

## Rise 89

### Chapter 89: The Surprising Immortal Poetry Gathering (2)

Crab meat is delicious, but it should not be eaten in excess.

When Zhu Ping'an finished eating two crabs and was about to turn his attention to the roasted goose, everyone present stood up to welcome the newcomers.

The scholars from counties like Taihu and Wangjiang were ecstatic upon seeing the visitors. They could hardly believe that Lord Zhou Xuezheng, the head of the prefectural academy in Anqing, had come in person. Zhou Xuezheng was known for his integrity and fairness, and this promised to be quite a spectacle.

When Uncle Zhu Shouren and the others saw Zhou Xuezheng, they felt both excited and apprehensive. The county's academic head was more than just the current principal; he held a position equivalent to an education officer during the Ming Dynasty. They were excited at the thought of making a good impression on Lord Xuezheng. If they could earn his recognition and guidance, wouldn't the upcoming student examinations be as easy as reaching into a pocket? However, they were also anxious because they understood the intentions of the scholars from other counties. They were not merely looking for an opportunity; they were after Zhu Ping'an. While they might tolerate the situation, Zhu Ping'an would undoubtedly face various challenges from the scholars of other counties. If something embarrassing happened—no, it wasn't just a possibility; it was bound to happen. The only question was how embarrassing it would be. Who knows, Zhu Ping'an's poem about being bitten by a snake while hearing birds chirping might turn out to be his crowning achievement... What could they do?

Zhou Xuezheng was known for his uncompromising nature and would undoubtedly criticize Huaining County's examination. If this reached the ears of the prefect or even the education officials in South Zhili, it would be a serious problem. Not only would the residents of Huaining County be affected in this provincial exam, but the county's examinations would surely suffer as well.

Uncle Zhu Shouren and the others had begun to harbor a bit of resentment toward Zhu Ping'an.

There were many newcomers, led by Zhou Xuezheng, followed by respected figures such as Elder Li and Elder Zhao from the county. Elder Li and Elder Zhao were both esteemed juren (provincial degree holders) in the county, and their status was not inferior to that of Zhou Xuezheng. They had originally planned to drink tea together and discuss the upcoming provincial examinations. However, halfway there, they heard that the Jingxian Building would be hosting a poetry meeting. They also heard mocking remarks about a talentless youth from Huaining County who had indulged in food and drink during the examination and even taken a nap, yet managed to top the examination rankings. Then they heard about Zhu Ping'an's famous poem about being bitten by a snake and hearing birds chirping. Zhou Xuezheng became furious and nearly went directly to the prefect to report Huaining County's examination. If it weren't for Elder Li and Elder Zhao's intervention, Zhou Xuezheng would have stormed out immediately.

Once calm, Zhou Xuezheng learned that the talentless, gluttonous youth was currently at the poetry meeting. He promptly turned around with Elder Li and Elder Zhao, abandoning their original plan to drink tea and chat, and headed straight to the poetry meeting.

He was determined to expose this fraud, to rid the scene of such a useless buffoon.

After punishing him, he would report to the prefect to have this incompetent removed from the examination and urge the prefect to hold Huaining County accountable for this oversight!

Zhou Xuezheng was filled with righteous indignation, his sleeves billowing, as he ascended the building.

Behind Zhou Xuezheng and Elder Li and Elder Zhao came a number of scholars who had caught wind of the event, followed by scholars from other counties, including several who were quite well-known.

"Glad to live up to expectations."

A few scholars ascended the building and cupped their hands in greeting to those who had come to welcome them.

The other scholars from different counties beamed with joy and playfully punched the shoulders of these scholars, exclaiming, "Not only did you live up to our expectations, but this is also something we never could have dreamed of. It's perfect to the extreme!"

Everyone exchanged smiles and took their seats.

The upstairs area had been rearranged. Besides adding some elegant decorations, the tables had been rearranged as well, with the scholars sitting on one side and Zhou Xuezheng, Elder Li, Elder Zhao, and other esteemed guests sitting on the other side.

As everyone settled in, the poetry meeting at Jingxian Building officially commenced.

Delicious food and fine wine were served by elegantly dressed maids and attendants. The performances on the upper floor had also been elevated, with beauties as exquisite as jade, who both hid and revealed themselves, captivating everyone with their singing and dancing.

Because of the involvement of Zhou Xuezheng, Li Lao, Zhao Lao, and others, the purpose of the scholars from other counties was no longer just to embarrass Zhu Ping'an from Huaining; they also wanted to make a name for themselves and leave a good impression in front of Zhou Xuezheng and Li Lao, holding onto the thought of "riding the wind to soar to the sky."

Although they had come to seek justice, Zhou Xuezheng was not in a hurry, seeing the crowd of scholars gathered here. After all, those good-for-nothings were right there; they couldn't run away anyway. This was a good opportunity to see how skilled these young scholars were.

As the music played, the songstresses slowed their dance, and sheets of plain white rice paper circulated among the tables. Each person had brushes, ink, paper, and inkstones in front of them, and anyone inspired could write a poem and pass it around for everyone to see.

The beautiful and sweet-voiced songstress softly recited the works of the scholars at the poetry gathering. Li Lao and others occasionally offered their comments, and those whose works were discussed were all overjoyed, bowing in thanks, polite and courteous.

At the poetry gathering, talented individuals occasionally composed fine works and boldly asked Zhou Xuezheng, Li Lao, and Zhao Lao for feedback. Each time this happened, someone would copy the poems into several copies to share among the attendees.

Even Zhu Shouren, Zhu Ping'an's uncle, got up to compose a poem and asked everyone for feedback. Although few praised him, it made Zhu Shouren hold his head high, feeling pleased.

At this time, the most out of place was probably Zhu Ping'an. While others wrote poetry, he was eating; while others received comments, he was eating; while others cheered, he was still eating...

If there were a contest for the biggest eater, Zhu Ping'an would definitely lead everyone by a wide margin.

Zhu Ping'an's manner of eating was like a pig among cranes; even without being pointed out, Zhou Xuezheng recognized him at a glance. Such a manner of eating was a clear mark of a good-for-nothing.

A kind-hearted person helped Zhu Ping'an count what he had eaten, teasingly recording it on paper. This fellow had eaten two drunken crabs, one goose leg, a bowl of lotus seed soup, one oil-braised prawn, one piece of hibiscus dim sum... Then, amusingly, it was shared among everyone, resulting in it being more widely known than the poems created by others, almost to the point that everyone present was aware of it.

Zhou Xuezheng looked at the menu of Zhu Ping'an that had been passed to him, his brows furrowing deeply.

"Such a disgrace to culture..."

"Shameful to associate with such a person..."

People sensed the elegant meaning behind Zhou Xuezheng and others' tightly furrowed brows and began to mock him.

The atmosphere was just right; if they didn't take action now, when would they? At this moment, some of the scholars from other counties, who had long been prepared, stood up, raised a cup of wine, and fired the first shot of tonight's ambush against Huaining County, aiming at Zhu Ping'an, who was eating heartily at the next table:

"Could that be the highly talented Zhu Ping'an from Huaining County? We all have poems to share, yet you remain silent; could it be that you look down upon us?"

Zhu Ping'an, who was contemplating what to try next, was momentarily stunned by this sudden shout. However, in the eyes of others, this was a sign of guilt.

In an instant, various amused and mocking gazes, like spotlights, all focused on Zhu Ping'an.