

## I. Dynasty 206

### Chapter 206: Lu Fei's Thoughts

“What gift?”

Emperor Wenxuan's interest was piqued. Recently, Xiao Ming had sent all sorts of strange and fascinating items to Chang'an, so he was curious about this one.

“Reporting to Father Emperor, this gift is quite heavy. It wasn't brought with me but is being transported separately by merchant ships via canal. It should arrive in a couple of days, at which point I will personally deliver it to you,” Xiao Ming replied.

Emperor Wenxuan felt a warmth in his heart. “You've put thought into this. Hmph! Unlike your brothers, who do nothing but scheme all day and never spare a thought for anything else.”

He waved his hand dismissively. “In that case, go attend to your own matters. Your mother must have mentioned the Fei family to you. I spent quite some time persuading Fei Ji. You should pay them a visit while you're here. Since returning to Chang'an isn't easy for you, stay a while longer. There's also a military competition coming up—if you're interested, you might learn something from it.”

“Understood, Father Emperor. This son takes his leave.” Xiao Ming bowed and turned to depart.

Watching Xiao Ming's retreating figure, Feng Deshui smiled and said, “Your Majesty, Prince Qi has matured quite a bit. He could prove very useful now.”

Feng Deshui had served Emperor Wenxuan since childhood and was one of his most trusted confidants.

Emperor Wenxuan sighed. "I never expected Xiao Ming to change so much in just a few years. It seems I underestimated him before. This son of mine stays silent only to astonish when he speaks; remains still only to soar when he moves."

"Indeed. Now, with Prince Qi in Qingzhou and Prince Wei in Jinling, the north can keep Princes Zhao and Liang in check, while the south restrains Princes Yan and Chu. The Great Yu will be more stable this way."

Emperor Wenxuan nodded thoughtfully. "If that's the case, perhaps we should have Xiao Ming sell cannons to Prince Wei as well?"

Feng Deshui was skilled at whispering suggestions but never dared to overstep on matters of state. "Your Majesty, this old servant knows nothing of such things."

"Hmph. You don't know, or you pretend not to? If we give cannons to Prince Wei, we'll have to give them to Prince Chu as well. Otherwise, the ministers will accuse me of favoritism." The thought gave Emperor Wenxuan a headache.

Feng Deshui's eyes flickered. "Why trouble yourself over this, Your Majesty? Chang'an doesn't produce cannons. Even if you wished to distribute them, you couldn't."

"Hah! Well said." Emperor Wenxuan suddenly laughed. "In that case, I'll leave this problem to Xiao Ming. What's a nuisance to me is a chance for him to make silver. Eight thousand taels per cannon—he's got nerve! I'd wager the actual cost is only ten times that of a fire lance, no more than two or three thousand taels at most. Let him handle a few troubles for me—it's only fair."

Had Xiao Ming heard this, he would have been stunned. Emperor Wenxuan was sharper than he appeared. Historical records showed that even the famed “red cannons” of the late Ming Dynasty cost only around 2,500 taels each.

And the cannons produced by Qingzhou’s Machinery Department were priced similarly.

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By the time Xiao Ming exited the palace, Lu Fei was already waiting for him.

“Where’s Luo Xin? Why isn’t he with you?” Xiao Ming asked.

Lu Fei grinned. “General Luo took him away. Back in Chang’an, he’s like a fish returned to water. Why bother about him, Your Highness?”

Xiao Ming glanced at the sun and then at his shadow. It was still early, likely around nine in the morning. The day had only just begun.

Thinking of Consort Zhen and Emperor Wenxuan’s words, he wondered if he should visit the Fei family.

But since most of the gifts he had brought from Qingzhou hadn't arrived yet, he dismissed the idea. Showing up empty-handed would be impolite.

Just then, he noticed Lu Fei fidgeting, as if hesitating over something.

"What is it? Spit it out," Xiao Ming said bluntly.

Lu Fei chuckled sheepishly. "Your Highness, they say Chang'an is a city of flowers and pleasures, a paradise of wealth and beauty. Since we've come all this way to receive rewards, shouldn't Your Highness... show this humble general a good time? Make the journey worthwhile?"

"Just say you want to visit a brothel. Must you phrase it so delicately?" Xiao Ming rolled his eyes.

In the Great Yu Empire, polygamy was as normal as monogamy in the modern world—and legally protected.

Gender inequality aside, the most pressing issue in ancient times was the demographic imbalance. War, disease, and forced labor disproportionately killed men.

Especially in Qingzhou, where the barbarian invasion three years ago had worsened the gender disparity.

For Xiao Ming, encouraging monogamy now would be as impractical as enforcing a one-child policy. What he needed was population growth. Without a strong demographic base, a nation could never achieve a complete industrial system.

Why did only a few major powers in his past life have full industrial systems while smaller nations remained mere assembly lines? Because population determined potential. More people meant more talent—and only with talent could a nation develop comprehensively.

So, accepting this reality, Xiao Ming had come to tolerate—if not endorse—polygamy. Policies had to adapt to circumstances, not personal ideals.

“No, I can’t take you to those places,” Xiao Ming said firmly, ignoring Lu Fei’s pleading look.

Lu Fei grumbled under his breath, “Your Highness forbids the commoners to light lamps while officials set fires...”

“Use your brain!” Xiao Ming snapped. “Common brothels are off-limits. Imperial law forbids officials from visiting them—only the Court Entertainment Bureau is permitted.”

Just like polygamy, visiting pleasure houses was socially acceptable in the Great Yu.

However, officials were strictly prohibited from frequenting common brothels. The only exception was the Court Entertainment Bureau, where “official courtesans” served.

These women were usually from disgraced noble families or trained from a young age to cater to scholars and officials. Unlike ordinary prostitutes, they were skilled in poetry, music, and painting—making them the preferred companions for high-ranking banquets and social gatherings.

Lu Fei's eyes gleamed. He knew the Court Entertainment Bureau was far more refined than common brothels—after all, these women entertained the empire's elite.

“Heh, Your Highness, this general misunderstood you.” Lu Fei grinned eagerly.

“But I still can't go.” Xiao Ming hesitated before delivering the final blow.

Lu Fei's face fell. “Your Highness might as well not have mentioned it at all! Now you're just teasing me!”