

I. Dynasty 274

Chapter 274: A Cold Sweat

“It was the gunpowder.”

A few days ago, snow had begun falling in Qingzhou, covering the land in a thick, unbroken white blanket. It was now the season for admiring the snow.

In his free time, Xiao Ming often sat in the tower of the Prince’s Residence, quietly working on writing educational materials.

“Gunpowder? So that means there was nothing wrong with Chang’an’s bronze cannon?” Pang Yukun asked with concern.

“It was both fine—and not fine,” Xiao Ming replied calmly.

From the moment he introduced cannons, he had anticipated others would try to copy them.

And since the Machinery Department in Chang’an was capable of producing fire lances—very similar to cannons in design—it showed they already had a mold-based production method.

So, replicating a cannon using that technique wasn’t hard. In fact, in real history, the Ming Dynasty rapidly copied European firearms like the folangji and red-coated cannon.

Imitation was inevitable.

That's why Xiao Ming had released an export version of the cannon. He sold it while deliberately hiding its full capabilities—misleading others into thinking this was what Qingzhou's cannons were truly like.

He wasn't worried.

His own cannons used high-quality steel, with performance far beyond any bronze replica of this era.

Plus, they were cheap and easy to mass-produce.

No matter how hard Chang'an tried, they could never replicate that.

So even if the bronze cannon matched his in performance, it didn't matter—the price alone would crush it.

If Emperor Wenxuan preferred expensive bronze cannons, Xiao Ming wouldn't stop him.

Pang Yukun was still confused.

"Then what's the problem if the cannon itself works?"

“Because even if it looks the same, the range and power are still only about half of ours,” Xiao Ming explained.

“And the bronze cannon is so expensive, you could buy five or six of ours for the same price. What do you think they’ll choose?”

“As long as Your Highness is willing to sell, they’ll always choose the cheaper option.” Pang nodded.

Xiao Ming agreed.

“Exactly. Everyone likes things that are cheap and good. But here’s the thing—during the bronze cannon test, they used Chang’an’s own gunpowder. The formula was wrong, which weakened the shot. That’s why the test failed.”

“So we got lucky?” Pang chuckled, although a little helpless.

After all, imitation wasn’t something to celebrate.

Qingzhou’s patent laws only applied within its territory—they had no power outside.

Pang's real concern wasn't imitation itself, but how it might hurt cannon sales.

Once firepower spread, barbarians and other regional princes would also have cannons.

"Let's hope it holds," Pang sighed.

"We'll be fine," Xiao Ming replied confidently.

"Because our cannons are sold with our gunpowder."

Sure, the cannon could be copied—but the gunpowder formula couldn't be guessed by eye.

Plus, we also have granular powder.

The power of his cannon relied on three things; the cannon itself, the gunpowder, and the cannonball.

Chang'an had only cracked one.

Without the other two, their imitation would never be as effective.

“Not to mention the cannonballs,” Xiao Ming added.

“They may look simple, but they’re not.”

Only cannonballs of the correct size and shape could ensure that the explosion pressure was efficiently used to launch the ball.

Otherwise, the cannon would be like a leaky bellows—all puff and no punch.

So the bronze cannon’s weak performance was likely due to both faulty powder and mismatched cannonballs.

The whole farce in Chang’an made Xiao Ming feel both amused and relieved.

But it also showed one thing clearly:

The emperor wanted the cannon-making method.

He was simply holding back—trying to preserve the court’s monopoly through the Imperial Guard.

Xiao Ming broke into a cold sweat just thinking about it.

Low-tech products really were easier to copy.

He knew he needed to start upgrading soon—so even if others wanted to copy him, they'd fail.

Setting that aside, Xiao Ming and Pang Yukun began discussing the upcoming New Year.

The holiday was only about ten days away.

Pang suggested sending out year-end gifts to the officials of the six prefectures—to show the prince's care and strengthen relations. It was the ancient equivalent of modern-day year-end bonuses.

Xiao Ming agreed.

After all, the officials had worked hard all year.

They deserved a good New Year.

But what to give?

Meat was too expensive.

Agriculture had only just recovered.

There wasn't enough livestock.

Grain was uninspiring.

As they pondered, Xiao Ming suddenly thought of the textile workshops.

He had invested heavily in them.

Now they were overproducing winter coats, and the warehouse was overflowing.

He'd been planning to sell them via merchant guilds, but now this was the perfect chance.

"Winter coats?" Pang stared, dumbfounded.

Xiao Ming nodded.

“It’ll help support the textile industry too.”

It was like how modern governments would use public procurement to help struggling industries.

If he was going to spend money anyway, he might as well spend it on his own businesses.

“And not just coats,” he added.

“Soap, perfume, wine—we should include those too.”

His eyes lit up.

Pang Yukun burst out laughing.

“Brilliant, Your Highness! We get to give New Year gifts, help merchants earn money, and even funnel some of it back into the treasury. Amazing!”

“Haha, not that amazing,” Xiao Ming smiled modestly.

Only ten days to go.

He could finally breathe a little.

Last year had been rough.

This year, he was determined to celebrate properly.

Just as they were chatting, Lu Tong came up to the tower and reported:

“Your Highness, the fireworks have arrived. They’ve been delivered to the residence.”

“Fireworks?” Pang smiled.

“Ever since I came to Qingzhou, I haven’t seen fireworks in five or six years. Looks like I’ll finally get to see them again.”

Xiao Ming was also excited.

The fireworks he ordered were nothing like the ones used in Great Yu.

Normally, they only showed the natural color of burning gunpowder.

But Xiao Ming's fireworks contained metal powders—so when they exploded, they would display vibrant, multicolored patterns.

They were going to be absolutely spectacular.