choice but to put on his signature foolish smile.

"Go ahead," the examiner nodded, granting him entry.

Fortunately, there was no danger. After entering the examination hall, Zhu Ping'an was led by an attendant to a designated examination cell. It was a relatively good one, far away from the "filthy cells," which were located near the toilets. This made it one of the better examination cells.

After placing his belongings inside, Zhu Ping'an took a quick look around. Just like during the county-level exam, the examination cell was extremely narrow, with only two wooden planks—one on top used as a desk for writing the exam answers, and the one below serving as a seat. At night, the two planks could be placed together to form a bed. The difference this time was that the examination cell was also equipped with a brazier and two candles. The brazier could be used both for warmth and cooking. The examination venue did not provide food; candidates had to take care of their own meals, with only water being provided. The officials patrolling outside were responsible only for maintaining discipline. As long as one did not cheat, they did not interfere with what candidates did.

From the moment he entered the examination hall until the end of the exam, Zhu Ping'an would have to stay confined in this small examination cell...

Around nine o'clock, all the candidates had finally entered. While waiting for the exam to begin, Zhu Ping'an overheard some attendants discussing that seven or eight candidates had been caught sneaking in cheat sheets, while another five were caught using substitutes to take the exam for them. All were detained in a small prison inside the examination compound, awaiting further punishment from the authorities.

He hadn't expected that there would actually be people trying to cheat. These individuals were now completely cut off from the imperial examination system. In the worst case, they could even be exiled or sent to military service.

Thinking back to the scene at the entrance, Zhu Ping'an couldn't help but break into a cold sweat. If he hadn't reacted quickly, things might have taken a bad turn for him as well. He was indeed Zhu Ping'an—there was no denying that—but proving it might have taken too long and caused him to miss the exam.

Once all candidates were inside, the main gate was locked. It would not be opened again until the end of the examination, no matter what happened—not even in the event of a fire or flood.

The Mingyuan Tower was bustling with activity. This time, the exam was overseen by two chief examiners, four associate examiners, and a provisioning officer responsible for the logistics of the examination. Additionally, there were officials in charge of collecting exam papers, sealing them, transcribing them, reviewing them, patrolling the premises, guarding the entrance, and conducting body searches for hidden cheat sheets.

Once the exam officially began, the elderly chief examiner signaled to an attendant, who then beat the drum, marking the start of the examination. The chief examiner and other officials calmly went about their duties, watching the examinees below with a nostalgic look—similar to how university upperclassmen observe freshmen undergoing military training.

As soon as the drum sounded, attendants began distributing the exam materials, including the test papers and draft sheets.

Next came the announcement of the exam questions.

Today was the first session of the special Imperial exam. As per tradition, the exam consisted of three questions on the Four Books and four questions on the Confucian classics.

When an attendant holding the exam questions approached, Zhu Ping'an quickly and neatly copied them onto his draft paper.

As in previous years, this session covered the same topics: three questions on the Four Books and four on the Confucian classics. The Confucian classics section was a component of the imperial examination, requiring candidates to write essays explaining the meaning of selected passages. Of course, they had to use the Eight-Legged Essay format. These essays had to be completed within three days and two nights. Candidates could arrange their time however they liked, as long as they did not cheat.

Since Zhu Ping'an hadn't eaten anything since early morning, after copying the exam questions, he carefully put away his materials, spread a cloth on the table, and lightly grilled the food he had brought over the brazier before eating.

After eating his fill, he tidied up the table, prepared his writing tools, and officially embarked on his journey through the Imperial examination.