

## I. Dynasty 45

### Chapter 45: The Art of Governing Subordinates

“Your Highness.”

Upon seeing Xiao Ming, Wang Shijie immediately cupped his hands in greeting, a fawning smile on his face.

Xiao Ming feigned surprise and said, “Isn’t this Brother Wang? What brings you here? What a coincidence.”

Wang Shijie thought to himself, I’ve been freezing out here in the snow for half the day just to wait for you. But instead, he said, “Your Highness, this only proves that we are fated to meet. I’ve heard that you’ve been keeping to yourself lately, declining visitors, and immersing yourself in scholarly pursuits. I never expected that just by strolling around today, I’d happen to run into Your Highness.”

In truth, Xiao Ming had been avoiding the Wang family, deliberately playing hard to get.

For the past few days, Qingzhou had been blanketed in heavy snow, and the bitter cold gave him the perfect excuse to refuse all visitors. Wang Shijie had come looking for him several times, only to be turned away each time.

Especially now, with the Qin family growing rich from Drunken Qingzhou wine, Wang Shijie could no longer sit still. He had been coming by every few days, and today, upon hearing of Xiao Ming’s whereabouts, he must have rushed over to wait for him.

“Oh, that is true,” Xiao Ming responded casually. “I was indeed engrossed in researching something new recently, and I must have inadvertently neglected Brother Wang.”

“Something new?” Wang Shijie perked up like a cat catching the scent of fish. “Might I ask what ingenious invention Your Highness has come up with this time?”

To Wang Shijie, the current Prince of Qi was no longer the useless fool of the past but someone with vast knowledge and a mind full of peculiar ideas.

This transformation baffled them, but since he was still the same prince in name, they could only accept that he had somehow acquired special skills.

Now that Xiao Ming had secluded himself for intense study once again, this further confirmed their assumptions.

“This invention is quite extraordinary,” Xiao Ming said mysteriously. “I must say, I was very pleased with how the Qin family handled Drunken Qingzhou this time.”

Wang Shijie was itching with impatience. Not only him, but his father, Wang Chengchou, was also as anxious as an ant on a hot pan. Last time, Qin Le had gotten him drunk with just a few bowls of wine, allowing Xiao Ming to dismiss their accusations of favoritism toward the Qin family.

When Wang Chengchou sobered up and tried to seek out Xiao Ming, the prince had already shut his doors to visitors.

Now, everyone in Qingzhou's aristocracy knew that the Qin family had struck it rich. A single jar of Drunken Qingzhou could fetch ten taels of silver—meaning a hundred jars could easily bring in a thousand taels.

It was rumored that Xiao Ming had even increased production, so now the Qin family was effortlessly raking in tens of thousands of taels every month.

In comparison, although coal stoves and briquettes were selling well in Chang'an, their profits couldn't compare to Drunken Qingzhou.

"Your Highness, you must not continue favoring the Qin family like this!" Wang Shijie pleaded urgently. "Qin Chuanyun harbors wolfish ambitions! You may not be aware, but before Your Highness even established the Salt Transport Commission, the Qin family was already secretly sun-drying salt in Dengzhou and engaging in illegal salt trading!"

His tone was desperate—if Xiao Ming continued to support the Qin family, within two years, they would surpass the Wang family and become the largest clan in Qingzhou.

At this, Qian Dafu glanced at Xiao Ming, his expression solemn.

The Great Yu Empire had extremely strict laws against the illegal salt trade. Even if Xiao Ming had not yet set up the Salt Transport Commission, ordinary merchants were still absolutely forbidden from selling illicit salt—otherwise, it would be a crime punishable by execution and property confiscation.

Although this was Xiao Ming's fief, if such a matter reached Chang'an, even if he wished to protect the Qin family, Xiao Wenxuan and the imperial court officials would pressure him into enforcing the law.

Clearly, Wang Shijie was using this to try and bring down the Qin family.

Narrowing his eyes, Xiao Ming asked coldly, “Do you have any proof?”

“This foolish younger brother does not, but there are indeed witnesses who saw Qin Mu transporting salt in Dengzhou,” Wang Shijie affirmed.

Xiao Ming nodded indifferently. “Very well. I am aware of this matter. I will have it investigated. However, this is a serious allegation—I cannot rely on your claims alone. You may leave now; I will handle this appropriately.”

Seeing Xiao Ming’s darkened expression, Wang Shijie was secretly pleased. He did not need to destroy the Qin family in one stroke—if he could just make Xiao Ming lose trust in them, it would be enough.

After Wang Shijie left, Qian Dafu chuckled and said, “Your Highness, the Wang father and son are quite scheming. They are clearly trying to sow discord between you and the Qin family. However, this could be to your advantage.”

Xiao Ming suddenly laughed. “I do love to see dogs biting each other. If Wang Shijie wants to use me, I can use this matter to divide Qingzhou’s noble families completely—split them into two factions, one led by the Wang family and the other by the Qin family. That way, I can play both sides against each other.”

“Your Highness is wise. The way of a ruler is nothing more than the word control. Once you grasp its essence, you can solidify your power,” Qian Dafu commented. Despite his past as a merchant, he was not without intelligence.

“Precisely. It seems I should have a chat with Qin Chuanyun,” Xiao Ming said, smiling slyly like an old fox.

That afternoon, in the main hall of the Prince of Qi’s residence—

“Your Highness, this is slander! Utter slander!” Qin Chuanyun knelt on the ground, tears streaming down his face.

In the Great Yu Empire, commoners were not required to kneel before the emperor unless they had committed a grave offense or wished to express deep gratitude. The fact that Qin Chuanyun was kneeling now showed how terrified he was at being accused of illegal salt trading.

“Rise. I haven’t said that I’m convicting you,” Xiao Ming said.

Qin Chuanyun was so frightened because illegal salt trading was a capital offense. If Xiao Ming truly wanted to confiscate his family’s property and execute them, he would have no way to resist—doing so would be tantamount to rebellion.

“Your Highness, Wang Shijie is falsely accusing me! He is the true villain here! Ever since Your Highness implemented the land cultivation decree, the Wang family has not only refused to cooperate but has also been hoarding plow oxen, raising their prices to exploit the commoners. They even hid their oxen from Your Highness, forcing you to buy from Prince Wei instead! Please, Your Highness, investigate this!” Qin Chuanyun spat with hatred, clearly seething at the Wang family.

Xiao Ming mused internally: These noble families truly are all the same—saying one thing while doing another. If the Qin family hadn't made a fortune, and if the Wang family weren't jealous, they would still be pretending to get along.

Now that he had torn apart their fragile peace, they would fight to the bitter end—perfect for his plans.

"Is this true?" Xiao Ming demanded sternly.

While the illegal salt trade accusation was about past events, the issue of hoarding plow oxen had occurred after he enacted the land cultivation decree. Though the oxen belonged to the Wang family, exploiting the crisis for profit left Xiao Ming deeply displeased.

"It is absolutely true! If Your Highness does not believe me, you may conduct a covert investigation of the Wang family's estates in various prefectures!" Qin Chuanyun insisted.

Just then, Qian Dafu arrived at the hall's entrance and announced, "Your Highness, Wang Chengchou requests an audience."

"That old fox," Qin Chuanyun growled. "He plotted against me first, and now that Your Highness has summoned me, he must know his scheme has been exposed!"

Xiao Ming was secretly delighted—having the two face each other directly was exactly what he wanted. Feigning anger, he said, "Since that's the case, you will confront each other right here."

Before long, Wang Chengchou entered the hall. Upon seeing each other, both men bristled with hostility.

Stepping forward, Wang Chengchou and Qin Chuanyun knelt side by side, both exclaiming, “Your Highness, I am guilty!”