

## I. Dynasty 21

### Chapter 21: The Production Team

Snowflakes, soft as cotton, continued to drift down.

Pang Yukun walked through the snow-covered courtyard, his shoulders dusted with white. When he reached Xiao Ming, he bowed and said, "Your Highness."

"No need for formalities. Come warm yourself by the coal briquette stove, Pang Longshi," Xiao Ming said.

Pang Yukun was dressed in thin garments, his face slightly purple from the cold. Unlike in modern times, where every household had padded coats and down jackets, warm clothing was a luxury in Dayu. Pang Yukun, for one, could not afford it.

Shivering from the cold, Pang Yukun replied, "Your Highness, rank must be observed. I shall stand."

Xiao Ming was already familiar with Pang Yukun's rigid nature. Over the past month, every time Xiao Ming did something unconventional, Pang Yukun would sternly reprimand him without the slightest regard for the fact that he was a prince.

Curious about this, Xiao Ming had asked Ziyuan and Lüluo about him and finally understood.

It was simple—before being assigned to Qingzhou, Pang Yukun had been a censor in Chang'an.

In other words, his official duty was to take a salary for doing nothing but scrutinizing others for mistakes. Censors were of low rank, but they had the authority to criticize anyone—from minor officials to grand ministers, even the emperor himself.

This was because of an unspoken rule passed down through dynasties—censors were not to be executed.

Any emperor who dared to kill a censor would be branded a tyrant.

With this moral safeguard, even emperors who despised censors had to tolerate them.

By sending Pang Yukun to Qingzhou, Emperor Xiao Wenxuan had killed two birds with one stone. First, he had placed someone to keep an eye on Xiao Ming and prevent him from running amok. Second, he had rid himself of a bothersome critic in Chang'an.

"Pang Longshi, there's no need to be so rigid. You and I are both here in Qingzhou, and according to Father's wishes, neither of us will be returning to Chang'an anytime soon. Given that, shouldn't we support each other?" Xiao Ming said, testing the waters.

A flicker of emotion crossed Pang Yukun's face. Like Xiao Ming, he had family in Chang'an, yet in the past five years, he had only been allowed to return once.

And his chances of being recalled were slim.

Pang Yukun was a principled man, but he was not a fool. He understood that Xiao Wenxuan had sent him to Qingzhou out of frustration.

“Your Highness is a prince, and I am Qingzhou’s chief attendant. Assisting Your Highness is my duty. As long as Your Highness governs diligently and does not act recklessly, I will have no reason to report against you to the emperor,” Pang Yukun said firmly.

Stubborn as a mule! Xiao Ming cursed inwardly. Turning Pang Yukun into a personal ally was unlikely in the short term, as the man’s heart belonged to Dayu.

Xiao Ming, on the other hand, was toiling for his fief. He had little attachment to the empire, and the emperor on the throne had nothing to do with him personally.

“Your words are fair, Pang Longshi. ‘I will not lament past mistakes, but seek to correct the future. If I have not strayed too far, I can still return to the right path.’ In the past, I was ignorant and reckless. If I have offended you, I ask for your understanding. I summoned you today, despite the snow, to discuss agricultural matters.” Xiao Ming leaned back in his chair, the warmth of the stove making his voice sound lazy.

Pang Yukun replied, “Since Your Highness issued the order to cultivate wastelands, the common people have been overjoyed. In just one month, the local governments have reported over 300,000 mu of newly registered farmland under the names of those who reclaimed it.”

“Three hundred thousand mu?”

Xiao Ming considered the numbers.

According to Qingzhou's household registry, his fief had a population of around one million households. At a minimum of three people per household, that meant 3 million people. If each household averaged five people, that made it 5 million.

He believed the 5-million figure to be more accurate. Given the high mortality rate of this era, most families had three to four children to ensure survival.

A population of 5 million was neither small nor large for the Great Yu Empire. Due to long periods of stability, the empire's population had grown significantly, likely comparable to that of the Song Dynasty.

Seeing Xiao Ming's dissatisfaction with the number, Pang Yukun added, "This cannot be helped. Wealthier families own oxen, allowing them to plow more land. Poorer households lack tools, so their progress is slower."

Xiao Ming nodded. "That is precisely why I called you here. I plan to establish production teams in villages across every county."

"Production teams?" Pang Yukun's expression turned puzzled. He had never heard of such a term. Furthermore, Xiao Ming's earlier poetic phrase, 'If I have not strayed too far, I can still return to the right path,' had surprised him.

The old Xiao Ming would never have spoken so eloquently.

Xiao Ming gestured for him to come closer. “This will take some time to explain. Pang Longshi, you might as well sit and warm yourself.”

Just then, Lülao ran in from the snowy courtyard, lifting her skirt slightly to avoid tripping. She hurried inside, grabbed a chair, and placed it beside the stove.

Flashing Xiao Ming a sweet smile, she rubbed her rosy cheeks before darting off to play with Ziyuan again.

Pang Yukun, already numb from the cold, hesitated. But upon hearing Xiao Ming say, “This will take some time,” he knew he had no choice. If he stayed standing any longer, he might actually freeze.

Awkwardly, he took a seat by the coal stove.

As if to cover up his discomfort, he said, “So this is the coal briquette stove Your Highness invented? Indeed, having one indoors during winter is excellent for warmth. I’ve heard that since winter began, the Qin family’s coal stove business has been booming.”

“Naturally. The stove is convenient and practical—especially in winter, it’s a lifesaver,” Xiao Ming said proudly. “But for every coin the Qin family earns, the Engineering Department profits as well. Right now, the Engineering Division is bringing in several hundred taels of silver per day.”

Pang Yukun was slightly astonished.

The Engineering Department, once a financial burden, had now become a major source of income. Even more surprising was that coal briquettes—rather than the stoves—were the real moneymaker, with Xiao Ming taking a 30% cut from the Wang family's sales.

"In that case, I hope Your Highness will use this silver wisely and refrain from indulging in frivolities."

Pang Yukun's old habit of scolding royalty had kicked in again. Xiao Ming was momentarily taken aback before chuckling helplessly. This man really couldn't go three sentences without a reprimand.

"Rest assured, Pang Longshi. I haven't wasted a single tael. In fact, I had Chen Wenlong purchase a batch of oxen from Prince Wei's fief, along with newly forged farming tools."

"Oh?" This time, Pang Yukun was genuinely surprised.

Xiao Ming continued, "The production teams I mentioned earlier are directly related to these supplies. Because of wealth disparities, the amount of land each household can cultivate varies greatly. Under this new system, villagers will be grouped into production teams, each with an elected team leader. The government will provide oxen and tools, and the teams will manage their use collectively. This will greatly accelerate land reclamation and future planting efforts..."