

I. Dynasty 243

Chapter 243: Cotton

Qingzhou Machinery Department.

The issuance of the Anti-Spy Decree and the widespread education of the populace on espionage had caused all the hidden forces within Qingzhou to suddenly keep their heads down.

At the same time, to further safeguard Qingzhou's technologies from theft, Xiao Ming was preparing to restructure and subdivide all technical crafts and industrial processes.

For example, in cannon production, processes such as steel refining, mold-making, casting, and ammunition manufacturing would be made completely independent. Each stage of the process would be handled by different specialists, with every craftsman only responsible for a small part of the workflow—isolated from the others.

This would drastically reduce the risk of core technologies being stolen.

On this day, Xiao Ming handed his meticulously designed production workflow over to Chen Wenlong, ordering him to reform the Machinery Department accordingly, taking preventive action before problems arose.

Holding the thick manual, Chen Wenlong felt even greater admiration for Xiao Ming. In recent weeks, books written by Prince Qi had steadily been distributed to the Machinery Department, the Military Workshop, and Bo Wen Academy. All of them were personally written, edited, and then published through the Qingzhou press.

In the Great Yu Empire, books had always been considered rare and precious, but in Qingzhou, thanks to reduced printing costs, that was no longer the case.

After passing along the production manual, Xiao Ming asked, “Is the Huang Daopo weaving machine ready for delivery?”

“Your Highness, it’s ready. I was just about to report that to you,” said Chen Wenlong as he led Xiao Ming to the rear courtyard of the Machinery Department, where one hundred looms had been neatly lined up.

These were the famous Huang Daopo looms, designed to convert single-thread weaving into multi-thread weaving. Once operational, these machines would multiply Qingzhou’s textile efficiency by more than tenfold.

Xiao Ming had been eagerly awaiting the delivery. The textile workshop run by Ziyuan and Lülao had been waiting for them. Once operational, they would no longer be limited by the slow production of sails for his wind-powered warships.

“Move them all. I need them now,” Xiao Ming said happily.

With the entire batch of looms in tow, Xiao Ming returned to the Prince’s Manor. The moment the looms arrived, Ziyuan and Lülao ran out from the inner residence, excitement shining in their eyes.

“Your Highness, is this the Huang Daopo loom you spoke of?” Ziyuan asked, nearly breathless with joy.

Both Ziyuan and Lülao were well-versed in the art of weaving. They had learned embroidery and textiles while serving by Consort Zhen's side at court. Lülao nudged Ziyuan and pointed, "Sister, this loom can spin ten threads at once—look at the shuttle mechanism!"

Ziyuan smiled brightly. "Your Highness, let's move the looms to the workshop right away. I can't wait to try them out."

Qingzhou Prefecture was vast. Xiao Ming had relocated all heavy industries like steel production outside the city, but since textile manufacturing was a light industry, the workshop was located within the city. This was part of his long-term industrial plan: heavy industry outside the city, light industry inside.

To make it convenient for Ziyuan and Lülao to oversee the operation, the workshop was located just two residential blocks away from the Prince's Manor. It was situated in a large courtyard with five long rows of tiled-brick buildings.

Once they arrived, Xiao Ming had the looms moved into the workshop.

"From now on, this textile workshop will rely on you both. The Qingzhou Army is waiting for your uniforms," Xiao Ming joked, seeing the workshop fully equipped.

Ziyuan replied confidently, "If these looms are truly as miraculous as you say, Your Highness, then this task will be no trouble at all."

"Talk is cheap—I only care about results," Xiao Ming teased with a smirk.

Ziyuan stuck out her tongue, then joined Lülao at one of the Huang Daopo looms to try operating it.

After familiarizing themselves with the machine, Ziyuan turned and asked, “Your Highness, if we’re to begin production, we need to gather the workers. But what about cotton? Do we have enough?”

“I’ll coordinate with Li Kaiyuan to secure enough cotton. You two just focus on the weaving,” Xiao Ming said, frowning slightly.

Ziyuan and Lülao nodded, then split up to begin preparations for the workshop’s operation.

Meanwhile, Xiao Ming headed for the Commandery Office and summoned Li Kaiyuan for a meeting.

“If we want to promote cotton cultivation, we must act now. If we miss the winter, it’ll be too late,” said Pang Yukun.

Once the textile workshop was up and running, it would mark the true beginning of Qingzhou’s textile industry. And once steam engines were available, Xiao Ming planned to introduce the Spinning Jenny. At that point, cotton demand would skyrocket—especially since he intended to monopolize the textile sector.

“Li Kaiyuan, you heard him. The cotton seeds are your responsibility,” Xiao Ming said.

Li Kaiyuan gave a bitter smile. “Your Highness, that’s easier said than done. Right now, most of the cotton in the Great Yu Empire is grown in the south. The main supplier is the King of Chu’s fiefdom. And lately, our merchants have encountered trouble when passing through his lands. Do you think he’ll willingly sell us cotton or seeds now?”

The King of Chu was from the maternal family of the Third Prince—long known for his ambitions. In the empire, the four most dangerous autonomous lords were: Southern Chu, Northern Zhao, Eastern Yan, and Western Liang. The other three were generally well-behaved, but King Chu was always stirring up trouble.

Pang Yukun nodded. “Li Kaiyuan is right—but doesn’t the King of Chu also have something to ask of Your Highness?”

“You’re referring to the matter of cannons?” Xiao Ming asked.

Pang Yukun nodded again. “Ever since cotton was introduced from India, it’s been primarily cultivated in the south. King Chu, in particular, has invested heavily in it. His region produces vast quantities of cloth, and the income from that alone is considerable. He’s always been wary of outsiders acquiring cotton or its seeds. And even if we do manage to acquire the seeds, it will take time to scale up production. In the short term, we’ll still need to buy cotton from Chu.”

“Makes sense,” Xiao Ming said. “The problem is, Father is still undecided about whether to grant cannons to King Wei and King Chu. If he agrees, we’ll have leverage. If not, King Chu will be the one holding the cards.”

Once again, Xiao Ming felt the familiar frustration of being constrained by internal politics.

Cotton had come to the Great Yu Empire from Tianzhu (India), and naturally, it was first cultivated in the southern regions. The north had little cotton farming.

In a way, the south's wealth was directly tied to cotton—where there's cotton, there's cloth.

Even if he could negotiate a trade—cotton for cannons—Xiao Ming still wouldn't feel safe. He needed two supply routes: one through King Chu's lands, and the other by sea to Tianzhu, to import cotton directly from its place of origin. Only then would he avoid being strangled by one supplier.

That meant he needed to get Yue Yun and the others sailing the wind-powered warships soon—to protect merchant convoys at sea.

But for now, the most practical solution was still to purchase cotton from Chu's territory. Xiao Ming said to Li Kaiyuan, "Organize a trade caravan to go south and buy cotton from the King of Chu's lands. At the same time, have the Chamber of Commerce start buying any cotton available here in Qingzhou. Though the cannon deal isn't finalized, King Chu won't dare mess with me just yet. After all, if he angers me now, I might just deny him access to artillery altogether."

"Yes, Your Highness," Li Kaiyuan replied.