

## Rise 210

Chapter 210: I insisted on placing you at the bottom of the list.

The two poems written by Zhu Ping'an were both originally by Zheng Banqiao. Zhu Ping'an slightly modified the second poem to make it more suitable for himself. In fact, Zheng had written dozens of poems about bamboo, but these two were enough.

If he wrote all of them himself, it would be too shocking! He never liked to show off in the first place! If it weren't for his deeply suppressed emotions and Guo Ziyu deliberately provoking him, he wouldn't have written a single poem. He had little interest in fame.

Seeing that it was enough, after writing two poems, Zhu Ping'an put down his brush and said lightly:

"Forgive my poor attempt."

These three words felt like a slap landing on Guo Ziyu's face once again. Guo Ziyu looked at Zhu Ping'an in speechless frustration. Hearing him say "Forgive my poor attempt," Guo Ziyu was full of grievances—what poor attempt? Clearly, I am the one embarrassing myself here!

Before long, some enthusiastic people had copied the two poems multiple times and spread them throughout the entire Luming Banquet, causing waves of applause and admiration.

The poems quickly reached the table of the highest-ranked guests, where the reaction was stronger than that elicited by any other poem that day.

Not even fifteen minutes had passed after writing the poems when Zhu Ping'an heard people around him rising respectfully and greeting someone in unison:

"Lord Zhang."

Looking up, he saw an elderly man with white beard and mustache standing in front of him, dressed in an official's robe, smiling at him.

Before the banquet began, this official had spoken, so Zhu Ping'an immediately recognized him as Examiner Zhang. He quickly stood up, bowed, and saluted:

"Greetings, Lord Zhang."

Examiner Zhang looked at Zhu Ping'an, stroking his beard, his expression both gratified and calm. Then, he spoke directly:

"It was I who insisted on placing you at the bottom of the ranking."

These words caused an uproar. The people around were stunned. Why would the chief examiner deliberately place Zhu Ping'an at the bottom?

Was there a personal grudge?

Had Zhu Ping'an offended the examiner?

What was Zhu Ping'an's actual ranking supposed to be?

For a moment, everyone was discussing and speculating.

Hearing this, Zhu Ping'an looked up at Examiner Zhang's open and unreserved expression. Though the examiner did not offer an explanation, Zhu Ping'an understood the meaning behind his gaze.

Damn, this was the kind of treatment that only Zhang Juzheng had received back in the day! And now, he was experiencing it too?!

However, whether it was first place or last place, Zhu Ping'an didn't care at all. As the Tibetan poet Cangyang Gyatso once wrote:

"First place or last place, my abilities remain unchanged."

His true strength would not increase or decrease because of a ranking. Seeing himself at the bottom of the list only motivated him to work even harder, which, in the end, achieved exactly what the examiner intended.

While everyone expected the thirteen-year-old Zhu Ping'an to fly into a rage, slam the table, and lose his temper, they instead heard him express his gratitude without a trace of resentment. With a respectful cupped-hand salute, he said sincerely:

"Thank you for your guidance, my lord. Though I am young, I understand your deep intentions."

Seeing that Zhu Ping'an was calm and free of complaints, Lord Zhang was very pleased and said, "When I first read your examination paper, I was amazed by your talent, thinking you deserved the top scholar's title. However, when the grass list was finalized, I discovered that you were only thirteen years old. I worried that your ambition was too strong and feared that pushing you too fast might ruin your potential. The officialdom does not need another young scholar indulging in flowery poetry and literary games—that would be a loss for our Ming Dynasty. If a blade is to be sharp, it must be honed repeatedly. But today, observing your demeanor and reading your words, 'Every branch and leaf carries deep emotions,' I realize that placing you at the bottom of the rankings was my mistake. However, I hope you have great ambitions, remain humble and patient, and solidly build your knowledge step by step. Be like Yi Yin or Xiao He, not just a young scholar who gains fame too quickly."

Yi Yin and Xiao He were both legendary prime ministers, known for their exceptional talents that left a lasting impact on history.

Hearing these words, everyone was astonished at how highly Lord Zhang evaluated Zhu Ping'an.

"Remain humble and patient, and progress step by step..."

These words felt like a revelation to Zhu Ping'an, instantly lifting the weight off his shoulders.

Hadn't he just lost his appetite over what he witnessed yesterday? Wasn't that a mistake too? Trying to achieve everything in one bite would only lead to failure.

He had been acting like an impulsive youth.

The key was to have ambitions, but to advance steadily! To give his best and stay true to his conscience.

The worries on Zhu Ping'an's face disappeared in an instant, and he suddenly felt enlightened. He bowed deeply to Lord Zhang and sincerely expressed his gratitude:

"Thank you for your guidance, my lord. I am deeply grateful!"

Seeing Zhu Ping'an's newfound clarity, Lord Zhang assumed it was his words of wisdom that had profoundly touched him, unaware that it was actually due to Zhu's reflections on yesterday's events.

This made Lord Zhang even more satisfied.

In that moment, a touching scene unfolded: a senior official cherishing and nurturing a young talent, while the young scholar sincerely respected and appreciated his mentor. In the eyes of the onlookers, this interaction had already become a heartwarming tale of mentorship. Perhaps in the near future, this story would spread even further and become a widely recounted literary anecdote.

"Now I am relieved. Come, join me at the front to enjoy the banquet together," Lord Zhang stroked his beard and invited Zhu Ping'an to sit at the foremost table for the prestigious Deer Cry Banquet.

This invitation left the onlookers in awe. Just from this gesture alone, it was evident that the young scholar ranked at the bottom of the list must have had an outstanding examination performance. If Lord Zhang had not been so eager to nurture young talent, the top scholar title would likely have gone to someone named Zhu.

"Sharing a table today is a privilege for me. In the future, people of my rank might not even qualify to sit with you," Lord Zhang joked, stroking his beard.

Though spoken in jest, these words struck the audience like a thunderclap. If even someone of Lord Zhang's rank would not be qualified to dine with Zhu Ping'an in the future, just how high would Zhu Ping'an's status rise?

Why did Lord Zhang hold this young scholar in such high regard?

Though puzzled, everyone now looked at Zhu Ping'an with increased respect.

"My lord, please don't joke at my expense," Zhu Ping'an said with a wry smile as he bowed to Lord Zhang. "I am well aware of my own abilities. Without your guidance, I might have gone astray."

Zhu Ping'an couldn't help but think that Lord Zhang's words had once again put him in the spotlight.

Just moments ago, Lord Zhang had worried about his excessive ambition, so why was he no longer concerned now?!

The real culprit behind all of this was Zhu Ping'an's two poems about bamboo. As the saying goes, handwriting reflects a person's character, but poetry reveals even more. His first poem used bamboo as a metaphor for himself—while seemingly describing the plant, it was actually an expression of personal values. Phrases like "biting firmly onto the green mountain," "rooting deep in rocky crevices," and "withstanding countless hardships and beatings" conveyed his indomitable spirit and unwavering resilience. The emotions were genuine, and the meaning profound.

The second poem further emphasized that he was not just a scholar indulging in literary elegance, but rather someone from a humble background who truly understood the hardships of the common people.

Moreover, now that Zhu Ping'an had grasped Lord Zhang's deeper meaning, the old concerns no longer existed. Thus, Lord Zhang no longer concealed the great expectations he had for Zhu Ping'an!