

Rise 199

Chapter 199: What the Heck Is This Writing?

The Hard Work of Grading Through the Night, the Flickering Light and Red Ink Blurred Together

The examinees finished their exams and felt a weight lifted off their shoulders, but for the examiners, this was the busiest time. They stayed up late, grading papers under the dim lamp light until their eyes blurred.

In the provincial examination of Southern Zhili, the chief examiners were all Hanlin scholars—there were two, a principal and a vice chief examiner. The principal examiners were Hanlin Academician Zhang Tao and Wang Da. Both were scholars from other provinces, with Zhang Tao being slightly older, though Wang Da was already fifty. In addition to the two chief examiners, Southern Zhili had nine assistant examiners, which was about three more than other provinces. These nine assistant examiners were recommended and appointed by the circuit inspector and included magistrates, deputy magistrates, and literary instructors from other provinces.

The exam papers of Zhu Ping'an and the other candidates were in the hands of these two chief examiners and nine assistant examiners.

During the grading process, the responsibilities of the chief and assistant examiners were clearly defined: the assistant examiners decided which papers were retained, while the chief examiners determined the rankings. To put it simply, the assistant examiners screened the tens of thousands of exam papers and selected the best ones to recommend to the chief examiners, who then decided on the final admissions and rankings.

The grading process began as soon as Zhu Ping'an and the others finished their first exam. The candidates' papers were written in black ink, known as "ink scrolls." After submission, they were immediately sealed and numbered before being transcribed in red ink by scribes into "red scrolls." After verification, the red scrolls were sent to the assistant examiners for review. The assistant examiners graded and selected outstanding papers, which they then recommended to the chief examiners, a process known as "recommendation scrolls."

The chief and vice chief examiners focused primarily on reviewing the recommended scrolls from the first round. After reading them, they cross-checked them with the second and third round results and deliberated before finalizing the list of admitted candidates. Therefore, if an examinee performed well in the first exam, they had already secured more than half of their success—perhaps this was what people called the importance of first impressions.

Papers that were eliminated by the assistant examiners were called "failed scrolls." However, failing at this stage did not mean all hope was lost. The examiners would conduct another round of selection from the failed scrolls to see if any overlooked papers were worthy of admission, a process known as "reexamination." Of course, in most cases, the chief examiners preferred efficiency and usually only reviewed the recommended scrolls while disregarding the rest.

Regardless of the process, outside, the snow was falling heavily, while inside the grading hall, the scene was bustling with activity. The dark night was illuminated by torches, and the examiners worked overtime, meticulously grading the papers.

Meanwhile, outside, candidates were enjoying their time, drinking and admiring the snowfall, completely unaware of how their exam papers were being evaluated.

At this moment, Zhu Ping'an was also in a tavern enjoying the snow. It was in the backyard of a tavern, where the lights stayed on all night, undisturbed by the curfew. The combination of the heavy snowfall and the bright lights created a unique atmosphere. Beside him, the chubby man, Xue Chi, was rambling on, waving his chubby hands and spitting as he spoke, as if the examiners would be doing a great injustice to Confucius and Mencius if they didn't admit him.

"Brother Zhu, you have no idea how well I answered this time..."

Xue Chi, his mouth full of mutton, gestured animatedly, his excitement uncontrollable.

"Hmm." Zhu Ping'an responded noncommittally, gazing at the thick snow outside under the lantern light, his expression calm.

"Don't doubt me! This time, the exam played right into my strengths—there's no way I won't pass!" Xue Chi picked up a drumstick, took a huge bite, and radiated confidence.

This piqued Zhu Ping'an's curiosity—Xue Chi's strengths?

Seeing Zhu Ping'an's intrigued gaze, Xue Chi's face lit up with pride. He wiped his mouth with his fat hand and began boasting. "It's strange, really. Why would the provincial exam include a topic about romance?"

Upon hearing this, Zhu Ping'an immediately recalled the essay prompt "Mèimèi wǒ sī zhī" (妹妹思之). He looked at Xue Chi with an awkward expression—did this fool misread it as "Mèimei wǒ sī zhī" (妹妹思之, meaning 'I think of my little sister')?

"Little sister, I think of you.' Hahaha! What kind of topic is this? I don't remember seeing this in the Four Books and Five Classics. But none of that matters! What matters is that I'm good at this! Back in the day, I read through all the love stories in Fengyang..."

Sure enough, in the next second, Xue Chi beamed like a shining little sun, his face flushed with excitement.

At this moment, a fitting background music should be playing—Fire, I am fire...

Zhu Ping'an stared at Xue Chi with a speechless expression, his face filled with secondhand embarrassment. How did this guy even pass the county and prefectural exams...?

As Zhu Ping'an was busy looking at Xue Chi with a constipated expression, he was unaware that his own exam paper had just reached the hands of an examiner for review.

Unfortunately, Zhu Ping'an's luck was particularly bad—his paper ended up with assistant examiner Song Shiming. Song Shiming was a Confucian instructor from Zunhua County, Jizhou, Shuntian Prefecture. However, unlike his name "Shiming" (世明 meaning "worldly wise"), he was actually quite conservative.

At this moment, our fellow examiner Song was working overtime, grading papers beyond his limits. It must be said that Examiner Song was indeed working hard—wiping sweat with a handkerchief in one hand while picking up a test paper from the pile for review.

Yes, at this moment, the test paper in Song's hand was none other than Zhu Ping'an's.

Zhu Ping'an's fate now rested in Song's hands. Song could either recommend the paper to the chief examiner ("recommend") or discard it outright ("fail").

A sudden northern wind howled outside, lifting snowflakes into the air before crashing unexpectedly against the window shutters.

Caught off guard, Song, who was sitting near the window, felt the sudden chill seeping through the cracks. Just a moment ago, he had been sweating from the heat, but now his hands and feet were ice-cold!

The abrupt change in temperature left Examiner Song in an absolutely terrible mood.

However, our diligent examiner quickly steadied himself and, with a sense of responsibility toward the examinees, focused on the paper in his hands.

And then—his already bad mood suddenly became...

Even worse!

"What the hell is this nonsense?!"

Song stared at the paper in his hands as if he had just seen the goddess he had pursued for eighteen years strip off her clothes—only to reveal something even more well-endowed than himself...

Disgusted, as if he had just swallowed something revolting, Examiner Song muttered under his breath and casually tossed the paper—Zhu Ping'an's paper—onto the floor!

Failed!

And not just any failure—most rejected papers at least ended up stacked in a neglected corner of the desk, where some bored examiner or even the chief examiner might flip through them on a whim, offering a slim chance of revival. But Zhu Ping'an's paper? It was tossed straight to the floor, with not even a sliver of hope left. A failure among failures! A VIP in the world of rejected papers!

After discarding Zhu Ping'an's paper, Examiner Song gathered himself and resumed his noble duty of selecting talents for the nation. He picked up the next paper, reviewing it with utmost diligence, as if fully engrossed in his sacred task...

Such is life. Meeting the wrong person at the right time can only leave behind a sigh and a sense of regret. This is life.

Of course, at that moment, Zhu Ping'an—who was staring at a chubby fellow with a constipated expression—had no idea that his paper had just been tossed aside with utter disdain.

But fate, as it often does, took a sudden turn.

Just as Zhu Ping'an was on the verge of becoming a failed candidate, the goddess of fate playfully winked at him and smiled.

At the exact moment when Song discarded Zhu Ping'an's paper, letting it flutter to the ground, the door swung open.

Yes, it was that coincidental—so coincidental that even a scripted drama wouldn't dare be this dramatic.

The chief examiner happened to walk in at that precise moment. And Zhu Ping'an's paper just so happened to land right at his feet.

The chief examiner bent down, picked up the fallen paper, and held it in his hands. At first glance, his body trembled. At the second glance, and then the third... he studied it for a long, long time.

Then, he walked up to Examiner Song, placed Zhu Ping'an's paper on the table, and declared his verdict:

"This deserves to be the top-ranked paper."