

## Rise 304

### Chapter 304: Even the Examiners Go Crazy

Xu Jie's calm and measured reply was entirely within Yan Maoqing's expectations. If Xu Jie had readily agreed to designate the exam paper as the top candidate (Cao Yuan), Yan Maoqing would have found it strange.

Since Xu Jie had been promoted to Minister and received several summons to the Western Garden by His Majesty, he had become a bit restless. Not only did he harbor ambitions of entering the Grand Secretariat, but he even dared to subtly challenge the authority of Grand Chancellor Yan.

And who was Grand Chancellor Yan? Could a mere Minister like Xu Jie challenge him? Think back to Xu Jie's mentor, Xia Yan, the former Grand Chancellor. What an exceptional and powerful figure he was—yet even he was no match for Grand Chancellor Yan. So how could someone like Xu Jie, who didn't even have a strong mentor, stand a chance?

Not long ago, Grand Chancellor Yan merely sneezed lightly, and Xu Jie suffered a major setback in front of the emperor.

And rightly so. But a single fall wouldn't turn a snarling dog into a docile cat. So while it was reasonable for Xu Jie to turn a blind eye and give this paper a middle rating, it was unrealistic to expect him to directly name it the top scorer.

However, Yan Maoqing believed—if he could get Xu Jie to rate this paper well, he could also get him to mark it as the top candidate. He intended to handle this matter perfectly so that he could use it as a stepping stone before Grand Chancellor Yan.

He'd heard that the salt administrations in Liangzhe, Lianghuai, Changlu, and Hedong had run into serious problems, and the Ministry of Revenue was at its wits' end. This was a great opportunity. Since ancient times, salt and iron had been highly profitable trades—no family, no person, could do without salt. Yan had long coveted this lucrative post, only lacking the right opportunity. Now, this was heaven-sent. He believed that if he handled this matter well and warmed Grand Chancellor Yan's heart, it wouldn't be long before he'd be appointed to the salt administration. And if he could become Chief Overseer of all four salt regions—Liangzhe, Lianghuai, Changlu, and Hedong—then all the profits of the realm would lie in his hands.

“Minister Xu speaks the truth. It was simply that this subordinate saw such a brilliant piece and was momentarily overcome with excitement. Let us resume grading... resume grading...”

With a confident smile, Yan Maoqing cupped his hands to Xu Jie, then returned to his grading.

“Lord Yan truly has great energy...”

Xu Jie chuckled as he looked at Yan Maoqing, speaking with veiled meaning before turning back to his own work.

Inside the Hall of Impartial Justice, the atmosphere during grading was harmonious.

After several days and nights of relentless work, one of the co-examiners was utterly exhausted. All he saw were red annotations from the cinnabar pen, and his mind had grown cloudy. The essay currently in his hand was written so poorly that it made him feel mentally and physically drained. He couldn't understand how someone of this caliber had qualified to take the exam.

Too poor. Fail. Not selected. Not recommended.

“I’ll review one more paper, then take a break. A cup of tea... a short rest...”

He comforted himself this way, rubbed his tired eyes, and picked up the next red-sealed exam paper.

Opening it, the examiner, fighting off fatigue, squinted and let his gaze fall on the first passage.

Hmm. It was the first essay from the initial round of questions. The prompt was one he knew by heart:

“There was a man named Feng Fu in Jin. Feng Fu rolled up his sleeves and got down from his carriage.”

No issues so far. The examiner forced himself to stay focused and continued reading.

“At first, the people of Jin changed their ways to follow virtue; in the end, they merely followed others and lost themselves.”

Just from this opening line, the exhausted examiner felt as if he had just drunk a fine glass of grape wine. A refreshing stream seemed to pour into his mind through his eyes, a fragrant sweetness exploded in his brain, and his exhaustion was immediately lifted.

What a brilliant opening—it perfectly encapsulated Mencius' original message and set the stage for the essay.

Having read this much, the examiner felt torn. On one hand, he desperately wanted to continue reading to see how such a strong start would develop. On the other hand, he feared the rest of the essay might ruin the brilliant opening—like attaching a dog's tail to a dragon's head.

Still, no matter how conflicted he felt, he had to continue. After all, he was an examiner.

“What matters most in correcting one's ways is consistency. Feng Fu had already become a virtuous man, yet he still fought tigers—how could he not know to stop? Mencius used this as a metaphor, indeed!”

As he read this continuation, all doubts vanished. It was superb. Absolutely superb.

The examiner couldn't help but mutter to himself, stroking his chin and softly saying, “Excellent, excellent.”

Though his voice was low, those nearby still heard him.

Two other nearby examiners looked up briefly, seeing that he was deeply absorbed in his work. Since he wasn't being disruptive, they merely smiled kindly and returned to their own grading.

The more the examiner read, the wider his eyes became, and he barely dared to breathe. If the opening was like sipping fine wine, then the rest of the essay made him feel as if he were swimming in a sea of wine and delicacies.

The examinee had broken from convention—rather than relying on repetitive parallel prose, they employed narration, description, and argumentation in perfect sequence. The plot was tightly organized, the scenes vivid, and the language vibrant and fluent.

The depiction of the fierce, cornered tiger and the panicked, desperate crowd was masterful.

“At that moment, man and beast clashed with great urgency; and their plea for help from the strong was truly desperate.”

The words “urgency” and “desperation” were a stroke of genius—like the touch of a brush bringing a dragon to life, leaping from the ice to the heavens.

And then what did Feng Fu do? He “rolled up his sleeves and got down from his carriage”, baring his arms, jumping down, and once again wrestling the tiger.

The conclusion circled back to the theme—analyzing the changes in Feng Fu’s behavior and connecting them to the people’s request for Mencius to persuade the King of Qi to open the granaries and aid the famine-stricken.

The essay flowed without flaw, written in one sitting, perfect and complete.

Reading it through, the examiner felt drunk on brilliance, flushed red, blood surging with excitement. He couldn’t help but take a deep breath, slam his hand on the desk, leap to his feet, and shout:

“Excellent!”

This time, it wasn’t a mutter—it was a full shout that shook the entire Hall of Impartial Justice. The two examiners near him nearly wet themselves from the shock; one even dropped his writing brush.

Everyone stared in stunned silence, frozen by the sudden outburst.

Damn—muttering to yourself was one thing, but shouting like that? Grading is hard, yes, but this is too much! Outrageous!

Several fellow examiners, unable to tolerate it, stood up, rolled up their sleeves, and were about to unleash a storm of verbal rebuke.

But just as they stood, they saw the shouting examiner grab the paper and rush toward the chief examiners.

“I strongly recommend this paper!”

Strongly recommend! This was the first such case in the entire exam.

When an examiner believed a paper was exceptional, they would submit it along with written reasons to the clerks, who would pass it to the chief and deputy examiners. Truly outstanding ones were marked as “strongly recommended.”

Everyone stared at him in astonishment, watching him charge ahead like a madman.

But after just two steps, he was stopped by a Jinyiwei officer stationed in the hall as a monitor. Though examiners were officials, Jinyiwei still enforced decorum with courtesy:

“Please remain quiet, my lord. This is the Hall of Impartial Justice.”

With a forced smile, the officer gently escorted him back to his seat. There were strict rules in the hall—while internal grading was not interfered with, disruptive behavior was forbidden.

“Silence! Write the recommendation clearly and hand it to the clerk. Any more disruptions will be severely punished.”

Xu Jie waved his hand to restore order and glanced at the emotional examiner, instructing him to follow protocol.

Still, Xu Jie was curious—what kind of essay could move such a normally composed examiner to such extremes? He would certainly have to read it himself.

Yan Maoqing, too, kept his eyes fixed on the examiner with great curiosity.