

## Rise 273

### Chapter 273: Jin Has Feng Fu

When he woke up from his sleep, it was already late afternoon, with the setting sun slanting westward.

As Zhu Ping'an opened his eyes, he saw the exam paper for this round of the imperial examination. It had been placed on the makeshift wooden table, held down by his inkstone. It seemed the exam supervisor saw that he was sleeping soundly and chose not to wake him, instead placing the paper on the table and pressing it down with the inkstone.

The people who set the questions for this exam were probably the imperial examiners. Once the examiners for the Ming dynasty were appointed, they had to go directly to the examination compound (Gongyuan), which would then be immediately sealed and heavily guarded—no birds could fly out, no ants could get in! This lockdown continued until the exams were finished, the papers graded, and the rankings determined. Only then would the examiners be released.

This was to ensure secrecy and fairness in the imperial examination, and to prevent favoritism or leaking of exam questions.

According to tradition, the first round of the metropolitan examination (huishi) had about the same number of questions as the provincial examination (xiangshi): a total of seven questions—three from the Four Books and four from the Five Classics. This was the most important exam of the “eight-legged essay” system for selecting officials.

It was rumored that the chief examiner for this session was the historically famous Xu Jie, known for toppling Yan Song, a powerful official. Therefore, Zhu Ping'an was very interested in the questions Xu Jie might have crafted with painstaking effort and ingenuity.

Gently pushing aside the rabbit-fur blanket covering him, Zhu Ping'an got up, performed a quick wash, dried his hands, then tidied the desk, neatly arranging brush, ink, paper, and inkstone. He officially began his journey to leap over the dragon gate through the metropolitan examination.

Unfolding the exam paper, the questions for this round of the metropolitan exam appeared before his eyes.

If the first exam was the most important one in the whole metropolitan examination, then the first question was the most crucial of all. The quality of the eight-legged essay written for this first question would almost determine the entire outcome of the examination.

“Among the people of Jin, there was one named Feng Fu; Feng Fu rolled up his sleeves and got out of the carriage.”

This was the first question of this metropolitan examination. For most candidates, it was slightly different from the usual.

Typically, the eight-legged essay questions were chosen from the Four Books—a sentence, a few sentences, or even entire passages—with complete meanings, all emphasizing major moral or political doctrines, related to human ethics and governance. However, such well-formed questions in the Four Books were limited. To prevent candidates from guessing or copying topics, the so-called “fragmented” questions emerged. These were composed by arbitrarily joining or breaking parts of the classical texts to form a question.

Before this special metropolitan examination, such a fragmented question had appeared only once. Although unfamiliar, this fragmented question was relatively straightforward. It was an “emotionally coherent” fragmented question—meaning the beginning and ending parts made logical sense together and were easily understood.

So, examinees were only mildly surprised by it.

This question came from Mencius: Jin Xin II, which says: “In Jin, there was a man named Feng Fu, skilled in wrestling tigers. Eventually, he became a gentleman. Once, in the wilderness, people were chasing a tiger that had taken a defensive position. None dared approach it. When they saw Feng Fu, they ran to meet him. Feng Fu rolled up his sleeves and got off his carriage. The crowd rejoiced, but the gentlemen laughed at him.”

Seeing this question, Zhu Ping’an paused and reflected briefly.

Recalling the context in which Mencius spoke these words—Qi was suffering a famine, and Chen Zhen said to Mencius, “The people in the state believe that Master will again persuade the King of Qi to open the granaries and relieve the disaster. But perhaps that’s not advisable anymore?” Mencius replied that doing so again would make him like Feng Fu, and then told the story of Feng Fu.

So, what were the gentlemen mocking Feng Fu for?

Zhu Ping’an pondered carefully. From Mencius’ tone, he did not seem to completely disapprove of Feng Fu’s actions, because “becoming Feng Fu again” actually received public support. It was only the scholars who mocked him.

Would Mencius truly refrain from persuading the King of Qi to help the people just because he feared being mocked by scholars?

Taking into account the current situation of the Ming dynasty—threatened by northern invaders and southern pirates, with frequent famines—Zhu Ping’an understood the question setter’s intent.

So, he ground the ink, spread the paper, and began drafting his eight-legged essay.

“At first, the man of Jin changed his course to follow goodness; in the end, he complied with others and lost himself.”

This was Zhu Ping’an’s opening line—the “breaking of the topic.” It meant: The man from Jin, Feng Fu, initially was able to change his fierce and aggressive ways and become a good and virtuous person. But later, for the sake of others’ safety, he lost his reformed self and once again became aggressive.

This opening both accurately summarized the main point of Mencius’ original statement and set the stage for the subsequent discussion.

Continuing to develop the topic, Zhu Ping’an wrote: Feng Fu had already become a good person, so why did he still go to wrestle the tiger? Mencius likely knew this story and used it as a metaphor for those wanting him to persuade the King of Qi again to open the granaries for famine relief.

After finishing this part, Zhu Ping'an put down his brush, rubbed his forehead with both hands, and fell into deep thought.

The first eight-legged essay of the exam almost decided one's entire success in the metropolitan examination. To stand out among the best examinees in the nation was no easy feat. All these candidates had already passed the county and provincial exams, meaning their eight-legged essay skills were solid.

To stand out—to attract the attention of the examiners among more than 5,000 essays and earn a good rank—writing a safe, standard essay wasn't enough. Innovation was needed.

He had to make the examiners' eyes light up.

After some thought, Zhu Ping'an suddenly curled his lips slightly, a gleam like a meteor flashing in his eyes.

Heh. Got it. Then he dipped his brush in ink and resumed writing.

In the middle and concluding sections of the essay, Zhu Ping'an broke from his usual analytical style and instead used vivid description. He depicted the crisis faced by the people before Feng Fu fought the tiger and then described Feng Fu's tiger-fighting actions in an evocative way.

Of course, he still adhered to the required paired and parallel sentence structure of the eight-legged essay, but replaced argumentation with narration. As a result, this essay would certainly stand out like a crane among chickens among the more than 5,000 others.

As daylight dimmed, Zhu Ping'an lit a candle, brightened the lamp, and wrote the final paragraph of his essay in a tone echoing Mencius' sentiment:

"Alas! When Feng Fu first wrestled tigers, he did not know he would later become a gentleman; and once he became a gentleman, he did not expect to wrestle tigers again. Therefore, the people's hope that I open the Tang granaries again—is it any different from Feng Fu rolling up his sleeves and stepping off his carriage?!"

The soldier assigned to supervise Zhu Ping'an's exam room stared blankly at him writing diligently under the candlelight.

The examinee in the next foul-smelling room had already vomited seven or eight times, but this candidate didn't seem affected at all. He ate well, slept soundly—and now, even while answering questions, his writing flowed like water, entirely unfazed by the stench from the adjacent restroom.

After finishing, Zhu Ping'an put down his brush and reread his essay. He nodded in satisfaction.

With this, it was certain that he would not return empty-handed from this metropolitan examination.