

Rise 275

Chapter 275: It's Raining

Chilly Spring Rain, A Drop of Icy Rain. Wind and Cloud Net. Zhu Ping'an had just finished writing his second eight-legged essay when he happened to see a drop of icy rain fall to the ground outside. A soldier standing guard outside shrank his neck in the cold.

It's raining. Zhu Ping'an looked up carefully at his examination cell. Hmm, not bad. Though it was a smelly cell, the structure of the house was solid, and the roof had just been repaired recently. The rainproof layer was also well arranged—there was no need to worry about any leakage.

So, Zhu Ping'an took out the umbrella he had brought from his luggage, extended it outside, pointed it at the shivering soldier, then placed it on the wall outside his cell.

Use it or not, that's up to you.

After setting down the umbrella, Zhu Ping'an paid it no further attention and continued with his writing.

This was the final Four Books argument essay. The topic was also quite standard and came from Mencius: "Confucius climbed Mount Dong and found Lu small."

The sentence was simple—it meant that Confucius climbed Mount Dong and, looking down, felt that the state of Lu seemed small. Simple as it may be, writing a coherent eight-legged essay based on this line was not so easy. You couldn't just write a travel diary about Confucius climbing a mountain, after all.

To tackle this question, one needed to understand the full context. The complete passage in Mencius reads: “Mencius said: Confucius climbed Mount Dong and found Lu small; climbed Mount Tai and found the world small. Therefore, one who has seen the sea finds it hard to be impressed by other waters; one who has studied under a sage finds it hard to speak. There is a method to observing water: one must see it in its waves. The sun and moon have brightness; their light must shine upon it. Flowing water does not proceed without first filling its channels; a gentleman's pursuit of the Way must follow steps before achieving mastery.”

Reading this passage, Zhu Ping'an thought of Zhu Xi.

Zhu Xi, the old master, had written a note in the margin of this chapter of Mencius: “This chapter speaks of the greatness and rootedness of the sages' teachings; students must progress gradually to reach them.”

What Zhu Xi meant was that the Confucian doctrines established by sages were lofty and profound, with deep roots. Those who sought to learn must follow a gradual path, step by step, in order to reach that lofty realm.

Zhu Xi's words were not to be taken lightly. They were the golden rules of the imperial examinations. In the second year of the Hongwu era (1369), Emperor Taizu of Ming had decreed that Zhu Xi's commentaries be regarded as orthodox for the examinations.

Zhu Ping'an pondered for a moment and found his direction. He would follow Zhu Xi's interpretation and use it as the introduction to his essay.

Outside, the rain gradually intensified. The pitter-patter grew louder, carrying the lingering chill of winter, driven by the howling northern wind. It poured down mournfully, like weeping and lamentation, blanketing the entire examination courtyard.

The soldier standing outside was now holding the umbrella Zhu Ping'an had lent him. Seeing his fellow guards shivering in the wind and rain, he felt a deep sense of gratitude toward Zhu Ping'an, who sat in his smelly cell. His gaze toward Zhu Ping'an was filled with appreciation.

However, Zhu Ping'an was completely absorbed in his ink-stained world, oblivious to the grateful gaze from the soldier.

Dipping his brush deeply into ink, Zhu Ping'an wrote the opening sentence of the essay:

"The sage's Way is grand and well-rooted; the student must proceed gradually to attain it."

With the opening complete, Zhu Ping'an continued fluidly, composing the essay in one go. Following Zhu Xi's commentary, he elaborated on Confucian doctrine, praising it to the skies—comparing it to the lofty Mount Tai, the vast ocean, and the radiant sun and moon. Of course, all these had roots and origins. He emphasized again that learners must begin from the basics and proceed step by step. In this way, he completed the eight-legged essay.

At this point, he had finished all three of the Four Books argument essays. The remaining four questions would all be from the Five Classics. In Zhu Ping'an's experience, Five Classics essays were relatively easier—a matter of personal preference.

Zhu Ping'an opened the question sheet and continued reading.

As expected, the remaining four were all from the Five Classics. None of them were difficult. Zhu Ping'an read through all four at once, and ideas began to flow, spreading out like the pitter-patter of rain outside.

Rain fell on the eaves—drip, drop—with a clean rhythm that seemed almost cheerful. Zhu Ping'an's thoughts drifted with it. That rhythmic rain stirred waves of inspiration within him—soft, silent ripples.

With ideas flowing smoothly, Zhu Ping'an kept writing.

And so, in the curtain of rain, a young man wearing a face mask tirelessly wielded his brush, ink flying with each stroke.

On rainy days, the stench in the toilets became stronger. There were several other smelly cells like Zhu Ping'an's in the examination compound. Most examinees were nearly overcome by the stench, vomiting profusely. Another candidate couldn't hold out any longer and was escorted to the Mingjing Pavilion by the proctors. The few who remained were pale and barely holding on.

Yet Zhu Ping'an, wearing a face mask, seemed entirely unaffected by the neighboring cell's odor. He wrote fluently, as if surrounded by birdsong and blooming flowers. Every candidate who passed by his cell was awed by the sight of him calmly composing amidst the stench.

"Swinging an axe under the bed, building a temple in a snail shell."

That's how most people felt—like wielding an axe under a bed or performing a ritual in a snail shell. There was no room to fully express oneself. After all, the eight-legged essay had strict formats and rules: each sentence had to follow a fixed style, with parallel structure and symmetry.

However, at this moment, Zhu Ping'an felt completely at ease. Wherever his thoughts led, his brush followed. Every word perfectly adhered to the rigid requirements of the eight-legged form.

In one go, Zhu Ping'an finished two Five Classics essays before putting down his brush. His stomach, however, began to rumble again.

So, Zhu Ping'an gestured to request the "relief token," hung an oilcloth in front of his cell as a curtain to block the wind and rain while he used the toilet, stored all his exam papers and drafts in the answer bag and hung it on the wall, then left the cell to head to the latrine next door.

Even with a mask, the stench in the toilet was almost unbearable upon entry.

Of course, without the mask, it would've been absolutely suffocating. The toilet was far from clean—nothing like our modern flush toilets. It was a squat-style trench, and waste couldn't be flushed away. It was unpleasant to look at.

There was toilet paper inside, but it was rough grass paper.

Zhu Ping'an finished his business at the fastest speed of his life and returned to his cell.

By then, it was probably around four or five in the afternoon. The sky outside was growing darker, and the rain was pouring even harder. A curtain of water had formed outside the cell, turning it into something like a "Water Curtain Cave."

Just then, a shrill cry echoed outside.

"Damn it! My exam paper is soaked!"

A frantic candidate was seen yelling and jumping wildly outside his cell. Three or four guards couldn't hold him down. It took six or seven to finally subdue him and escort him to the Mingjing Pavilion for processing.

Poor guy—his cell must have leaked, soaking his exam paper. A wet paper would leave stains, and such an answer sheet would be considered invalid, nullifying this entire examination round. Naturally, the candidate couldn't help losing it.

In that light, the smelly cell didn't seem so bad after all. Zhu Ping'an, wearing his mask, chuckled self-deprecatingly.