

## Rise 31

### Chapter 31: A Farmer's Discussion on Fish

"Emperors value heroes; literature teaches children. All things are of lower rank, only reading is exalted."

Zhu Ping'an returned to the classroom outside the window with a brush and a black wooden board when the old scholar Sun was teaching the children to recite this poem encouraging learning. It was evident that ancient private school education had a lot of freedom, although this freedom referred to the teachers' freedom, allowing them to teach according to their wishes, unlike modern education, which is still constrained by syllabi.

The teacher aimed to instill the importance of studying in the children, so they could take pride in reading and focus on their studies.

The children below did not understand the meaning of the poem but bobbed their heads and followed the teacher, reciting it word by word.

Zhu Ping'an had long memorized this poem and understood the meaning of "all things are of lower rank, only reading is exalted" better than these children. He had the advantage of a few hundred years of experience in ancient times, but it wasn't as great as one might think. A college student might have no problem taking an elementary school exam, but would they still be confident if asked to take the college entrance exam after graduation? It was the same in ancient times; the imperial examination was much more challenging than modern college entrance or graduate entrance exams. Although he had seen two occurrences of fortune, it didn't really help him or bring any changes to his life, and he couldn't even independently view his fortune.

Thinking of this, Zhu Ping'an placed the black wooden board on a stone again, poured water from the bamboo tube into the groove, and prepared to practice calligraphy. In the path of the imperial examination, calligraphy was crucial. It was the first impression for the examiners, so diligent practice was essential.

While the old scholar Sun was leading the students in reciting the poem encouraging learning, he inadvertently spotted that chubby mischievous child outside the classroom playing with the game of watering the stones again. Truly naughty! Sigh, a child of this age in the county should have started their studies already; it was truly a step behind, a step behind.

The teacher sighed, feeling increasingly that he needed to discipline these children in the school strictly. He led the children in reading the poem over and over again.

Outside the classroom, Zhu Ping'an dipped his brush in water and began practicing the traditional characters he had recently learned on the black wooden board. With tireless effort, he watched as his calligraphy gradually took shape from the initial wobbly strokes, and his enthusiasm for practicing grew even stronger.

As the day drew to a close, Zhu Ping'an saw that it was getting late, and the teacher was about to assign homework to the children. He packed his things, walked through the bamboo forest, took hold of the old yellow cow, and walked down the slope.

In recent days, the old yellow cow had been taken out to graze by Zhu Ping'an. Its coat was shiny and well-groomed, and it seemed to have forgiven Zhu Ping'an for trimming its tail, affectionately licking Zhu Ping'an's small hand with its tongue.

Reaching the foot of the slope, Zhu Ping'an released the old yellow cow and walked slowly to the riverbank where he caught fish.

The creek was shallow, with gentle ripples, and the aquatic plants and small fish beneath the water were clearly visible. Zhu Ping'an stepped barefoot into the creek, where the water just reached his calves, feeling pleasantly warm and cool. He walked a few steps to the spot where he had placed the fish basket in the morning, reached out, and lifted it. As soon as he lifted the basket, he heard a fierce splashing sound from within, the noise of fish thrashing against the basket. The splashes of water even splattered onto Zhu Ping'an's face.

Inside the basket was a yellow catfish, nearly as thick as his wrist, thrashing angrily, and there were also five or six white carp, each about seven or eight centimeters long, jumping around in the basket. However, they were helpless due to the small exit and the bamboo barbs.

Don't be angry; you will make a significant contribution to enriching our dining table.

Seeing you all so excited to dance, let's make some braised fish. Braised crucian carp is the tastiest.

However, watching these fish being caught because they were greedy for the bait in the basket, I can't help but think that the reason I've been repeatedly teased by that cunning little loli is the same; it's all because of greed. But then again, thinking about the fragrant chicken legs and the crispy, tender snacks, it seems that being teased a few times isn't so bad after all.

With the fish basket in hand, I put on my shoes, grabbed the brush and black wooden board, and climbed onto the cow's back to head home.

When I got home, dinner was being prepared. Seeing Zhu Ping'an carrying the fish basket back, grandmother rarely praised him.

"Oh my, this catfish is really big! Enough for a good pot of fish soup." My First Aunt came out of the house to take a look, smiling, "Yes, Zhi'er, you did great. I said letting Zhi'er tend to the cows would be good."

After a while, grandmother placed the fish into a basin, added a couple of drops of oil, saying it was to let the fish expel the mud and sand, then led several daughters-in-law to busy themselves with dinner.

Zhu Ping'an stood in front of the basin, thinking, just as he saw his uncle coming out of the room, probably having heard there was fish and looking forward to a meat dish for dinner. This made his uncle, who had been eating vegetarian for several days, very pleased.

Zhu Ping'an's eyes darted around, and he quickly ran up to pull on his uncle's sleeve, dragging him to the basin.

"Uncle, look how well the little fish are swimming in the basin! They look so happy!" He spoke entirely like a little child.

His uncle nodded dismissively.

"But grandmother said you like eating braised fish soup, and she's going to cook them soon!"

Seeing his little nephew about to cry and noticing his sister-in-law, Chen, looking over, who was quite feisty, he thought he couldn't let her think that he made Zhi'er cry, or else there would be trouble.

"Alright, alright, don't be sad. Uncle won't eat the braised fish soup."

So, his uncle just said this to placate him, thinking, kids' emotions are fleeting. If he can calm him down now, his mother will still cook the fish, and once dinner is ready, maybe he'll forget about it. Even if he remembers, who can say anything then?

"Really?" Zhu Ping'an suddenly looked up and ran into the kitchen, shouting, "Grandmother, grandmother! Uncle isn't eating braised fish soup anymore. I caught the fish, and I want braised fish!"

Meanwhile, his uncle, who was outside trying to appease his little nephew, was left in disarray.

However, Zhu Ping'an still overlooked the extent of his grandmother's favoritism. Although his uncle had just said he wouldn't eat the soup, his grandmother still made the fish soup... Fortunately, it was only the catfish being stewed; the other six small silver carp were braised, which somewhat balanced Zhu Ping'an's feelings.

Dinner was quite speechless. All the fish were caught by himself, even the braised fish he had to fight for, but in the end, his grandmother only gave him a bowl of catfish soup with just one piece of catfish meat.

Of the six braised silver carp, one was given to grandfather, two to his uncle, saying his uncle worked hard studying, and similarly, one was given to Zhu Pingjun. Zhu Ping'an felt speechless; Jun was often scolded by the teacher in the school for sleeping, and he wasn't the one who worked hard, I was the one tending to the cows! The remaining two fish were given to his fourth uncle, who hadn't fully recovered from his illness. Uh, I forgot to mention, today the family was clearing the ditches, and his fourth uncle got sick again, saying it was his hemorrhoids acting up. Can you believe it? The catfish is considered a harmful food, yet grandmother gave him a bowl of catfish soup with big chunks of fish, and he ate it more deliciously than anyone else, with no issues whatsoever.

The other half was split between his third uncle and Zhu Shouyi, with Zhu Shouyi giving his half to Zhu Ping'an. Zhu Ping'an nibbled on his half of the silver carp, watching Zhu Pingjun happily devour two whole silver carp, gaining a renewed understanding of his grandmother's favoritism.

Next time, I'll roast two fish by the river first before bringing back the rest, so I won't end up bringing back fish only to find I can't eat any.