

## Rise 81

### Chapter 81: The Jokester in the Examination Hall

The first round of the county examination is called the "main session." The exam questions for this session include two essays on the Four Books, one essay on the meaning of the Five Classics, and one five-character, six-rhyme trial poem. These questions are relatively simple and basic, much easier than the provincial and academy exams.

When Zhu Ping'an saw the questions on the board, a smile appeared at the corner of his mouth. What a coincidence—he had already attempted to break down the topics of these three essays from the Four Books and Five Classics.

The first question is from the "Analects," the chapter Wei Zheng: "To govern by virtue is like the North Star: it stays in its place, and the multitude of stars pay homage to it."

The second question is from the "Doctrine of the Mean": "The way of the gentleman is like ascending a height."

The third question is from the "Book of Documents": "Silent compliance with common practices leads to errors as immense as heaven."

Since Zhu Ping'an had previously worked on these topics, he could now write on them with ease. If he were to start writing, it wouldn't take much time, so he didn't feel any urgency. Zhu Ping'an neatly copied these three questions onto his draft paper in small regular script and then began looking at the last question of this session's exam.

The final question was a trial poem based on the line: "In the dense summer trees, orioles sing."

In the imperial examinations, trial poems are often like this: the topics are mostly taken from a single line of poetry from a previous dynasty or a historical reference, and then you compose a poem based on that line.

Zhu Ping'an also copied this line of poetry onto his draft paper, adding the phrase "Composed on" at the beginning, which is the required format for trial poems in the imperial exams.

This question was also very simple. The line comes from Wang Wei's poem "Written After Rain at Wangchuan Villa". The entire poem is as follows: "In the empty forest after rain, smoke rises slowly. I cook amaranth and millet to bring to the east field. White egrets fly over the water-filled fields, and in the dense summer trees, orioles sing. In the mountains, I observe the morning hibiscus in silence. In the pine grove, I fast and pick dewy mallow. The old men in the countryside no longer argue for a seat; why do the sea gulls still doubt us?"

The trial poem doesn't require any deep thoughts. As long as the format meets the requirements, the key is to sing praises. The founding emperor of the Ming Dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang, had already abolished poetry composition in the provincial and capital examinations, leaving trial poems only in the county exams of the "tongshi" (students exam), and they almost have no impact on the final results. The main focus of the students exam is still the eight-legged essays.

After reviewing all the exam questions, Zhu Ping'an felt confident. He placed his draft paper and test materials on one side of the desk, weighing them down with a paperweight to prevent the northern wind from blowing them away. Then he took out some food from his basket and began eating with great relish.

The cooked braised meat had already been sliced into pieces by the examiners, so Zhu Ping'an took out a pair of chopsticks and began eating slowly, savoring every bite.

He had woken up very early and hadn't eaten breakfast yet, and since the exam was going to last the entire day, he figured it wasn't too late to start writing after breakfast.

Zhu Ping'an thought it was perfectly normal to have breakfast, but the other examinees didn't see it that way. Especially the scholars and students staying at the same inn as Zhu Ping'an, who recognized this young man eating heartily at the exam table as the same infamous boy staying in the woodshed, the one bitten by a snake and who had become a laughingstock after hearing the birds' cries. They shook their heads slightly and looked at Zhu Ping'an with sympathy, their thoughts more or less as follows:

"This fool has already given up."

"As expected, this simpleton came to the exam just to eat."

"He's just here to make up the numbers. His job was done as soon as he entered the exam hall."

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Most people had already mentally concluded that Zhu Ping'an would fail the exam miserably.

After finishing the braised meat, Zhu Ping'an ate some preserved fruits and finally drank a cup of water he had brought with him. He let out a satisfied burp, earning countless disdainful looks from those around him. In their minds, they labeled him as a glutton and a fool.

Paying no attention to the gazes around him, Zhu Ping'an, now full and content, calmly picked up a piece of draft paper and began drafting his answers...

"This glutton still knows how to put on a show. After finishing his food and wiping his mouth, he acts all serious, scribbling and writing, but surely he's just writing nonsense. Ah, what a pity. How could someone like me, who has studied hard for ten years, be in the same examination hall as such a fool and glutton? Even if I pass with flying colors, it would still be a regret."

"I'm ashamed to share the same exam hall with him."

This was the collective thought of the surrounding examinees, who once again ridiculed and despised Zhu Ping'an in their hearts.

As time passed slowly, and the sun reached its zenith, people noticed that the gluttonous fool was eating again. This time, after finishing his meal, he didn't scribble anything down. Instead, he pulled out a rabbit-fur blanket, draped it over himself, and lay down on the table to take a nap.

"A rotten piece of wood cannot be carved, and a wall made of dung cannot be plastered." For Zhu Ping'an's behavior of sleeping at the table, everyone silently applied Confucius' original words about his disciple Zai Yu, who had once slept during the day.

At this point, the examinees thought that this guy must have been sent by heaven to amuse them. Eating, drinking, and sleeping—he could have done all this at home in comfort. Why bother coming to the exam hall to suffer?

Of course, there were also a few kind-hearted scholars, who had completed two questions, who felt deep sympathy for Zhu Ping'an's apparent act of giving up. "Such foolishness, yet he had the courage to come to the exam. His bravery is commendable, but alas, how unfortunate."

As for Zhu Ping'an, after sleeping for more than half an hour, when he sat up straight and started copying his draft onto the exam paper, the other examinees just took it as him making a show of it.

Zhu Ping'an, focused on his work, was completely unaware that he had spent the day being scorned, ridiculed, and pitied by those around him...

As the day neared its end, people began to finish their exams one after another. Guided by the exam clerks, they submitted their papers and left the hall. A little later, Zhu Ping'an also followed the majority and handed in his paper before leaving.

Those examinees who had not yet finished their papers once again looked at Zhu Ping'an with deep disdain for handing in his paper early. "He must have been too restless to sit still! Surely he didn't finish writing!"

The county exam consists of four sessions. After the first session, there is a two-day gap before the second session. For example, if the first session is held on the 9th, the second session will start on the 12th. The two days in between are for the examiners to grade the papers. The results are usually posted around noon on the 11th. Those who pass the first session will have their names listed, allowing them to participate in the second session. If you do not pass the first session, you'll be sent home.

After returning to the inn, Zhu Pingan put away his belongings, did some light washing, changed into clean clothes, and went to the hall for dinner.

In the hall, Zhu Pingan ordered two dishes, one meat and one vegetable, along with a bowl of beef soup. He also ordered two steamed buns. Just as he was about to eat, Zhu Pingan noticed that many people in the hall were pointing at him, shaking their heads, whispering, and occasionally letting out mocking laughs.

What's going on?

While Zhu Pingan was confused, his uncle came over to explain.

"Alas, Zhi'er, what can your uncle say? In this exam, you actually slept soundly in the examination hall. Your behavior has become a laughingstock. Everyone is saying that you are the modern-day Zai Yu!"

Uncle Zhu Shouren looked heartbroken.

"Modern-day Zai Yu?" It seemed like Zhu Pingan, busy eating, hadn't caught the first part of his uncle's words but only heard the term "modern-day Zai Yu." Upon hearing it, he put down his chopsticks, his eyes lighting up, and repeated the phrase.

Uncle Zhu Shouren nodded vigorously.

"Thank you for the compliment," Zhu Pingan replied with an embarrassed smile on his honest face after receiving his uncle's confirmation.

The people around who were eating, upon hearing Zhu Pingan's response, spit out their food. Damn, does this guy only know that Zai Yu was Confucius' student and think we're praising him?

"You... sigh..." Uncle shook his head and left, still heartbroken.

Zhu Pingan looked at his uncle and the expressions of the people in the hall, smiled faintly, and lowered his head to continue eating.

No wonder Uncle hasn't passed after more than twenty years of trying. No wonder so many people in this hall haven't passed either.

They read too superficially, too shortsighted. They only see that Zai Yu slept during class, but they fail to see that Zai Yu was one of the "Ten Philosophers" of Confucius, an eloquent speaker. Confucius listed Zai Yu as a language genius, ranking him even ahead of Zigong. People like Uncle haven't deeply understood Zai Yu as a person. Zai Yu was nineteen years younger than Confucius, had excellent oratory skills, and was one of the members who traveled with Confucius around the various states. During this time, he served as a diplomat, visiting states like Qi and Chu, achieving great feats. During the Tang dynasty, Zai Yu was posthumously honored as "Marquis of Qi." In the Northern Song dynasty, he was promoted to "Duke of Linzi," and in the Southern Song dynasty, he was further honored as "Duke of Qi."

Even in this dynasty, under the current Jiajing Emperor, Zai Yu was already renamed "Wise Zai Yu" in the ninth year of the Jiajing reign. Uncle and the others are still stuck with the impression of Zai Yu as a rotten wood who slept in class.