

## Rise 299

### Chapter 299: He Nian Tang

The carriages rumbled, the horses neighed softly, and the spring wind in February felt as sharp as scissors.

This was, at this moment, Zhu Ping'an's most direct impression of the capital—an endless stream of carriages and horses, and the spring breeze brushing the face with a hint of chill.

Zhang Siwei and Wang Shizhen, acting as tour guides, were to take Zhu Ping'an to Chongfu Chan Temple outside Xuanwu Gate, which is known today as Fayuan Temple. The distance wasn't too far. Once they exited Xuanwu Gate and followed the main street south, it wouldn't take long to reach Chongfu Chan Temple.

As was customary, after the imperial exams, many candidates liked to go to temples to seek some spiritual solace, make a wish, or burn some incense.

Moreover, this was the season of apricot blossoms, and the apricot blossoms at Chongfu Chan Temple were famously beautiful.

The three of them followed the main street outside Xuanwu Gate, heading south. This street was bustling with people and vendors. It was lively and full of various shops, inns, and guildhalls clustered together, with teahouses and stores lining the road. Most abundant, however, were the vegetable stalls and shops. Although it was early spring, a variety of vegetables had already begun to appear in the market.

Zhang Siwei and Wang Shizhen proved to be competent tour guides, introducing the local customs and sights to Zhu Ping'an as they walked.

"This is Caishi Street. It's no exaggeration to say this is the largest vegetable market in the Ming Dynasty. Most of the capital comes here to buy vegetables," Zhang Siwei explained while walking alongside Zhu Ping'an.

Oh, so this is Caishi Street.

Zhu Ping'an nodded upon hearing this. So this was the later-famous Caishikou. During the Ming Dynasty, it was merely the largest vegetable market, but in the Qing Dynasty, this place gained greater notoriety. The main reason for Caishikou's fame was that the Qing government moved the execution grounds from the Xisi Paifang of the Ming era to Caishikou outside Xuanwu Gate. Every year, just before the winter solstice, death sentences handed down in autumn would be carried out here.

But for now, it was still just the largest vegetable market.

"There's one place here we must not miss," Wang Shizhen, who had been walking behind them, suddenly perked up as they reached a certain spot. Speaking to Zhu Ping'an, he led the way in another direction.

Just a few steps away, they arrived at a large and impressive pharmacy called "Xi Heniantang."

The pharmacy was grand and spacious, but what drew Zhu Ping'an's attention most was its signboard. The three characters "He Nian Tang" (Crane Longevity Hall) were carved onto it. The character for "crane" had significantly more strokes and was asymmetrical compared to the other two, yet together the three characters formed a beautifully balanced composition, full of artistic charm.

“The characters on this plaque are like startled swans in flight, exuding vitality and spirit. To find such calligraphy in a bustling market is quite surprising...” Zhu Ping’an looked up at the words “He Nian Tang,” marveling that the calligraphy might even surpass his own, and couldn’t help but feel a bit emotional.

“Zihou, what a good eye you have.” Wang Shizhen had originally brought Zhu Ping’an here specifically to see the plaque. Seeing Zhu Ping’an notice it immediately, he smiled in praise.

“Wensheng, Zihou, this is not a place we should linger,” Zhang Siwei interjected, seemingly displeased with He Nian Tang.

“Why?” Zhu Ping’an asked, puzzled.

“Exactly, Ziwei, why the rush?” Wang Shizhen was also confused. He had discovered this place not long ago, having noticed the plaque while passing by. The calligraphy had caught his attention at once. At the time, he had urgent matters and only glanced at it briefly before leaving. Now passing by again, he couldn’t resist bringing Zhu Ping’an to appreciate it properly. He had planned to take a good look, but now hearing Zhang Siwei say they shouldn’t stay long, he was baffled.

Zhang Siwei didn’t answer immediately. Only after they had left He Nian Tang and walked a bit farther did he finally explain the reason to Zhu Ping’an and Wang Shizhen.

It turned out that He Nian Tang, located at the northwest corner of Caishi Street, was essentially the backyard business of Yan Song, the infamous Senior Grand Secretary. The pharmacy was one of his investments outside his political career, with the name “He Nian” symbolizing longevity like that of cranes and pines. Over the years, Yan Song had garnered quite a terrible reputation. Despite his immense power, many upright officials regarded him with disdain.

“What? So the plaque was written by Yan...?” Wang Shizhen’s expression soured as if he had just swallowed a fly.

Zhang Siwei nodded. Upon confirmation, Wang Shizhen’s face grew even more uncomfortable, as though witnessing a pig nibble on a ginseng root.

“Sigh, what a shame,” Wang Shizhen shook his head and sighed.

In traditional evaluations of calligraphy, character and calligraphy were considered inseparable, with personal integrity valued above artistic skill. Calligraphy was seen as an embodiment of one’s learning, talent, and virtue. Collecting calligraphy from someone of low moral standing was believed to invite evil energy into one’s home, tarnishing family values and one’s own reputation.

That was why Wang Shizhen sighed so deeply.

“I see now. No wonder... what a pity,” Zhu Ping’an nodded after hearing Zhang Siwei’s explanation. So it was written by Yan Song. No wonder. Yan Song was one of the three most infamous calligrapher-traitors in Chinese history. There’s even an anecdote about his calligraphy in later generations: it’s said that the plaque

bearing the characters “Hall of Impartiality” in the main hall of the Beijing Examination Compound was written by Yan Song. During the Qing Dynasty, when Emperor Qianlong learned of this, he wanted to replace it. He ordered all the skilled calligraphers at court—and even wrote it himself several times, being fond of calligraphy. However, he found that none of the calligraphy, including his own, could surpass Yan Song’s. In the end, he had to give up and let the traitor’s calligraphy remain hanging.

This shows that Yan Song’s calligraphy was truly masterful. Unfortunately, due to his despicable character, his work was despised and rejected.

From Zhang Siwei and Wang Shizhen’s reactions, it was clear they held no fondness for Yan Song. Likewise, they could tell from Zhu Ping’an’s expression that he, too, didn’t think highly of him.

The three exchanged a smile and shook their heads, then continued walking south along Caishi Street.

After walking a short distance, they reached a small alley connected to Caishi Street, where a crowd of mostly men had gathered. They stood in clusters of two or three around an open space, pointing and whispering to one another.

What’s going on?

The three of them, curious, walked up to see what had happened.

Seeing that the three of them were dressed well—clearly either wealthy or noble—the crowd made way for them, opening a small path so they could move forward.

When they reached the front, they saw the truth behind the commotion:

In the center of the open space knelt a young girl in plain clothes. She faced the crowd, a single stalk of straw stuck in her long hair, which partly veiled her face. The visible half of her face had light makeup and faint traces of tears.

In this era, having straw in one's hair was no cute gesture. The "straw" symbolized worthlessness—as in, "this thing is worthless to me now." Sticking a straw tag on something meant it was to be sold. In various periods of Chinese history, this custom was used for everything from everyday objects to, tragically, children being sold by impoverished families due to hunger and cold.

So the young girl with straw in her hair was effectively being sold.

Scenes like this were often described in novels—but Zhu Ping'an hadn't expected to witness one in real life. He hoped it wouldn't turn into some melodramatic farce, and shook his head slightly.