

Rise 303

Chapter 303: Grading the Exam Papers

The examination had concluded, and the grading work was in full swing. In just a few days, the results would be announced. Time was pressing, and all the examiners had thrown themselves into the marking work, forsaking sleep and food.

“Lock the examination compound to prevent questions from leaking, conduct searches to prevent smuggled materials; supervise to prevent peeking, anonymize and transcribe to prevent manipulation; separate inner and outer curtains to prevent collusion, and enforce examiner recusal to prevent favoritism.”

Under the leadership of Xu Jie, this year’s palace examination strictly followed these regulations, and even adopted additional measures. The anti-cheating mechanisms were so thorough that they had virtually exhausted every possible method.

However, no matter how precise a firewall is, there will always be loopholes.

On the first day of the palace exam, our deputy chief examiner, Comrade Yan Maoqing, during a routine inspection, finally spotted that sharp-eyed young comrade who had been introduced at Grand Secretary Yan’s residence by Comrade Yan Shifan. This youth was no ordinary person—his father, Ouyang Bijin, was close to Grand Secretary Yan, who even intended to marry off his second daughter to this young Ouyang.

After the introduction, Comrade Yan Shifan pointed at young Ouyang and casually asked Yan Maoqing: “Does he have the air of a top scholar?”

Naturally, Comrade Yan Maoqing understood the implication. If young Ouyang was to be the top scholar (zhuangyuan), he first had to pass the exam—and even be the top scorer of the provincial exam (huiyuan).

Moreover, Comrade Yan Maoqing remembered young Ouyang especially well because he once casually complained that the chamber pots at home were inconvenient to use. By evening, a full set of pure gold chamber pots was delivered to his residence—seven or eight of them, made of gold and platinum.

So when Deputy Examiner Yan Maoqing spotted young Ouyang, young Ouyang certainly noticed him too—after all, he had been staring the whole time.

“You examinee! Instead of answering questions properly, what are you looking at?” A petty official accompanying Yan Maoqing during the inspection softly rebuked young Ouyang, who had been staring intently.

Our Comrade Yan Maoqing gently gestured to stop the petty official, waved his hand casually, and calmly said, “Yu xiuzai, yu xiuzai,” repeating the phrase several times before leading the inspection team onward.

“Yu xiuzai” means something akin to “let it go” or “never mind.” By saying this, Comrade Yan Maoqing signaled that it wasn’t worth making a fuss. In the eyes of the entourage, it showed his tolerance—letting things slide, not giving the examinee a hard time, making a big matter small, and a small matter nothing at all.

After the group moved on, our young Ouyang beamed with delight. He had just seen the subtle hand gesture hidden in Yan Maoqing’s wave. “Yu xiuzai, yu xiuzai,” repeated several times—it couldn’t be clearer.

Thus, when answering his exam, young Ouyang repeatedly used the words “yu xiuzai” as an interjection.

From that moment on, the carefully designed firewall of Xu Jie’s palace exam showed its first internal crack.

The grading continued at a frantic pace. The assistant examiners in charge of recommending good papers were reading the red-marked scrolls with such intensity that they were forsaking rest and food. The papers, written in black characters on red grid paper, blurred their eyes with color; time was short, and the workload was heavy. Moreover, Chief Examiner Xu Jie was a strict supervisor, making things even more exhausting for the examiners.

One examiner, who was near his limits from the toil, suddenly brightened while reviewing a paper. Not because the content was particularly brilliant, but because the paper contained multiple instances of the interjection “yu xiuzai.”

The examiner was secretly pleased, though his face remained calm. He marked and recommended the paper to the two chief examiners.

When Yan Maoqing saw the paper with several “yu xiuzai” in it, his long-held tension finally eased. At last, he could give Grand Secretary Yan a satisfactory explanation.

“Heh heh, Lord Xu, after several days of grading, why not take a short break?” Yan Maoqing smiled and greeted Xu Jie, seated across from him.

“Very well.”

Xu Jie put down the scroll in his hand and stretched slightly. After all, he was nearly fifty years old. He couldn't deny aging any longer. After these past few days of grading, his back ached, and no part of his body felt comfortable.

“Has Lord Xu come across a worthy huiyuan composition yet?” Yan Maoqing massaged his arm and asked conversationally.

“There are a few well-written ones, but nothing worthy of the huiyuan title. Why? Has Lord Yan found one?” Xu Jie responded like a kindly elder, smiling.

Yan Maoqing had been waiting for this question.

“You flatter me, Lord Xu. I just read a paper that truly caught my eye. I haven't seen such a magnificent essay in years.” With a smile, Yan Maoqing stood and handed the paper—the one with several “yu xiuzai”—to Xu Jie with both hands.

“Please take a look, Lord Xu.”

Xu Jie accepted the paper and read it quietly while seated. The writing was decent, the argument substantial. As he read, he noticed the paper's hidden signal—several prominent and unnecessary uses of “yu xiuzai.”

“In all these years, this is the first time I've seen such a fine piece,” Yan Maoqing said, praising the paper enthusiastically as Xu Jie read it.

Xu Jie said nothing. He patiently finished the paper, counted the instances of “yu xiuzai,” and then turned his gaze to Yan Maoqing, staring at him for a long while.

“What do you think of this paper, Lord Xu?” Yan Maoqing knew what Xu Jie's gaze implied, but he smiled and asked anyway, “Before we entered the Examination Hall, Lord Yan reminded me repeatedly to conduct my duties impartially and assist you in overseeing this exam. He said all things should follow your lead.”

Yan Maoqing believed Xu Jie was a clever man who would surely grasp the meaning of his words.

Had it been before, Xu Jie would have unhesitatingly rejected the paper and perhaps even launched an investigation into cheating. However, after the recent Western Garden incident, Xu Jie had realized that even as Minister, he couldn't overpower even a pinkie of Yan Song. Letting things slide for now—so what? Even the proud King Fuchai of Wu met a tragic end.

“This paper is excellent.”

After a brief moment of thought, Xu Jie's calm voice came through.

He placed the paper on the table without changing his expression, picked up a brush, and wrote a large "Pass" character on it.

"Shall we then select it as the provisional huiyuan?" Yan Maoqing asked again.

"No rush. There's still time. Over half the papers remain ungraded. No need to be hasty." Xu Jie responded in an indifferent tone.