

## I. Dynasty 88

### Chapter 88: Fan Zeng's Windfall

At the command headquarters, Xiao Ming showed Pang Yukun the information he had received the previous night. The issue of the village heads also made Pang Yukun frown.

There were many villages within the six prefectures, and the number of village heads was equally large. While not every village head was connected to the powerful families, the previous night's events suggested that at least thirty percent of them were.

"Your Highness, supporting a new village head is one solution, but what if the two village heads collude? Wouldn't that make things worse?" Pang Yukun expressed his concern.

Xiao Ming had also been pondering this issue, which was why he had come to discuss it with Pang Yukun in the morning. He said, "That's why I want to establish an organization similar to the government office in each village. This organization will be called the 'commune,' and the production teams will be under its jurisdiction. The commune, in turn, will be managed by the county magistrate. This will completely eliminate the village elders' control over the villages and strip them of their influence."

"If that's the case, then supporting another village head wouldn't be necessary, would it?" Pang Yukun was still confused.

"It's different. Supporting another village head is still necessary. During the establishment of the commune, the influence of the village heads won't disappear overnight. We need to keep these village heads focused on their rivals so they overlook the establishment of the commune," Xiao Ming explained.

“Your Highness, this is what they call ‘building the plank road openly while secretly crossing Chencang,’” Pang Yukun said with a smile.

“Exactly. The commune is where we will truly unite the people. Once the commune system matures, the production team leaders from each village will join the commune, and from among them, a commune leader will be elected. The selection criteria will no longer be based on the village elders’ influence but on which production team produces the most grain.”

“The commune... another new institution,” Pang Yukun shook his head. He had grown accustomed to Xiao Ming’s unconventional ideas.

The only thing he was certain of was that everything Xiao Ming was doing was for the sake of the fief’s stability, and that was reason enough for him to offer his unconditional support.

“In that case, Your Highness, you’ll need to explain the details to me so I can implement them effectively,” Pang Yukun said.

Xiao Ming nodded and proceeded to explain the structure and functions of the modern commune to Pang Yukun, analyzing its specific roles in detail.

Overall, the commune Xiao Ming envisioned was a powerful organizational structure. Once the commune system matured, he would be able to efficiently organize production activities, promote ideological education through the commune, and completely break free from the control that village elders and powerful families had over the common people.

As Xiao Ming spoke, he also wrote, turning the establishment of the commune into a clear, written plan. Pang Yukun would use this document to guide the establishment of communes in each village.

The next day, the newspaper printed articles about the village heads and the commune. Fan Zeng and other newspaper distributors delivered these policies to the villages.

In Zhujia Village, after Fan Zeng finished reading the day's newspaper and left, Zhu Ziyou's expression turned grim. He glared at an elderly man of similar age standing in the middle of the threshing ground, his eyes filled with resentment.

In contrast, the elderly man, known as Old Hu, wore a look of triumph.

Suddenly, someone in the crowd shouted, "Since His Highness has decreed that each village should have two village heads, I nominate Old Hu as the new village head!"

"That's right, Old Hu is the perfect candidate!"

"..."

Old Hu stood up and said with a smile, "His Highness cares for the people like his own children. He worries that one village head is too busy to handle all the village affairs, so he has decided to appoint two. In that case, I will humbly accept this responsibility."

Zhu Ziyou's face darkened. This man had always been at odds with him, and now he faced a serious problem. He needed to figure out how to prevent the villagers from electing Old Hu.

The two elderly men glared at each other, while the villagers below discussed the commune. Zhu Wuliu turned to a middle-aged man beside him and said, "Father, you're also a team leader. Does that mean you can join the commune?"

"Of course!" Zhu Wuliu's mother chimed in.

The family laughed happily. They had lived in poverty all their lives and never imagined a day when they could be team leaders or join something like a commune.

As the newspapers reached the villages, news of the commune's establishment spread throughout the six prefectures. While industry was gradually being built, agricultural production centered around the commune was also taking shape.

Every morning, Fan Zeng would take the newspapers out and return in the evening from the villages he was responsible for. The policies in the newspapers, combined with the changes he witnessed in the villages, made him feel that the once-devastated land of the six prefectures was now sprouting with vitality, like seedlings in spring, giving a sense of flourishing prosperity.

However, the more he saw, the more he became aware of a powerful conservative force obstructing these changes. In some villages, newly reclaimed land was still being forcibly seized by powerful families.

He compiled these observations into a report and submitted it to the prince's residence.

“Wait, old sir, His Highness Prince Qi requests your presence.” As usual, Fan Zeng handed his report to the servant at the prince’s residence and prepared to leave.

But this time, the servant at the gate stopped him.

“Me?” Fan Zeng was shocked.

“Yes, His Highness specifically instructed me to bring you to him when you arrived,” the servant said with a smile.

Fan Zeng was nervous, but the servant’s friendly demeanor gave him the courage to enter the prince’s residence.

He had expected the servants of the prince’s residence to be arrogant and domineering, but from what he had observed over the past ten days, the entire staff of the residence was well-behaved.

As the saying goes, “If the upper beam is not straight, the lower beam will be crooked.” Since the upper beam was straight, the lower beam naturally followed suit. Fan Zeng no longer believed the rumors that Prince Qi was cruel and tyrannical.

Following the servant into the rear hall, Fan Zeng saw Xiao Ming fishing on a stone bridge.

“This commoner pays his respects to Your Highness,” Fan Zeng hurried forward and bowed.

"At ease," Xiao Ming handed the fishing rod to Luluo, who was standing nearby, and said, "I called you here today to discuss the newspaper office. Although there are many newspaper delivery boys going to the villages, you are the most diligent and responsible. The information you've provided is the most accurate, which is truly rare. In your reports, you've repeatedly mentioned the harm powerful families inflict on the people. That takes courage."

"This commoner receives Your Highness's silver and naturally works sincerely for Your Highness. Besides, although I have repeatedly failed the imperial exams, I am still a scholar and uphold the integrity of a scholar," Fan Zeng replied.

"Well said! I admire scholars who remain unyielding in the face of adversity. I assume you're aware of the newspaper office. Would you be willing to serve as its director?" Xiao Ming asked with a smile.

The newspaper office was something every newspaper delivery boy knew about. The director would be responsible for printing, distributing, and managing the newspaper delivery boys.

Fan Zeng was stunned. He felt as though a pie had fallen from the sky, and for a moment, he didn't know how to respond.

"You declined the position of Chief Secretary last time. You can't refuse this time. I am truly in need of capable people, and the director's salary is ten taels of silver per month. Your son will no longer lack the funds to travel to the capital for the imperial exams. Of course, if he chooses to stay in my fief, he is also welcome," Xiao Ming added.