

Rise 197

Chapter 197: An Unexpected Incident During the Examination

As light as a cicada's wing and as white as snow, it shakes like fine silk and makes no sound.

The imperial examination was not something that could be compared to the academy's examination. Even the draft paper used was of outstanding quality. Zhu Ping'an flattened the draft paper on which he had recorded the exam questions and couldn't help but praise its excellence.

This three-day, two-night examination required writing seven eight-legged essays: three based on the Four Books and four based on the Five Classics. The amount of work varied from person to person. Some candidates might finish in less than two days, while others might still be unable to complete it after three full days and nights. After reviewing all the exam questions, Zhu Ping'an felt that he could finish them without needing to work overnight.

Dipping his brush in ink, he laid out another sheet of draft paper and began working on the first question.

The first question was from the Four Books: "A gentleman resents dying without his name being known."

This was a standard eight-legged essay question from the Four Books, taken from The Analects (Chapter 15, Wei Ling Gong). The meaning of the phrase is that Confucius said, "A gentleman's regret is to die without his name being praised."

This was a heartfelt statement from Confucius. In life, nothing matters more than fame and fortune. The pursuit of fame has turned many young people's hair white and brought tears to countless heroes. Just as geese leave their calls in the sky, humans suffer when they lack recognition. Though Confucius often spoke of enduring obscurity without resentment—"If people do not recognize me, I will not be upset"—he also lamented, "No one understands me!" (The Analects, Xian Wen). Not being recognized or understood was troubling for him, which is why he compiled The Spring and Autumn Annals—to ensure that he would be known by later generations (Records of the Grand Historian, The Life of Confucius). In essence, this aligns with the statement: "A gentleman resents dying without his name being known."

Thus, Confucianism does not disregard fame, nor does it reject the idea of spreading one's reputation (Mencius), but it opposes excessive self-promotion and deceptive name-seeking. It only disdains false fame gained through trickery.

This phrase was easy to understand and straightforward to work on.

Zhu Ping'an dipped his brush in ink and began writing as if guided by divine inspiration.

"Lacking a name in later generations—this is the worry of the sages."

This was his opening statement, a perfectly standard introduction. The inability to have one's name passed down through history was indeed a concern for sages.

After writing the introduction, Zhu Ping'an dipped his brush in ink again and continued:

"A fleeting reputation is unnecessary, but a lasting name is essential. Thus, a gentleman does not seek fame, yet he cannot ignore this concern.

Confucius said: 'Loving fame is a natural human desire.' Therefore, when commoners seek fame, one cannot simply dismiss it as reckless ambition. However, I regret that they pursue only short-lived fame rather than eternal renown. A true gentleman understands this distinction.

There are matters greater than this, and there are those that last longer. To chase fame for the sake of momentary recognition—such people are only seeking swift destruction. Is this truly what it means to love fame?"

Within the time it took for an incense stick to burn, Zhu Ping'an had completed his first eight-legged essay. After finishing, he left the draft paper on the table to dry, ensuring that the ink did not smudge onto the exam paper.

While waiting for the paper to dry, Zhu Ping'an turned to the second question.

The second question was somewhat similar to the one from the re-examination of the county-level exam but not exactly the same. The question was as follows:

"A gentleman without dignity has no authority. If one's studies are not solid, they will not endure. Be loyal and trustworthy, and do not befriend those beneath you in virtue. If you make a mistake, do not hesitate to correct it."

During the re-examination, only the last part—"If you make a mistake, do not hesitate to correct it."—was tested. This time, the entire passage was included.

This difference was significant. The approach to answering the question had to be completely different. Last time, the focus was solely on the importance of correcting mistakes. This time, the entire passage had to be analyzed. The meaning of the passage was: A gentleman without dignity has no authority; if one's manner is not serious, their learning will not be firm. One must value loyalty and trustworthiness, avoid associating with those of lesser virtue, and correct mistakes without hesitation.

For this question, Zhu Ping'an crafted the introduction as follows:

"For a gentleman, learning is precious, but it must be pursued with utmost sincerity and dedication."

With thoughtful consideration and steady strokes, Zhu Ping'an calmly and methodically completed another eight-legged essay in one go.

By the time he finished these two essays, it was only midday. Zhu Ping'an carefully put away his writing tools and used a paperweight to hold everything in place, preventing the northern wind from blowing them away.

Then he arranged the examination cell into a resting state, preparing to take a short nap.

However, the cell was too cramped. He couldn't even fully straighten his body and had to curl up to rest. Just as Zhu Ping'an was about to close his eyes, a miserable roar suddenly came from the next room, instantly dispelling his drowsiness.

"Sh*t! I wrote my answers on the wrong page!"

Right after the tragic cry, there was a series of banging sounds. If Zhu Ping'an guessed correctly, the guy was probably banging his head against the wall.

Then, another furious roar followed closely behind. This was a different voice, filled with the kind of rage one would have if their father had been murdered or their wife stolen.

"You wretched fool! I was startled by your scream and dropped my brush—my entire exam paper is now covered in ink!"

Well, one of them had mistakenly written his answers on the wrong page, and the other had been so startled by the first guy's scream that he dropped his brush and smeared ink all over his paper. The first guy was definitely going to fail the exam, which explained his misery. But the second guy was truly unfortunate—his exam paper, now stained with a big blot of ink, would surely be considered tampered with and treated as cheating. He, too, was bound to fail.

Luckily, Zhu Ping'an had been resting. Otherwise, if he had been caught off guard by the sudden scream, he might have accidentally stained his paper too.

Soon, an invigilator arrived with four soldiers. Without saying a word, they confiscated the exam papers of both candidates. Then, the soldiers, as fierce as wolves, gagged the two men with cloth and dragged them out of their examination cells.

These two poor souls were done for in this exam. Whether they would even be allowed to take future exams was another question entirely.

After this unexpected incident, Zhu Ping'an no longer felt sleepy. He restored his cell back to its original desk-and-chair setup, roasted some jerky over the charcoal brazier, and took out a piece of pastry. With plain water, he had a simple lunch.

After finishing his meal, he tidied up, set up his brush, ink, paper, and inkstone, and continued working on his drafts.

The third eight-legged essay was quite difficult. Zhu Ping'an spent over an hour just thinking before he even started writing. Compared to the previous two essays, this one took much longer, and by the time he finished, the entire afternoon had passed.

The essay topic consisted of just four characters: "渊其渊" (Deep and Profound), taken from The Doctrine of the Mean, meaning that a sage's thoughts are as deep as a bottomless pool.

But how was he supposed to write an eight-legged essay on this?

The full passage from which this phrase was taken was: "Only the utmost sincerity under heaven can govern the great principles of the world, establish the fundamental laws of the world, and understand the transformations of heaven and earth. Where does it find reliance? It is profound in its benevolence, deep and profound, vast like the heavens."

After pondering for over an hour, Zhu Ping'an recalled that someone in modern times had once explained The Doctrine of the Mean. That person had interpreted this passage with the idea: "Heaven does not speak, the earth does not talk, and man stands in between to uphold moral principles."

After a bit more thinking, Zhu Ping'an's furrowed brow relaxed. He began writing, forming ideas as he went, and only finished the essay when the sun was setting.

Having completed three eight-legged essays in one day, he was confident that he could finish the remaining four in two days, even with his eyes closed. Satisfied, he nodded, put away his drafts, had dinner, then laid out a blanket and went to sleep.

The rabbit fur blanket was very warm, shielding him from the wind and keeping him cozy. Zhu Ping'an slept soundly through the night. But not everyone was as fortunate. The north wind howled through the night, and though there was no snowfall, the cold was bitterly severe. Many examinees, especially those who had mocked Zhu Ping'an at the entrance, shivered through the night, their regret so deep that their intestines might as well have turned green.