

Rise 276

Chapter 276: The Unique Style of Emperor Jiajing

The metropolitan examination consisted of three sessions, each lasting three days and nights. Due to two intermissions between sessions, the actual duration was nine days and seven nights. During these nine days and seven nights, all examinees had to remain inside the examination compound until the final session was completed, after which the gates would be opened and the candidates allowed to leave.

In the first session, which consisted of seven essays in the Eight-Legged Essay format, Zhu Ping'an finished quickly on the morning of the third day and carefully copied his answers onto the answer sheet. Since the second session would not begin until the fourth day, Zhu Ping'an packed away all his draft papers and answer sheets into the answer bag, hung it on the wall, tidied up his cell, laid out the bedding, and then lay down on it and fell into a deep sleep.

At noon that day, Chief Examiner Xu Jie led several proctors to make another inspection of the exam hall. When they passed the row where Zhu Ping'an's cell was located, they hadn't yet reached his particular cell before the surrounding stench already made Xu Jie frown.

However, determined to fulfill his duty as chief examiner, Xu Jie covered his nose with his sleeve and pushed forward. The proctors behind him also held their noses as they followed, taking several more steps forward.

A gust of north wind blew in, carrying the pungent stench of excrement that had accumulated in the latrines for three days. The sourness of the smell was overwhelming...

One of the proctors couldn't hold it in and retched loudly, vomiting on the spot.

But no one laughed at him, because when the wind blew past, almost everyone had come close to vomiting. Now that someone had already thrown up, others felt somewhat relieved—if they couldn't hold it in later, at least they wouldn't be alone.

“Proctor Wang, perhaps you should return to the Mingjing Building first,” one of the examiners suggested.

Proctor Wang, who was vomiting bile and crouched on the ground, still stretched out a hand and firmly shook his head, insisting on continuing the inspection.

Once Proctor Wang had finished vomiting, Xu Jie led the group onward.

As they neared the end of the row, a rhythmic snoring sound came from one of the cells ahead.

A few more steps forward, and they saw a young man sleeping soundly in the cell, covered with a thick rabbit-fur blanket, snoring with steady rhythm.

Sleeping so soundly next to the latrine! Even we couldn't bear it from a distance, and Proctor Wang just vomited a moment ago—yet this boy, right next to the source of the smell, right in the line of fire, was sleeping like a baby!

Everyone was stunned. Looking again, hmm, the nameplate of this cell seemed familiar. Oh! Isn't this the same latrine boy who cooked a pot of noodles and ate loudly on the first day?!

So this boy not only eats heartily, he sleeps soundly too!

But... while he eats and sleeps well, it seems he doesn't answer the questions. The first time they saw him, he was eating noodles. Now they saw him again, he was fast asleep. Looking around his cell, the answer bag hanging on the wall was neat and seemed untouched—as if it had been packed as-is when the exam paper was distributed.

What a pity.

If only that examinee who fainted from vomiting yesterday had this boy's endurance, how great that would have been! The examiners sighed, thinking of the other candidate who had vomited and collapsed.

One can endure but cannot write.

The other can write but cannot endure.

Truly a pity—and truly frustrating.

Of course, the pitiful one was the examinee who fainted from vomiting. The frustrating one, naturally, was Zhu Ping'an with his rhythmic snoring.

Zhu Ping'an slept through the afternoon until the proctor came to collect the papers for the first session. Awoken by a soldier-proctor, Zhu Ping'an got up and handed in his exam to a disdainful examiner. This examiner had also participated in the noon inspection with Xu Jie and had seen Zhu Ping'an sleeping then. Now, nearly dusk and paper collection time, the boy was still asleep—clearly, he hadn't written a thing.

Contempt!

After sealing the exam paper, the examiner gave Zhu Ping'an another look of contempt, pinched his nose, and walked away.

Outside, the rain was still falling in a light drizzle. After handing in his paper, Zhu Ping'an, wrapped in a thick rabbit-fur garment, took out some preserved fruits and dried meat from his bundle. He roasted them over the charcoal brazier, had his dinner, and then went back to sleep.

The next morning, a little after five, Zhu Ping'an woke up again. After washing up, he roasted some more dried meat over the charcoal fire and stuffed himself full. After drinking some hot water, he began waiting for the distribution of the second session's exam paper.

As per tradition, the second session—just like in the provincial exams—tested official document writing. This included two categories: communication memos between offices and judicial verdicts based on given case

materials. Specifically, it consisted of one discussion essay, five verdicts, and one each of an imperial edict, proclamation, and memorial.

Around 7 to 8 a.m., the exam papers were handed out.

After receiving the paper, Zhu Ping'an glanced at the questions. At first, he froze, then couldn't help but chuckle.

Of course, at the same time that Zhu Ping'an was laughing, many examinees were cursing inwardly as they looked at the exam paper.

Not because of anything else—just the second session's questions. Unlike in previous years, the overall volume of content remained unchanged, but the question types had changed. This session included one discussion essay, four verdicts (instead of five), one edict, one proclamation, one memorial—but added a new “Qingci” (Daoist-style sacred incantation) composition.

In other words, compared to past exams, this session had one less judicial verdict, but one additional Qingci.

With this change, the second session took on a distinctive Jiajing characteristic. The Qingci—this was Emperor Jiajing's symbolic legacy. Jiajing even earned the nickname “Emperor of Qingci.”

The change in the exam was unlikely to have been made by Xu Jie or his colleagues. Even with ten times their courage, they wouldn't dare. Although Emperor Jiajing was obsessed with alchemy and Taoist practices, he had near-genius understanding and control over political power. He kept his ministers tightly in check—any one of them, even a powerful one like Yan Song, could be crushed to dust by the emperor with just a word.

Emperor Jiajing was the absolute ruler of the Ming Empire.

Moreover, due to his devotion to alchemy and high intellect, Emperor Jiajing seemed enigmatic and unfathomable. His ministers were all terrified and respectful before him. Who would dare to take liberties with an exam that determined the fate of the nation? No one had enough heads to lose!

As for Xu Jie, historically speaking, he had just been set up by Yan Song during this period and was currently being sidelined by Emperor Jiajing. He definitely wouldn't dare make such a controversial change in the exam.

So, the only possible initiator of this change could be Emperor Jiajing himself. Which makes sense, considering this was an imperial favor-granted examination session. It's not unusual that the emperor would personally alter the exam content.

Truly, Emperor Jiajing was Emperor Jiajing.

Under his reign, the infamous Qingci Prime Minister Yan Song emerged—and now, we have a Qingci session in the metropolitan exam.

But this actually helped Zhu Ping'an. Thanks to his prior readings of historical texts, he had learned much about Emperor Jiajing. When he received that "Daoist Qingci Manual" from the old Taoist—possibly Lan Daoxing—he had studied Qingci extensively. While not a master, he had achieved solid proficiency. Within the context of this examination, that was enough to outshine others. He had previously wondered how he might apply that knowledge.

Now he had the opportunity—thank you very much.

His confidence in passing the exam had now risen to 99%. The first session was heavily weighted, and he had performed well. Now, with the special Qingci question—an imperial favorite—this would certainly be a scoring focus. Given that Qingci was his strength, he was confident.

Zhu Ping'an looked at the exam paper and curled his lips into a smile.