

I. Dynasty 238

Chapter 238: Weights and Measures

Under the crimson glow of the evening sky, everyone gathered to eat and drink.

From the kitchen came dish after dish of delicacies, the kind one would only find in modern times.

Though Xiao Ming had always focused on building hard power, he had never neglected soft power either. Aside from cuisine, he was also preparing for a revival in arts and culture—this was his way of launching a challenge against the entrenched Confucian feudal ideology.

Still, he didn't dare act too boldly just yet. Even as a feudal prince, he couldn't afford to make enemies of all the scholars in the empire. For now, he would continue strengthening Bo Wen Academy's prestige. Once the time was right, he would begin testing reforms in Qingzhou.

After all, most scholars still saw becoming an official as their life's ultimate goal—something that seriously hampered his ability to cultivate capable talent.

As they ate, the conversation naturally continued. Pang Yukun asked, "Your Highness, the wine, soap, and perfume you launched are all seeing declining sales now. With your brilliance, haven't you considered introducing a new product?"

This question hit the mark.

It had been a full year since the launch of Drunken Qingzhou liquor, soap, and perfume. The initial novelty had worn off.

More importantly, the distribution rights for all three of those products had already been auctioned off. For a long while now, Xiao Ming could only profit from direct sales.

And the merchants who had secured those rights were all major tycoons from various provinces—small-scale traders in the Great Yu Empire never got a taste of the pie.

At the time, Xiao Ming had prioritized raising funds to rapidly develop Qingzhou. But now that he had stabilized the situation, a new problem had emerged—these monopolies were stifling commercial vitality.

That's why he had been considering releasing a new product—something that would give the common people in his territory a fair shot at doing business.

And now, he had finally made his decision.

"I've got something," he said. "In the next couple of days, I'll have the workshops produce a prototype or two. This time, I won't be auctioning off the distribution rights. Any merchant will be able to purchase and sell it."

Pang Yukun's eyes lit up. The Chamber of Commerce had been a bit lifeless lately, with few new merchants joining. A fresh product launch would surely reinvigorate the market.

No sooner had Pang Yukun finished speaking than Lu Fei raised a concern: “Your Highness, I have a request as well. Now that Luo Xin’s artillery unit has its own academy, shouldn’t the rest of our troops get one too? Otherwise, the men may become resentful. After all, during the Battle of Cangzhou, our regular infantry played a bigger role than the artillery.”

Xiao Ming had actually thought about this earlier that day. He turned to Niu Ben and said, “I’ve already reserved an academy for your forces. Old General, how much do you know about signal flags?”

“Your Highness, I’m quite familiar with flag signals. Are you planning to assign some soldiers as signalers?” Niu Ben asked.

“Not just that—we’ll also need drummers and buglers,” Xiao Ming replied.

“Drummers and buglers?” Niu Ben paused, lowering his cup and looking to Xiao Ming.

Xiao Ming explained, “The drummers are for future training, but the buglers can be used to issue various commands in battle: charge signals, wake-up calls, drills, assembly, emergency muster, rest, mealtime—you name it. They’re just as effective as flag signals. You might not know what a bugle is yet, but once the Machinery Department finishes producing a few, I’ll show them to you.”

Niu Ben nodded thoughtfully. It looked like the standardization of the army was about to take another major step forward.

Since the gathering had already turned into a strategy session, Xiao Ming added, “There’s one more matter—this concerns everyone. We must standardize weights and measures.”

He directed this comment at Pang Yukun, who looked surprised. “Your Highness, haven’t weights and measures already been standardized since Emperor Qin unified the Six States?”

“That’s true,” Xiao Ming said, “but I’m referring to a different system. I’ll be drafting a new textbook specifically for it.”

As industry grew increasingly precise, reforming the measurement system had become inevitable. Whether in chemistry or manufacturing, a scientific and standardized system of weights and measures was absolutely essential.

Tonight’s banquet was only meant to give everyone a heads-up. These reforms would be implemented step by step.

The banquet lasted for another full hour before everyone finally left, well-fed and slightly drunk.

Upon returning to his chamber, Xiao Ming immediately began writing the new instructional materials. The first would cover flag signals, bugle calls, drummer operations, and so on. The second would be the units of weights and measures.

But when he got to the second topic, he found himself a bit stuck. Listing the units was easy—the real challenge was crafting the actual measuring tools.

Take rulers, for instance. He needed to find a way to produce them with precise accuracy.

He worked late into the night before finally dozing off.

The next morning, Li San arrived at the manor bright and early.

He reported, “Your Highness, since Zhao Yuanliang left the manor, he’s been staying at the Wei Family Restaurant and hasn’t left the city. The man named Zhao Kuan who came with him has been in contact with merchants from the Zhao Clan here in Qingzhou. We’re not sure what they’re plotting.”

As Xiao Ming washed his face, he listened carefully. He had ordered Li San to give daily updates on the matter.

“Hmph, it’s definitely nothing good. If that’s the case, we’ll just bait the hook and wait. Zhao Yuanliang clearly thinks he’s untouchable because Empress Zhao is his aunt, but I won’t allow him to do as he pleases in Qingzhou,” Xiao Ming said coldly.

Li San nodded. “Understood. The rest day is almost here. I’ll alert the craftsmen to prepare.”

“Good. Let’s get this over with. Once that guy’s out of Qingzhou, I’ll finally be at ease,” Xiao Ming said.

“Yes, Your Highness,” Li San bowed and quickly took his leave from the manor.

Back at the Secret Guard headquarters, Li San made his preparations and headed straight to the Machinery Department. There, he found the three craftsmen chosen to act as bait.

All three were Qingzhou locals, with wives and children living nearby.

Though Xiao Ming had always been lenient toward craftsmen, the sensitive nature of Qingzhou's industrial secrets left him no choice but to exercise caution. All Machinery Department craftsmen had their families housed in a designated residential ward within the city. Officially, it was for better welfare and unified management—but it also served to ensure they wouldn't leak state secrets.

The craftsmen all understood this, though they never spoke of it. Compared to how things used to be, this arrangement was already a great improvement.

"If anyone approaches you, pretend to offer them cannon technology. Secret Guard agents will be shadowing you the entire time. But stay alert, and don't take any unnecessary risks," Li San instructed.

"Yes, we will follow Commander Li's orders," the craftsmen responded. Deep down, they were genuinely grateful to Xiao Ming.

Craftsmen were usually at the bottom of society in the Great Yu Empire. Yet Xiao Ming had not only given them dignity but also generous salaries—and allowed their children to attend school for free.

They had nothing more to ask for.

Li San gave a firm nod. He had already mobilized the entire network of Secret Guards in the city. If they found solid evidence, Xiao Ming would have all the justification he needed to expel Zhao Yuanliang.