

## I. Dynasty 9

### Chapter 9: Reform

After his bath, Xiao Ming dressed with the help of Lu Luo and Ziyuan.

Returning to his bedchamber, he carefully considered the issue of land reform. Thinking through the night, he formulated a plan. At dawn, he headed straight for the Governor's Office.

As he reached the entrance, he collided with a middle-aged man wearing a blue robe and a black square headscarf.

Both men steadied themselves, and the man immediately bowed. "Your Highness."

Xiao Ming looked him over. It was none other than Pang Changshi—the Chancellor of the fief, whom Lu Luo had mentioned before.

Pang Yukun had just returned from Dengzhou, where he had been inspecting tax accounts. "Why are you here, your highness?"

"This fief belongs to me—I can go wherever I please. Your arrival is timely, as I have matters to discuss with you," Xiao Ming said, striding into the Governor's Office.

According to his predecessor's memories, this was how he always spoke to Pang Yukun, so Xiao Ming kept up the act.

Pang Yukun scratched his head. Since the Governor's Office was established, this was the first time Xiao Ming had ever visited.

Even though he had heard about the prince capturing thirty barbarian cavalymen the day before, he still found it hard to believe.

"What does Your Highness wish to discuss?" Pang Yukun asked as he followed behind.

The Governor's Office was sparsely furnished—three black desks and chairs, with a few official documents spread across them.

Sitting at the central desk, Xiao Ming got straight to the point. "I want to discuss the establishment of a Salt Bureau and the issue of land."

Pang Yukun was shocked. Thinking he had misheard, he asked again, "Your Highness, what did you just say?"

"I order you to immediately organize the fief's officials and establish a Salt Bureau in Dengzhou and Laizhou. Issue a decree to all six provinces: From today onward, the government encourages commoners to cultivate unused land. Any land they clear will belong to them, tax-free for three years, and their ownership will be hereditary. For those who already own land, taxes will be reduced by 30%."

Xiao Ming's voice was firm and unwavering.

Pang Yukun was completely stunned. The series of reforms left him utterly speechless.

After regaining his composure, he said hesitantly, “The Salt Bureau and land reclamation are feasible. However, if taxes are reduced, the six provinces may struggle to cover their expenses.”

“With a Salt Bureau, we can make up for the lost tax revenue. Moreover, I will find other ways to increase government income,” Xiao Ming said decisively.

Then he asked, “As for the noble families that have seized land from commoners—what do you think should be done about them?”

Pang Yukun’s thoughts were in disarray.

In the past, he had always been the one gathering evidence of Xiao Ming’s misconduct and scolding him at the Governor’s Office. Then, he would report it to the Emperor, who would issue a stern rebuke.

Now, the prince was seriously discussing governance with him? It felt surreal.

Still, when it came to dealing with the noble landowners, Pang Yukun did not hesitate.

“Your Highness, these local aristocrats are intermarried, deeply entrenched, and have powerful backers in the imperial court. If we forcibly seize their lands, it will cause unrest. Do not forget what happened to Prince Ning...”

Xiao Ming narrowed his eyes.

Prince Ning was his second imperial uncle, once renowned as a “Virtuous Prince” in Chang’an.

At the age of thirteen, when he was first granted his fief, his first act was to reclaim illegally occupied land from the nobles.

But within three months, he was accused of treason by court officials.

At the time, Emperor Xiao Wenxuan had just ascended the throne and was wary of Prince Ning’s popularity. Seizing the opportunity, the Emperor dispatched troops to suppress him.

Unaware of the looming conspiracy, Prince Ning was assassinated by his own guards, who had been bribed by the noble families.

His death left no evidence, and the matter was buried.

By bringing up Prince Ning, Pang Yukun was subtly warning Xiao Ming not to repeat his mistake.

In the past, Xiao Ming had hated Pang Yukun. But now, discussing governance with him, he realized the Chancellor wasn't a bad man—just a scholarly idealist.

In this era of low literacy, having someone capable and educated to assist him was invaluable. He intended to make full use of Pang Yukun's talents.

"I understand. For now, we will not pursue the noble families' land. Our priority is encouraging commoners to cultivate new land. You will oversee this effort. Additionally, all labor tax for this year is waived."

"Understood, Your Highness. I will make the arrangements immediately," Pang Yukun replied, bowing.

When he first arrived in the fief, Pang Yukun had proposed similar reforms. But at the time, the old Xiao Ming had opposed everything—simply for the sake of being difficult.

This had left governance in complete disarray across Qingzhou and the other provinces.

Now, inside the Governor's Office, Xiao Ming personally watched as Pang Yukun wrote the decree and ordered its publication.

Outside the city gates, the new decree was posted for the public to see. Immediately, the townspeople erupted in discussion.

“Is this real?” a doubtful commoner asked.

“Would the Governor’s Office issue a fake proclamation? The King of Qi has been here for five years—he’s finally showing concern for the people!”

“If it’s true, what are we waiting for? Let’s start clearing land! Whoever claims it first owns it!”

Excitement spread rapidly.

Meanwhile, five couriers on horseback galloped out of the north gate, carrying the decree to the other five provinces.

Standing on the city walls, Lu Fei watched the commotion among the townspeople, deep in thought. The King of Qi is truly different now.

After leaving the Governor’s Office, Xiao Ming did not return to the palace. Instead, he went to the Armory

“Your Highness,” Military Quartermaster Chen Wenlong greeted him.

With the technology crystal at his disposal, Xiao Ming needed a place to apply its technological advantages.

And the Armory was the perfect place to start. It was a state-run facility, home to Qingzhou's finest craftsmen.

Xiao Ming's goal was to expand it beyond just weapon-making—he wanted it to become the foundation of industry and mechanical innovation in his fief.

"Quartermaster Chen, from today onward, the Armory reports directly to me. You will follow only my orders—no one else's."

Chen panicked, breaking into a cold sweat.

"Your Highness! I have failed in my duty—please punish me!"

He assumed Xiao Ming was angry about the lack of iron caltrops.

"You misunderstand. I am not here to punish you," Xiao Ming said calmly. "I reject the notion that only scholarly pursuits are valuable. Practical craftsmanship is not trivial—on the contrary, it is essential to labor and industry."

Chen let out a sigh of relief. "Your Highness is wise! I have always believed that better tools could greatly improve agriculture."

"Exactly. That's why the Armory is crucial. From now on, gather all skilled craftsmen in the city and categorize them by specialty. They will formally join the Armory."

"That can be done... but Your Highness, these craftsmen need food. And right now, we..." Chen hesitated, clearly concerned about limited resources.