

Rise 271

Chapter 271: Searching and Inspecting the Civil and Military Papers

Although still young, the number of essays steadily increased;

Let's wait till fifteen or sixteen, and he shall succeed in a single try.

Zhu Ping'an slightly curved his lips, silently reciting this poem about a child prodigy, quietly watching the various expressions of his fellow examinees before the exam—some were sweating nervously, others trembling with excitement, and some remained calm and composed. Zhu Ping'an belonged to the calm category. He had prepared thoroughly and no longer feared the exam.

The waiting time was long. Soldiers holding torches stood everywhere, and braziers were burning all around. The entire venue was brightly lit.

From the thirteen provinces of Northern and Southern Zhili, over five thousand examinees gathered in teams outside the examination gate, forming a long line. It looked like a swarm of ants moving house—everyone was carrying large and small bundles, waiting to enter the exam venue.

This scene reminded Zhu Ping'an of the Spring Festival travel rush, and he couldn't help but curl his lips in amusement.

While Zhu Ping'an and others were queuing outside for the exam, the internal and external officials were busily preparing the arrangements for this metropolitan examination inside the gate.

There were two chief examiners for this metropolitan exam. The main examiner was Xu Jie, Minister of Rites, a top-ranked official. The vice examiner was Yan Maoqing, the second-in-command at the Censorate and Left Vice Censor-in-Chief, a third-ranked official, and an important member of the Yan faction. Additionally, there were eight assistant examiners. These were the internal officials for the exam.

The Left Vice Minister of Rites, also a member of the Yan faction, served as the examination supervisor. In addition, two censors acted as overseers. There were several officials responsible for paper distribution, collection, sealing, recording, cross-checking, receiving, and security. These were the external officials for the exam.

Of course, the main force was still the soldiers responsible for maintaining order, conducting inspections, and ensuring security.

After the briefing session for internal and external officials, the external officials began admitting examinees in batches by region.

Zhu Ping'an's exam region, Southern Zhili, was in the second group to enter. After the first group from Shandong had entered, Zhu Ping'an and the examinees from Southern Zhili began moving toward the gate with their bundles amid the envious glances of examinees from other regions, lining up for inspection and entry.

Once all the hundreds of examinees from Southern Zhili had entered the gate, several soldiers shut it. Then, a middle-aged official in a court robe, surrounded by four other officials, stepped forward from the crowd.

“Gentlemen,” he said sternly, “I am one of the overseers for this metropolitan examination. One of my duties is to supervise the inspection for concealed materials. You all are outstanding talents from various regions, having passed the provincial exam and are among the elite. You have come here to the tune of ‘Deer Cry’ [a classical reference to gathering of the virtuous]. Normally, such treatment as is given to bandits would be unthinkable for you gentlemen. However, the state has its laws, and the family its rules. This exam is a gracious gift from His Majesty. I believe, like me, you are all immensely grateful and eager to repay His Majesty’s favor. Therefore, inspections will proceed strictly by the rules. I myself underwent the same inspection, and I trust you gentlemen will understand.”

This middle-aged official, one of the two overseers, stood before the examinees of Southern Zhili and spoke solemnly.

“Let me put the unpleasant part first: if any of you dare bring in prohibited items such as written notes, copied materials, or anything else forbidden, and are caught, you will be immediately sent to the Commandant’s Office for questioning, exposed in public for a month, then sent back to your place of origin to serve as a low-ranking clerk, with your qualification as a provincial graduate revoked. You will be permanently banned from all future examinations and disqualified from any promotion! And those officials and soldiers responsible for the inspection—be alert! Each inspection will be conducted in two rounds. If the first round finds nothing, but the second does, the first group of officials and soldiers will be severely punished. If any prohibited items are found inside the exam venue, both rounds of inspectors will be punished: officials will be docked pay, and soldiers will be sent to the frontier!”

With the stern warning from the overseer, the entire atmosphere turned grave.

“I advise you provincial graduates to treasure your hard-earned status. Before the inspection begins, you still have a chance to discard any prohibited items you may have brought. I will not pursue it. But if you’re caught during inspection, don’t blame me for being merciless! Starting now, I give you ten counts of time.”

As the official spoke, he waved his hand. All the officials and soldiers present turned their backs to the examinees, creating a visual blind spot so no one could see the examinees' actions.

Then came a series of thuds. Zhu Ping'an saw some people throwing out small notes and booklets, even one guy who pulled an inkstone out of his bag and flung it away with a smack.

Well, these provincial graduates were certainly resourceful in cheating methods.

Everyone's the same, Zhu Ping'an couldn't help but smile. It reminded him of his days as a postgraduate—students had their own clever cheating tricks, like using transparent tape to stick notes and soak them in clear water before attaching them to cups, or using WeChat groups, miniaturized cheat sheets, and more.

“Very good. Begin the inspection.”

After ten counts, the middle-aged official looked at the various styles of cheat materials on the ground and nodded in satisfaction, signaling the officials and soldiers to divide the examinees into groups and start the inspection.

The officials supervised while the actual inspection was carried out by the soldiers.

The luggage and belongings were inspected similarly to the provincial exam—hats, robes, shoe soles, socks, everything was checked. Clothes couldn't have inner linings, seat cushions could only be single-layered, thick inkstones were not allowed, brushes had to be hollow, even food had to be cut open. It was quite similar to the provincial exam.

After watching the entire inspection process of the first examinee, Zhu Ping'an had to admit that the inspection for the metropolitan exam was much stricter than the provincial or county-level exams. In addition to your belongings, your entire body was subject to a thorough body search.

How thorough? Well, it meant undressing and letting several soldiers grope you all over. The inspection was extremely detailed. For example:

Open your mouth—hmm, nothing hidden there. Check your ears—hmm, nothing in there either. Your hair—also nothing. Your body—any tattoos or ink markings?

And finally, one more place to inspect. You know which one. That, too, had to be checked.

The provincial graduates ahead, during inspection, kept saying "This is an insult to my dignity!" Faces flushed red, necks stiff with anger. The soldiers, hearing this, mocked them and deliberately told each other to search more carefully. If there was ever a time to mock these so-called lords, this was it!

Witnessing this, Zhu Ping'an instinctively thought: "A scholar meets a soldier—reason has no effect."

Clothes inspection? Fine. Food inspection? Fine. Hair inspection? Alright. Belongings? Sure. Even undressing—fine. But to even inspect that part of the body? And not just that, but to deliberately humiliate, and laugh about it while commenting?

Comment your sister!

Scholars were prideful beings. Even in death they posed in elegant forms. And now, to be treated like this?

These provincial graduates were all well-read, highly dignified people who cared immensely about their image. To be treated like this during such a time—by illiterate, blade-wielding soldiers who deliberately mocked and humiliated them—was the ultimate humiliation. But what could they do? The order came from the Emperor. They couldn't do anything to the Emperor, so they directed all their hatred toward the soldiers in charge.

Wouldn't they be resentful? Wouldn't they bear grudges? Probably began harboring hatred for anyone in armor. They couldn't retaliate now, but once they passed the exam and gained power—oh, they'd settle scores. Not just with the soldier, but with his commander too!

That's probably why, in peaceful times, some scholars always found ways to crush military men through politics.

Maybe the resentment began from this very moment!

Zhu Ping'an watched in silent exasperation as the soldiers posed the examinees in all sorts of bizarre positions. Truly speechless! Some of these soldiers—what a pity they weren't born in the future to direct adult films!