

I. Dynasty 279

Chapter 279: Looking Ahead

The golden fried egg gave off a rich, mouthwatering aroma that wafted through the main hall. Everyone, from Pang Yukun to the other officials, let out a unified sigh of amazement. While the saying goes, “A gentleman stays far from the kitchen,” the truth was—they had all been in a kitchen before.

“This smells amazing! Your Highness, allow me to be the first to try it,” said Lu Fei, licking his lips and swallowing hard.

Luo Xin quickly interrupted, “Lu Captain, with all due respect, as an officer, I should be the one to try it first—for the sake of all of us.”

“Nonsense! I outrank you! This honor belongs to me!”

The two tugged and bickered, neither willing to back down. Just then, Niu Ben hiccupped from his wine and casually muttered, “If we’re talking about seniority in risking one’s neck, I’m the Commander of Qingzhou—I’ll take the lead.”

Without hesitation, he picked up the fried egg and popped it into his mouth, while Lu Fei and Luo Xin watched, heartbroken.

“How does it taste?” Pang Yukun asked with great curiosity. As civil officials, they wouldn’t dare act as shamelessly as the military types—but before they could hesitate further, the opportunity had been taken.

Niu Ben chewed thoughtfully and nodded. “Excellent. It’s delicious! So this is what they call stir-frying.”

Xiao Ming cooked another egg and handed the second to Pang Yukun, who took a bite and nodded in agreement. The difference in flavor from this stir-frying method was clear.

Once everyone had had a taste and experienced how stir-frying worked, Xiao Ming gestured for the servants to clear the cooking setup and returned to his seat.

“You’ve all now witnessed what stir-frying can do. Could this be another business opportunity for Qingzhou?”

“Absolutely,” Pang Yukun said. “There’s an old saying: ‘The people regard food as their heaven’—this proves how deeply food touches the hearts of the people. If even simple ingredients can become this delicious through stir-frying, diners will return again and again.”

“Yes!” someone else added. “With wealthy nobles and merchants frequently passing through Qingzhou, and being notoriously picky eaters, this level of cuisine would easily win them over.”

Xiao Ming nodded. In modern times, the culinary industry was one of the most important sectors, driven by people’s relentless pursuit of good food. Even during economic downturns, restaurants remained packed.

And where there’s great food, good inns and accommodations would surely follow—attracting even more merchants and visitors.

The crowd enthusiastically agreed, and Xiao Ming silently made up his mind: after the New Year, he would work on organizing Qingzhou's service industry—starting with restaurants and inns. Improving the quality of life here would be key to drawing in the wealthy and influential from across the empire.

An hour passed in laughter, drinking, and feasting. When the bell struck, Xiao Ming turned to Qian Dafu. "Let's begin the fireworks."

"Yes, Your Highness!" Qian Dafu responded quickly and jogged outside.

The doors of the main hall opened, and three servants carefully brought out rows of cylindrical fireworks, placing them in the courtyard.

The officials leaned forward eagerly. Rumors had spread that this year's fireworks were unlike any before, and anticipation filled the room.

The bamboo tubes were set in place. Qian Dafu lit them one by one.

Pop! Pop! Pop! With a series of crisp bursts, vibrant jets of color shot up four to five meters high. Brilliant red, green, and gold flared across the snowy sky. The grouped display was truly spectacular.

"How beautiful..." whispered Zhan Xingchang, mesmerized by the shimmering spectacle. His smile was warm and content. Like many scholars who had relocated from Chang'an to Qingzhou, he had gradually become at peace with his new life here—now, he embraced it with pride.

The rapid development of Qingzhou over the past year had affirmed that he had made the right choice.

Watching the colorful fireworks light up the sky, he could almost see Qingzhou's future rising just as brightly.

Sitting in the hall, Xiao Ming sipped wine as he gazed at the rainbow of colors bursting above. For a moment, it felt like he was back in the modern world. But that feeling quickly faded, replaced by flickering lanterns, coal-burning braziers, and the biting cold of winter.

After tonight, tomorrow would mark the start of the 18th century.

Xiao Ming's thoughts churned.

By the early 1500s, in his world's history, Italy's Dal Cario brothers had already invented the glass mirror. In 1590, Janssen from the Netherlands created the compound microscope, and in 1593, Galileo introduced the water thermometer.

The 17th century, which was just ending, had seen even more advances: blood transfusions, steam turbines, adding machines, barometers, air pumps, pendulum clocks, reflecting telescopes, phosphorus, calculators, and steam pumps.

But the 18th century would be even more explosive for science. His knowledge told him that this century would bring innovations such as the seed drill, Newcomen's steam engine, the piano, mercury thermometers, Leyden jars, spinning frames, compound steam engines, early automobiles, double convex lenses, gas turbines, gas lighting, cotton gins, and hydraulic presses.

He mentally flipped through this scientific timeline again and again. On this New Year's Eve, he felt the weight of history pressing down on him.

The Great Yu Empire slumbered in its illusion of superiority. But he couldn't afford to sleep.

Xiao Ming knew that with his current strength, he couldn't change the entire empire yet. But he could change his territory.

He vowed to make his land the birthplace of the Enlightenment in the Great Yu Empire. The imperial court would never listen to his words—but they would believe their eyes.

Just like they had when he introduced artillery—only after witnessing it would they be convinced.

If he could build his territory into a model of technological progress, others would follow, even if slowly and painfully.

And if traditionalist noble clans tried to stand in his way?

Then he would use his cannons to blast open the gates of the empire—before the Western powers did.

Outside, the last burst of fireworks hissed and faded, leaving behind the sharp scent of gunpowder.

Just then, a group of beautifully dressed women entered the main hall, accompanied by two rows of musicians holding traditional instruments.

Xiao Ming's expression softened in anticipation—the performances were about to begin.

After all, tonight was the last night of the 17th century. It had to end with a flourish.

Tomorrow, he would begin a new era—leading Qingzhou to catch up with the Age of Exploration.

A sweet voice began to sing:

“Graceful as startled swan, elegant as dancing dragon;

Radiant as autumn chrysanthemums, lush as spring pines;

Like drifting clouds veiling the moon, like breeze-driven snow in flight;

From afar, dazzling as the rising sun; up close, blooming like lotus on water...”

It was Cao Zhi's "Rhapsody of the Luo River Goddess", sung softly yet clearly.

From within the lingering smoke of the fireworks, Ziyuan and Luluo emerged—one in violet, the other in green—graceful as dawn light breaking through morning mist.

Their movements were as fluid as poetry, dancing beneath the crimson lanterns of the New Year's Eve.