

## Rise 220

### Chapter 220: Offering Tribute

After Zhu Ping'an's initiative of establishing the "Learning Valley," Scholar Zhang took his leave from Shanghe Village. He had accompanied his wife to visit her family and couldn't stay long. Zhu Ping'an, along with the village head and elders, escorted him to the village entrance and watched him depart.

After seeing off Scholar Zhang, Zhu Ping'an was invited by the village head and elders to discuss plans for the Learning Valley. The village elders were even more enthusiastic about this than they had been about erecting a monument. It was almost noon before Zhu Ping'an was able to excuse himself.

Before he even reached home, he heard a commotion from his courtyard, as lively as a bustling market.

"Master Zhu is back!"

Before Zhu Ping'an could step inside, an excited voice called out from the courtyard.

Master Zhu?

Zhu Ping'an's mouth twitched slightly upon hearing this. As soon as he lifted his foot to enter, he was surrounded by a crowd of enthusiastic villagers.

"I am an excellent farmer. I humbly beg Master Zhu to take me in—I'll work like an ox or a horse!" An elderly man in patched clothing approached respectfully but with great excitement, his words stumbling over each other.

"Master Zhu, your household is now that of a scholar! You can't be without a cook. I'm Er Zhuzi from Bianjia Village—I've been a chef in town for over ten years. Let me handle the kitchen, I guarantee the food will be delicious!"

A burly man with a large head, thick neck, and greasy clothes slapped his chest confidently.

"I'm just a simple man, but I have strength. Let me be a house guard."

"I know how to farm too!"

"Master Zhu, please take us in!" The others all rushed forward, eagerly recommending themselves.

"Master Zhu, I have two daughters—both pure, unmarried girls. Let them stay and serve tea and water for you. They are hardworking! And... if Master Zhu finds them pleasing, they can also warm your bed."

A middle-aged man even pushed his two neatly dressed daughters in front of Zhu Ping'an, enthusiastically advertising them like an old matchmaker.

Then Zhu Ping'an looked down and saw the two little girls, both with braided hair, staring at him with big, innocent eyes. One of them was even sucking on her finger, drooling slightly.

The older one was at most six years old, while the younger was only around four or five!

They weren't even taller than a table leg—how could they possibly "warm a bed" at this age?!

Zhu Ping'an's face darkened.

Looking at the courtyard full of people scrambling to offer themselves as servants, his mouth twitched again. This must be the Ming Dynasty's version of voluntary servitude.

Zhu Ping'an had read about this practice before—modern history books mostly criticized it, even attributing it as a major factor in the downfall of the Ming Dynasty.

However, in Zhu Ping'an's view, voluntary servitude had different implications depending on perspective. For the state, it was undoubtedly harmful, but for the common folk, it was a different story.

Take the scene before him—if this arrangement didn't benefit them in some way, they wouldn't be so eager.

In a way, this was like a tax avoidance strategy, an ingenious workaround by the common people. The government exempted officials and scholars from taxes and corvée labor. So, peasants thought: if I become part of an official or scholar's household, wouldn't I also be exempt? They could donate their land to become tenant farmers, or even donate themselves as household servants.

Although the Ming government officially set the land tax at no more than ten percent, multiple layers of surcharges, levies, and arbitrary fees made the burden unbearable for ordinary farmers. Furthermore, the corvée labor obligations were extremely heavy, requiring people to build roads and bridges, transport grain, or even carry small tribute gifts to the capital, all at their own expense.

Thus, many peasants "donated" their land to powerful families—although they continued to farm it, they no longer had to pay government taxes. Instead, they paid rent to the landlords, which, as long as it was lower than the total sum of government taxes and local extortions, was a preferable deal. It was similar to how, in modern times, businesses sought foreign investors to qualify for tax exemptions.

For officials and scholars, voluntary servitude was all benefits with no drawbacks—this was one of the privileges of the ruling class, a form of exploitation.

Still, even understanding it rationally...

"Yaya can warm the bed!"

The four- or five-year-old girl, still drooling, waved her chubby little hand and repeated her father's words in a childish voice. Zhu Ping'an almost spat out blood.

"Zhi'er is back! Quickly, come inside!"

Just then, his mother, Chen, appeared at the doorway, waving excitedly and calling him over.

With his mother's timely rescue, Zhu Ping'an finally squeezed through the crowd and entered the house.

The villagers respected Zhu Ping'an as a scholar, so when they saw his mother calling for him, they automatically stepped aside to let him pass.

"Hurry, Zhi'er, look at this!" Chen eagerly pulled Zhu Ping'an into the inner room, pointing at the piles of gifts stacked on and under the bed.

"What is all this?" Zhu Ping'an asked, puzzled by the assortment of gifts scattered around the room.

"While you were at the village head's house, people kept coming to deliver these gifts. They insisted on leaving them, and I couldn't stop them." Chen's eyes shone as she admired the full room of gifts.

You didn't even try to stop them, did you, Mother?

Zhu Ping'an silently mocked her in his heart as he watched her delighted expression.

Still, he wasn't an inflexible person—exchanging gifts was part of social etiquette.

Besides, since his mother was so excited, he wouldn't spoil her mood. But in the future, they couldn't accept any more gifts.

"Oh, I almost forgot! There are also these land deeds—this one is for fifteen acres of irrigated farmland, this one is also fifteen acres, and this one... oh, this one is fifty acres of fertile land. All of these are from wealthy landlords near the village. And look at this—a general store in town! I forget who sent it. And here are some banknotes—I haven't even counted them yet."

As she spoke, Chen suddenly remembered the land deeds. She reached under the bed, pulled them out from Father Zhu's worn-out shoes, then dug under a loose floor brick and retrieved several banknotes, sitting on the bed and going through them one by one.

"Mother..." Zhu Ping'an began.

Before he could finish, Chen firmly grasped the land deeds in her hands, holding them like a treasure hoarder. In the same tone she used when confiscating his New Year's money in childhood, she said, "I'll keep these for you."

That morning, Zhu Ping'an had generously donated fifty taels of silver to establish the Learning Valley, which had distressed Chen immensely. Thankfully, by the time he got home, wealthy villagers had already sent over these gifts, greatly improving her mood. There was no way she was letting him take them now.

Seeing his mother clutching the deeds as if guarding a precious hoard, Zhu Ping'an was speechless. He turned his attention to the gifts stacked around the room.

"Don't even think about taking these either! You don't know how expensive daily necessities are. I need these for returning favors."

Chen pointed at the gifts and began listing their intended recipients.

"Wang family's gift will be sent to the Zhang family; Zhang family's gift will be sent to the Wang family..."

"This time, I'll let it go, but we can't accept any more in the future, Mother." Zhu Ping'an could only smile bitterly.