

## Rise 298

### Chapter 298: Wenyuan Pavilion

Wenyuan Pavilion. This Wenyuan Pavilion was not the same as the one from the Qing Dynasty a hundred years later that housed the Siku Quanshu (Complete Library of the Four Treasuries), but rather a symbolic restaurant in the capital of the Ming Dynasty — an ideal destination for scholars and literati to drink and socialize.

To enter Wenyuan Pavilion, one must meet two criteria: talent and wealth.

Each day, a poem topic would be hung at the entrance of Wenyuan Pavilion. Only those who could compose a poem according to the topic were allowed to enter. It was somewhat akin to today's high-end clubs. This rule ensured that those who came to Wenyuan Pavilion were men of letters and erudition, thus elevating the atmosphere and prestige of the place.

Officials, recluses, poets, monks, and Daoist priests frequently visited Wenyuan Pavilion. It was a gathering place of literati. If one received praise there, one's reputation would rise rapidly. For a time, everyone flocked to Wenyuan Pavilion, seeing it as a place of great honor.

Today, the poem displayed at the entrance of Wenyuan Pavilion was Bai Juyi's Recalling Jiangnan from the Tang Dynasty:

How lovely is the South!

The scenery so familiar from the past.

At sunrise, river blossoms glow redder than fire;

In spring, the river's green is as deep as indigo.

Can one not long for Jiangnan?

The requirement was to compose a poem in the same format and style.

Zhu Ping'an and the other two arrived at the entrance of Wenyuan Pavilion. Seeing the Recalling Jiangnan displayed at the door, they all smiled slightly. The three exchanged polite gestures, each deferring to the others. In the end, the honest childlike Wang Shizhen was pushed forward by Zhang Siwei and Zhu Ping'an to write the poem.

Wang Shizhen, who would later lead the Ming literary world, truly lived up to his reputation. After being pushed forward, he remained calm and composed, merely smiling faintly. Without much thought, he stepped forward and wrote down a Recalling Jiangnan:

Where the song begins,

The slanting sun reddens half the river.

Tender green poles add to the plum rain,

Pale yellow robes endure the lotus-thread wind.

My home lies east of the Five Lakes.

The moment Wang Shizhen finished, applause broke out at the door. This was customary at Wenyuan Pavilion. Each day, a few scholars would be stationed at the entrance as gate judges, either from the Imperial Academy or invited literati. Only with their approval could one enter the Pavilion.

Wang Shizhen's Recalling Jiangnan was arguably the best of the day. Hence, the cheers came naturally.

"'Plum rain', 'lotus-thread wind'—Sir Wang's poem could rival that of Bai the Poetry Demon!" Zhang Siwei couldn't help but exclaim in admiration.

"Come now, I know my limits. Compared to the Poetry Demon Bai, I'm still far off," Wang Shizhen replied with a faint smile and a modest shake of the head.

The demeanor of a gentleman.

Zhu Ping'an and Wang Shizhen embodied the ancient ideal of the refined gentleman — composed in honor and disgrace, as if they had stepped out of an ink painting.

However, in the next second, Zhu Ping'an retracted that thought—

“Ahem, I'm not familiar with those two. Thank you all, I'll go up first.” After being granted entry, Wang Shizhen cupped his hands to the scholar gate judges, then smiled at Zhu Ping'an and Zhang Siwei, who were standing outside.

Originally, the rule at Wenyuan Pavilion was that if one person in a group composed a poem meeting the requirement, the whole group could enter. But with Wang Shizhen saying “I'm not familiar with them,” it meant they weren't considered a group. Thus, according to the rules, Zhu Ping'an and Zhang Siwei had to each submit a new Recalling Jiangnan to gain entry.

And so, Zhu Ping'an was pushed forward by Zhang Siwei.

Zhu Ping'an smiled slightly, stepped forward, picked up a brush, and wrote:

How lovely is the South.

The city walls rise steep and tall.

Before the mausoleum, only stone horses remain;

On the old path, traces of bronze camels endure.

Under jade trees, night deepens with song.

This was a version of Recalling Jiangnan by Nalan Xingde of the Qing Dynasty. Though not his most famous piece, Zhu Ping'an had encountered it while visiting a historical site in Nanjing in modern times, and it had stuck in his memory. So he conveniently used it here.

Though not among Nalan's most outstanding works, it stood out among today's poems at Wenyuan Pavilion.

Even the gate judges couldn't help but exclaim in praise. While Wang Shizhen's poem was lively and expressed love for his southern homeland, Zhu Ping'an's poem reflected on the rise and fall of history. Both were excellent.

“Heh, the first word of Sir Wang’s poem was ‘song’, and the last word of your poem is also ‘song’ — a call and response, quite delightful,” Zhang Siwei said, laughing as he praised the poetic harmony between the two works.

Zhu Ping’an, without a word, calmly entered Wenyuan Pavilion. Just like Wang Shizhen, he cupped his hands to the gate judges and smiled at Zhang Siwei, who was outside, then said the same line as Wang Shizhen:

“Ahem, I’m not familiar with the man outside. Thank you all, I’ll go up first.”

Then Zhu Ping’an caught up with Wang Shizhen. The two stood together in the hall, smiling at Zhang Siwei, who was still outside.

“You guys...” Zhang Siwei shook his head with a chuckle, then stepped forward and wrote his own Recalling Jiangnan:

Swallows of the South,

Gently flutter in the breeze beyond the embroidered curtains.

After the spring festival in the pond of February,

The palaces of Six Dynasties are now empty nests.

Flying freely east and west.

The first half echoed Wang Shizhen, the second half echoed Zhu Ping'an. Zhang Siwei penned it with ease.

Indeed, those who could leave a name in history were never ordinary — their poetry flowed effortlessly. Today's events gave Zhu Ping'an a deeper understanding: historical figures were truly remarkable.

This Recalling Jiangnan was also met with praise from the gate judges. Zhang Siwei laughed and caught up with Wang Shizhen and Zhu Ping'an, entering Wenyuan Pavilion.

The three of them went upstairs in Wenyuan Pavilion and found a vacant table. Zhang Siwei took charge and ordered eight dishes and a soup in one go. Wang Shizhen simply smiled without comment, while Zhu Ping'an added Wenyuan Pavilion's signature dish — a jar of ten-year aged fine wine. Then they handed the menu to the waiter to send to the kitchen.

The purse Li Shu had given contained three silver notes, each worth fifty taels — a total of one hundred and fifty taels. That would be equivalent to about 100,000 RMB in modern currency, enough to afford even Qingdao prawns ten times the price.

In *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the entire Jia household's crab feast cost only 24 taels, which made Granny Liu exclaim it could support a small household for a whole year. This meal at Wenyuan Pavilion, no matter how expensive, surely wouldn't cost more than that.

Of course, Zhu Ping'an had no intention of taking Li Shu's money for nothing. He had his own modest savings and would return the money later.

Wenyuan Pavilion's dishes came quickly. Before the three had finished a few exchanges, the dishes began arriving one after another.

"Just now at the marquis's residence, you all heard it — I can't drink much. You two enjoy yourselves," Zhu Ping'an said, pouring a cup for both Zhang Siwei and Wang Shizhen, as well as for himself, raising his cup in a toast.

"Understood. If we had such a lovely wife or beautiful concubine, we wouldn't drink much either, haha..." Zhang Siwei and Wang Shizhen raised their cups, clinked with Zhu Ping'an's, and laughed teasingly.

No one else came to disturb them, and no poetry gathering was held in the pavilion. In short, the meal was peaceful. The three chatted while they ate, discussing topics related to the upcoming metropolitan examination. The food was delicious, and they thoroughly enjoyed both the meal and the conversation.

After the meal, the three exited Wenyuan Pavilion. Zhang Siwei and Wang Shizhen took the lead, saying they would show Zhu Ping'an around the capital.