

## Rise 214

### Chapter 214: A Beautiful Time and Scenery, Yet Helpless Against Fate

In the bitter cold of winter, the north wind howled, slashing like a knife, especially at night.

After spending the entire day at the Luming (Deer Cry) Banquet, Zhu Ping'an returned to his inn room before the evening curfew. His breath carried the scent of alcohol, and he was slightly intoxicated. Zhu Ping'an had once resolved not to drink, but with so many influential figures at the banquet toasting each other, how could he just sit there eating without drinking? Despite his restraint, he still ended up slightly drunk.

After returning to his room, Zhu Ping'an took a hot bath, changed into clean clothes, and sat at the desk by the window. He opened the "Chuanxi Lu" (Records of Transmission and Learning) given to him by the mysterious Taoist, adjusted the oil lamp, and started reading.

With three parts drunkenness, his head felt heavy, making it hard to concentrate. He placed a cover over the oil lamp and opened the window. The cold wind rushed in, its sharpness like a knife cutting into him, instantly clearing his mind.

A hundred readers will have a hundred different interpretations of Hamlet. Wang Yangming's "Heart Learning" philosophy integrates the essence of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. With his understanding gained from hundreds of years of experience, Zhu Ping'an saw Chuanxi Lu as a guide to winning in struggles against nature, against others, and against oneself. Its core principle was Wang Yangming's eight-character maxim:

"This heart remains unmoved, yet adapts with change."

"True knowledge is action itself; without action, knowledge is incomplete. This is the crucial teaching for scholars—only by personally practicing it can one truly grasp it..."

As the night deepened and snow drifted in through the window, the young man sitting by the window gradually became immersed in his book.

The next morning, Zhu Ping'an rose early, finished washing up, slung his book bag over his shoulder, and tucked a black wooden board under his arm before heading out as usual. As the saying goes:

"Train in the cold of winter, train in the heat of summer."

In the biting winter wind, practicing calligraphy and studying had its own unique charm.

As more pedestrians appeared on the streets, Zhu Ping'an packed up his brush, bamboo tube, and black wooden board, then leisurely left the grove. He entered a street-side shop and ordered a bowl of duck blood vermicelli soup with an oil cake for breakfast.

After breakfast, he slung his book bag over his shoulder and made his way to the dock outside Yingtian City. He planned to inquire about upstream passenger boats and gather some information. Even in this harsh weather, Yingtian's docks were quite busy. When Zhu Ping'an arrived and began asking around, the dock workers, seeing his scholar's long robe, dared not treat him lightly.

After some inquiries, Zhu Ping'an gained a general understanding of the situation. Small boats generally did not travel upstream in this weather. Only larger passenger and cargo ships, using a combination of sails, oars, and sometimes even tow ropes pulled by laborers, could make the journey against the current. Furthermore, the fare was three times more expensive than traveling downstream.

However, the owner of a large cargo ship actively sought out Zhu Ping'an. This ship was departing early the next morning, heading toward Bashu (modern-day Sichuan and Chongqing), and part of the route overlapped with Zhu Ping'an's journey.

The reason the owner approached Zhu Ping'an was simple—he wanted to use Zhu Ping'an's status to his advantage.

During the Ming Dynasty, there were no high-speed trains or airplanes, but there were waterways and postal roads. Postal roads were like modern national highways—open to all, free to use, but postal stations only provided lodging for officials and government couriers. General waterways were also free, but some routes—like the Grand Canal—had toll stations. Small boats could pass for free, but large cargo ships were subject to tolls.

However, the Ming Dynasty greatly respected scholars, and there were rules exempting certain people from tolls: Government officials' ships were exempt, Eunuchs' ships were exempt, Ships carrying successful candidates of the imperial examination (Jinshi, Juren, Xiucai) were also exempt. The Ming people loved to take advantage of loopholes. They found all sorts of ways to avoid tolls and even evade taxes. For every government policy, there was a countermeasure. The key to avoiding fees? Forgery.

Some merchants would fake a government ship by placing a large official plaque at the bow, listing a high-ranking title to intimidate tax collectors into letting them pass. Others, if they weren't actually Jinshi, Juren, or Xiucai, would hire one to accompany them—like a protective talisman. If a tax officer tried to charge them,

their "talisman" would step forward, and the ship would be exempted. Faking a government ship was risky, so many merchants hired scholars for protection instead.

The owner of this cargo ship took a liking to Zhu Ping'an's status as a Xiucai (a scholar who passed the imperial exam) and wanted to use it to gain tax exemption.

"Young Master Zhu, we are honored to have you. You will be treated to the best food and wine along the journey, and we also offer you a token of appreciation—ten taels of silver. Please accept it with a smile."

When the shipowner heard that Zhu Ping'an had recently passed the Juren exam (the next level after Xiucai), his attitude became extremely respectful, and he made this promise.

Hearing this, Zhu Ping'an couldn't help but curl his lips into a smile. Free food, free drinks, free entertainment, free travel—and he could even earn some consultation fees along the way. Why not?

Moreover, he had heard about this practice in his previous life. It had already become a convention in the Ming Dynasty, so why should he go against the norm?

After agreeing on the time and place, Zhu Ping'an bid farewell to the shipowner and returned to the inn.

Inside the inn, his chubby friend had just woken up. When he heard that Zhu Ping'an would be returning home early the next morning, he insisted on taking him to a restaurant to send him off properly.

By now, Zhu Ping'an was somewhat well-known around the Confucius Temple area. He was the youngest Juren in the current special imperial exam in Nanzhili. While dining at the restaurant, the innkeeper had the staff bring out two signature dishes for free.

This left the chubby friend sighing with emotion. He swore that when he returned home, he would study hard so that he, too, could one day enjoy such privileges.

The next day, before dawn, Zhu Ping'an quietly left the inn with his luggage. He walked along the Qinhuai River toward the city gate, managing to leave Yingtian City with the first batch of people when the gates opened.

The cargo ship's owner had been waiting at the dock early in the morning. Upon seeing Zhu Ping'an, he had his workers help him board the ship.

This cargo ship could be considered a giant vessel in the Ming Dynasty. After Zhu Ping'an boarded, the owner personally arranged a well-prepared room for him on the upper deck to serve as his bedroom. He also had the onboard cook prepare a lavish meal and delivered it along with a sealed red envelope.

"Much appreciated." Zhu Ping'an cupped his hands in gratitude toward the shipowner.

"Please, Young Master Zhu, there's no need for such courtesy. I should be the one thanking you. If there's anything that isn't to your liking, please don't hesitate to let me know."

The shipowner quickly stepped aside, not daring to accept Zhu Ping'an's formal gesture, and instead bowed in return.

Since this was a mutually beneficial arrangement, Zhu Ping'an did not insist further. After thanking the shipowner, he sat down to enjoy his breakfast.

"If you need anything, just call for someone downstairs," the shipowner said tactfully before leaving.

Because the cargo ship had high railings and handrails, it was quite safe. After breakfast, Zhu Ping'an went to the bow of the ship, firmly grasped the railing, and took in the sight of the snowy winter landscape along the Yangtze River.

Though snowflakes were falling from the sky, the flowing waters of the Yangtze River did not freeze.

With several large sails raised, the cargo ship skillfully navigated against the current in a zigzag pattern, thanks to the helmsman's expertise in utilizing the wind. As the ship moved forward, the snow-covered forests and half-white mountain peaks passed by one after another.

Facing the howling north wind, wearing a rabbit-fur coat, and standing at the bow while watching the mountains and forests unfold before him, Zhu Ping'an couldn't help but feel a surge of heroic spirit in his chest.

Moved by the scenery, he stood at the bow and recited a verse:

"A beautiful time, yet fate is cruel; the great king sent me to patrol the hills."

After sailing for three days, they arrived at a tax checkpoint. Zhu Ping'an disembarked and presented his official Juren certificate to the tax officers on duty, allowing the cargo ship to pass through without issue.

Two days later, Zhu Ping'an disembarked. His home was now within reach.

When he left home, the autumn harvest was in full swing; now, as he returned, snow was falling heavily. When he left, he was just a small Xiucai; now, he had returned as a Juren. Such a contrast naturally stirred a sense of emotion in him.

Brushing the snow off his shoulders, Zhu Ping'an hoisted his luggage and walked forward.