

Rise 198

Chapter 198: The Seventy-Two Sages of the Confucian Sect

Early the next morning, Zhu Ping'an woke from his sleep, lifted the rabbit fur blanket, and opened his eyes—his only sensation was cold.

Then, to his surprise, he found that it was snowing outside. The snowfall was quite heavy, with countless white snowflakes freely falling from the sky, drifting down onto rooftops, the ground, trees—anywhere they could land. The outside world was covered in a vast expanse of white, as if a thick, snowy carpet had been laid over the ground. Occasionally, a few sets of footprints could be seen, likely left by the soldiers changing shifts.

"I am a wolf from the north, yet in Nanjing, I freeze like a dog."

In modern times, Zhu Ping'an had heard this saying before but never understood it. Nanjing was in the south—how could it be that cold? It must have been a joke. But now, he had firsthand experience. It was truly cold, and not just any cold. The moment he lifted his blanket, he shivered violently from the chill. Fortunately, he had prepared well and brought plenty of warm clothes.

After getting out of bed, Zhu Ping'an pulled out a rabbit fur coat from his bag and put it on, finally feeling warm. After washing his face, he had breakfast by the charcoal brazier. Then, he tidied up his examination cubicle, restoring the desk and chair to their proper arrangement, before returning to his task of answering the exam questions.

His only remaining neighbor in the cubicle next door had layered on every piece of clothing he had, yet he was still shivering. He had to warm his hands over the brazier after writing just a few words, all the while making sure that his running nose wouldn't drip onto the exam paper. At this moment, he couldn't help but envy the boy next door—the one who had entered with a massive travel bag.

The snow continued falling heavily throughout the entire day. By the end of it, Zhu Ping'an had finished writing the last four essays for the exam. The final one was completed at dusk, requiring a small section of candlelight.

All four essays followed the structure of the Eight-Legged Essay based on the Five Classics, and none were particularly difficult. However, one question stood out: "Mèimèi wǒ sī zhī" (味思之). This phrase comes from The Book of Documents (Shangshu)—specifically the Qin Oath—where "mèimèi" originally means "dim" or "obscure." The phrase as a whole means "I ponder deeply and silently."

This particular exam topic had an amusing anecdote in modern times. During the late Qing Dynasty, a provincial exam once featured this exact phrase as its topic. A candidate who had never read the Qin Oath

mistook "mèimèi" (味) for "mèimei" (妹), meaning "younger sister." As a result, he wrote an entire essay filled with romantic declarations about his "sister," portraying a melodramatic love story. When the examiner read it, he couldn't help but laugh and even left a comment on the side: "Brother, you are mistaken." This became a well-known joke at the time.

Zhu Ping'an wondered if anyone in this exam session had made the same mistake.

By evening, the snow finally stopped.

However, by the third day, the weather had turned even colder. The saying "It's not the snow that's cold, but the thawing of the snow that is" proved to be absolutely true.

By around 5 p.m. on the third day, Zhu Ping'an had carefully transcribed all seven of his Eight-Legged Essays onto the official exam sheets. After reviewing them multiple times, he was ready to submit his answers.

This was the first round of the imperial exam—the most important one. The examiners would primarily judge the candidates based on these seven essays. After that, they would consider the results of the second and third rounds before making a final decision on who would pass.

The submission process for the exams was divided into three sessions: one in the morning, one in the afternoon, and one in the evening. Each time a candidate submitted their paper, the exam officials would issue a receipt to verify it. The answer sheets would then be anonymized by pasting over the candidates' names. Before the examiners graded them, scribes would carefully transcribe each essay in red ink. The graders would then mark the papers in blue ink.

Zhu Ping'an submitted his exam papers in the evening. After packing up his belongings, he followed the crowd out of the Jiangnan Examination Hall.

As he left, many candidates inside were still frantically racing against time. According to the rules, the hall would be cleared by *xūshí* (戌时)—between 7 p.m. and 9 p.m. Anyone who had not finished by then would automatically fail.

"Good luck," Zhu Ping'an silently wished them as he stepped out.

Just like in modern exams, the moment he exited the hall, he saw small groups of candidates gathering together, discussing the exam. Naturally, they were mainly debating the questions. One person would say one thing, another would argue back, and soon the discussion would grow heated. Eventually, someone would realize they had made a mistake—at which point their face would turn pale.

What was the point? If you don't have the mental resilience for it, why discuss the exam answers now? Zhu Ping'an shook his head slightly, curled his lips into a smile, and strode toward the inn.

"Zhu... Brother Zhu, wait for me!"

A voice came from behind—it was the chubby man. Zhu Ping'an stopped in his tracks and turned around, only to see the chubby man shivering as he ran over, sniffing all the way, completely frozen like a dog.

When the chubby man reached Zhu Ping'an, his eyes lit up upon seeing the two layers of rabbit fur coats Zhu Ping'an was wearing. Without hesitation, he lunged forward, trying to take one off to wear for himself, all the while grumbling about how his godmother was playing favorites.

"There's another one in the bag. It's yours," Zhu Ping'an sidestepped to avoid him and tossed his backpack into the chubby man's hands.

The chubby man quickly rummaged through the bag, found the rabbit fur coat, and eagerly put it on. Instantly, the long-lost warmth enveloped him, and he squinted in happiness, his eyes practically disappearing from the sheer joy.

Since they had another exam the next day, Zhu Ping'an and the chubby man had a simple but hearty dinner at the inn before retiring to their rooms for the night.

At dawn the next day, Zhu Ping'an and the other candidates lined up once again outside the Jiangnan Examination Hall, waiting to enter. This time, everyone was better prepared, carrying more supplies and warmer clothing.

At around three o'clock, the examination hall began the entry inspections, and by six o'clock, Zhu Ping'an had arrived at the same examination cubicle as the previous day.

This was the second round of the imperial examination, consisting of one essay question, five judicial commentaries, and an official document draft, which could be an imperial edict, decree, or memorial.

The exam was not particularly difficult, as it mainly consisted of official documents used in bureaucratic settings. Zhu Ping'an completed the exam leisurely, as if just passing the time. His answers were of high quality, and by the afternoon of the third day, he submitted his paper.

Then, another early morning queue led to the third round of the exam.

This round was significantly more challenging, focusing on five questions related to the classics and historical policies. The first policy discussion question was manageable, but the second one nearly drove 80% of the candidates to despair.

"The Seventy-Two Sages of the Confucian Sect—what made them wise?"

Damn! I can't even name all seventy-two disciples of Confucius, and now they expect me to explain what made them special? Many candidates were on the verge of breakdown.

When Zhu Ping'an saw the question, he couldn't help but smile. With his exceptional memory, this question posed no challenge at all. Back when he was browsing the internet, he had intentionally researched Confucius' seventy-two disciples. Various sources like Records of the Grand Historian and Spring and Autumn Annals contained scattered records of them. For example, Records of the Grand Historian: Biography of Confucius states: "Confucius taught poetry, history, rites, and music. He had about three thousand disciples, of whom seventy-two mastered the six arts."

For Zhu Ping'an, this question was practically effortless.

Yan Hui was Confucius' favorite disciple, known for his diligence and benevolence. Min Sun was famous for his virtuous conduct. Ran Qiu was skilled in multiple arts and known for his administrative expertise. Zai Yu excelled in rhetoric. Duanmu Ci was a talented politician and diplomat, with remarkable financial management and business acumen.

Besides this policy question, there was another particularly interesting one—a strategy for dealing with Japanese pirates.

Zhu Ping'an barely needed to think. He simply refined a strategy he had previously devised for handling the Japanese pirates and copied it directly onto the draft paper.

At dusk on the third day, the creaking sound of the Jiangnan Examination Hall's doors opening shattered the silence of the street.

A young man wearing a rabbit fur coat stepped out from within, pausing occasionally as he walked. He turned back to look at the grand entrance of the Jiangnan Examination Hall, a confident smile curling at his lips. Then, with a simple and honest grin, he disappeared into the vast expanse of swirling wind and snow.