

Rise 312

Chapter 312: Examination Ranking

The sun sets and rises, time flows on; passionately embracing the years, ink splashes with orchid fragrance.

Between the brush holders where Zhu Ping'an splashed ink and practiced calligraphy, time slipped away silently like sand through fingers. In the blink of an eye, the birthday of the old madam of the Marquis of Linhuai's residence was approaching. The residence was festively decorated, filled with joy, and everyone was preparing for the old madam's birthday the next day.

Zhu Ping'an had also prepared a birthday gift for the old madam—a calligraphy and painting scroll written by himself. The paper was a fine-grade chupi paper that he had bought outside: white and smooth like a mirror, its fibers finely ground and tightly woven, as exquisite as silk. This kind of paper absorbs ink evenly, and works written on it can be admired for a lifetime.

When creating the calligraphy scroll, Zhu Ping'an gave it considerable thought.

In aristocratic families like this one, whenever there's an elder's birthday, people usually present congratulatory poems or couplets. Most of these birthday blessings had become clichés, as one poet remarked on the difficulty: "Nothing is harder than birthday blessings. If you speak only of wealth, it becomes vulgar; of fame and titles, it sounds flattering; of immortality, it turns absurd and far-fetched." Looking at most birthday poems and couplets, they nearly all say something like "May your fortune be as vast as the East Sea, and your life as long as the Southern Mountain"—words so common they're practically worn out.

After pondering for a moment, Zhu Ping'an dipped his brush in thick ink and wrote a piece of calligraphy on the fine chupi paper, with sweeping strokes:

"Say no more, for she is indeed a living Guanyin Bodhisattva.

Though this year marks sixty in age, anyone can see—just sixteen in beauty.

Do not light candles for the star of longevity,

Do not offer incense to the divine tortoise or ancient crane.

Just gently move the brush,

Add a stroke to the character for 'ten'—and it becomes 'a thousand.'"

Adding a single stroke to the character "ten" (十) turns it into "a thousand" (千); such a clever play on characters was far better than the tired "East Sea and Southern Mountain" blessings.

Of course, this birthday poem was not Zhu Ping'an's original work. It was adapted from a poem by Xin Qiji, written humorously and joyfully as a blessing for one of his relatives' 80th birthday. Zhu Ping'an modified "eighty" to "sixty" to better suit the old madam's age.

Aside from this scroll, Li Shu also had the little maid nicknamed Baozi send over a jade sculpture of Magu presenting birthday blessings, for Zhu Ping'an to present as a gift. Li Shu had thought things through carefully, fearing that if Zhu Ping'an's gift was too modest, the shallow-minded members of the marquis' household might look down on him.

Zhu Ping'an tidied everything up, adjusted the oil lamp, and sat down at his desk, fully engrossed in his reading.

By this time, night had fallen deeply, and the world was fast asleep. Except for the gentle breeze and the occasional bark of a dog, the once-bustling marquis' residence was now silent.

The eldest madam of the marquis' household was in the old madam's room, discussing the arrangements for tomorrow's birthday celebration. The old madam was quite pleased with the eldest madam's preparations—primarily because the shops under the household had been raking in profits over the past few days, with business booming.

In order to expand profits, the old madam had agreed to the eldest madam's plan to invest all available household funds. Though the investment was large, judging by recent earnings, the profits would multiply several times over.

The old madam felt younger by several years, her mood indescribably good—almost as happy as the time she drove that fox spirit from the third branch out of the household.

The eldest madam was even more delighted. While the shops officially reported substantial earnings, the actual income was even greater—most of it secretly going into the first branch's coffers. Considering all the contributions her branch had made to the household, it seemed only natural that they should receive more. Now, with the old madam's approval, she had invested all the available household funds. The profits would surely multiply, and with that, her branch would gain a significant income stream. No longer would they have to rely on the third branch for household subsidies. With money, they could also pull strings to elevate her husband's position.

In high spirits, everything seemed perfect. The eldest madam attentively cared for the old madam, who lovingly urged her to return and rest early.

In short, the relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law was as harmonious as fish in water.

While the Linhuai Marquis' residence lay silent under the deep ink of night, far to the southeast of the capital city, the Shuntian Examination Hall was brightly lit—reviewing of exam papers had reached the final stage: ranking the results of the imperial examination.

Inside the Gong Hall, the co-examiners were working overtime. At this moment, all the exam papers had been reviewed and recommended. Chief examiners Xu Jie and Yan Maoqing had also worked tirelessly to review every paper recommended by the co-examiners. They even "dug up" two overlooked masterpieces from the unselected pile, and finally settled on the 400 successful candidates for this year's special examination.

The 400 exam papers selected for admission were laid out one by one across several long tables. Each paper featured writing in five different ink colors. This was because the examiners used color-coded pens with strict regulations: Supervising officials and proctors used purple ink; co-examiners and curtain-handling officials used blue; transcription clerks used red; comparative readers used yellow; chief and deputy examiners used

black. Collectively, this system was known as the “five-color pens,” hence the 400 successful papers bore writing in five ink colors.

Ranking these 400 papers was no small task either.

According to tradition, this part often sparked fierce debate among the examiners, because the ranking of the imperial exam was of critical importance.

Why so important? Because the rankings from this exam would almost directly determine the results of the upcoming palace examination. The Emperor would personally write the questions for the palace exam and finalize the new list of successful candidates. However, unless there were exceptional circumstances, the final rankings would not differ much from the current exam rankings. The Emperor usually made only slight adjustments based on personal preference. Typically, the top scorer of this exam would also be awarded the title of Zhuangyuan (First Place Scholar) in the palace examination. The top three palace exam results—Zhuangyuan, Bangyan (Second Place), and Tanhua (Third Place)—would almost always be chosen from the current top ten.

Thus, the imperial exam ranking was the final step in paper reviewing, as well as a key quality control measure.

Because of this, the examiners—chief or co—would argue passionately to justify their opinions and push for their preferred rankings.

The 400 selected papers were laid out in sequence. About thirty of them were placed separately—these had been handpicked by Chief Examiner Xu Jie during the reviews as the best of the best. These thirty were the focus of the ranking deliberations.

Under the direction of Xu Jie and Yan Maoqing, the ranking of the 400 papers proceeded methodically. The co-examiners each expressed their views and argued their cases. Though disputes were constant, the work proceeded in an orderly fashion.

Apart from the thirty exceptional papers, the rankings for the remaining 370-plus papers were finalized amidst a flurry of debate and discussion.

Next, rankings were assigned to twenty of the thirty exceptional papers, leaving ten to be sorted into the top ten. However, within that final top ten, the examiners could not reach consensus on the exact order: who should be first, who should be second, who should be third... The disagreements were sharp, and debate raged on. Some examiners had already drunk two cups of tea yet still felt parched—but their tongues wouldn't stop wagging...