

I. Dynasty 282

Chapter 282: The Voyage

Running between Bowen Academy and the royal residence every day, Xiao Ming quickly ushered in another new year.

By the fifth day of the first lunar month, the administrative offices of Qingzhou had resumed normal operations.

The common people could continue enjoying the New Year festivities until the fifteenth, but Xiao Ming couldn't afford such luxury. He always reminded himself: "Be alert even in peaceful times."

He had spent a whole month teaching ocean navigation, especially how to determine position at sea. During that time, he also covered how to measure sailing speed.

Now that the theory lessons were complete, Xiao Ming decided it was time for Yue Yun and his crew to practice at sea.

"Your Highness, all the cannons are now loaded on the ships. Our job at the Military Workshop is finally done," Chen Qi said with a deep breath of relief as he watched the last cannon hoisted aboard at the Xiaoqing River shipyard.

Even during the New Year, the Military Workshop had not stopped working. Craftsmen labored day and night to finish all 150 naval cannons.

From the time Xiao Ming had left for Cangzhou, it had taken three months to complete them—fifty per month on average.

Similar to the cannons used to defend the city walls, these naval guns were 32-pounders. Of the ammunition loaded, 60% were solid cannonballs, and 40% were grapeshot.

According to Xiao Ming, grapeshot was specifically designed for naval warfare—ideal for smashing into enemy ships.

Looking at the galleons and the rows of cannons, Zhang Liang said to Yue Yun, “Be very careful out there. Each of these galleons cost us 300,000 taels of silver. This isn’t a ship—it’s a pile of money.”

Chen Qi added, “And don’t forget these cannons. Each one weighs nearly nine thousand pounds and costs about five thousand taels of silver. That’s 150 cannons—750,000 taels total!”

Hearing this, Yue Yun broke into a cold sweat. He looked at Xiao Ming, distressed, “Your Highness, after hearing them, how am I supposed to sail this thing?”

“They’re just telling the truth,” Xiao Ming said. “These three galleons are worth over a million taels. Yue Yun, you must not mess around once you’re at sea. Remember your mission: you’re not going to fight—you’re going to explore. Our ships may be small, but they’re agile. If we need to run, they’ll have a hard time catching us.”

Xiao Ming wasn’t heartless. He knew how dangerous the sea was. In Da Yu, he was a prince—people gave him face. But out there? No one cared about titles. If Yue Yun and his men returned safely, it would be a blessing.

Still, he had to do it.

In the Age of Exploration, whoever ruled the seas ruled the trade routes.

The overland Silk Road had already been cut off by the Ottoman Empire, and the northern route was blocked by the barbarian tribes. That meant he had no choice—he had to control the sea if he wanted to trade. And as long as he could secure the East and Southeast Asian trade routes, he could dominate.

With a guaranteed outlet for exports, Qingzhou's industry could truly flourish.

Seeing the value of everything, Yue Yun now treated his ship like treasure. "Understood, Your Highness. I won't forget."

With all the naval guns loaded, everything was finally ready. Xiao Ming and Yue Yun boarded the flagship, the Qingzhou.

Xiao Ming planned to accompany them from the Xiaoqing River to the Bohai Bay, then onward to Dengzhou. Along the way, Yue Yun would practice using all the navigation skills he'd learned.

Zhang Liang came aboard too. His son would now oversee the Xiaoqing shipyard, while he would manage the new shipyard in Dengzhou.

After all, Xiao Ming had chosen Weihaiwei as the location for his naval base.

Many people would recognize the name Weihaiwei—it had played a major role in the First Sino-Japanese War.

Weihaiwei sat on a peninsula, surrounded by the Yellow Sea on three sides. It faced the Liaodong Peninsula to the north and looked toward the Korean Peninsula and the Japanese islands to the east and southeast. Its location was of huge strategic importance.

If he could secure Weihaiwei, Xiao Ming would control the southern routes from Goryeo (Korea) and Japan. He'd also have a straight path to the Ryukyu Islands.

Choosing Weihaiwei wasn't just for strategy—it was personal. Once lost dignity would now be reclaimed.

"Raise the sails!"

At Xiao Ming's command, the crisp call rang out. The sails dropped like waterfalls from the masts.

A strong wind puffed the sails full, and the ship's first officer took the helm, guiding the Qingzhou gently away from the dock.

The two other galleons followed close behind, anchors lifted, sails unfurled.

The Xiaoqing River was wide, and the fleet headed east with the wind. Within a day, they reached the river's mouth and saw the vast ocean ahead.

Seeing the open sea, Xiao Ming ordered, "Begin drills."

Yue Yun nodded, shouting, "Drill, begin!"

On board, the signalman raised his flags, sending coded messages to the other ships.

Seeing the signals, the captains of the other galleons ordered their navigators to take readings and determine their positions.

On the Qingzhou, Yue Yun pulled out his quadrant. He measured the shadow cast on the instrument and began calculating, then cross-referenced with the coordinate charts Xiao Ming had provided.

He had taken a reading back in Qingzhou, and now with the new data, he said, "Your Highness, we're currently at latitude 53° North. We've sailed 97 nautical miles from Qingzhou."

Half an hour later, Yue Yun gave Xiao Ming the final report.

Xiao Ming nodded. Back in Qingzhou, their starting point had been 49° North. Now they'd gone northeast.

He did a quick check himself—the numbers matched closely.

He was satisfied. The instruments of this era couldn't be perfectly accurate. But this was already impressive—they had a general idea of their position, which was enough.

Before Yue Yun set out for open sea, Xiao Ming had also given him a full set of latitude-longitude maps. With those, Yue Yun would always be able to locate himself.

After the position check, Xiao Ming said, "Speed and time."

The crew sprang into action. One sailor flipped an hourglass—the new kind produced by the glassworks.

As the sand flowed, another sailor tossed a triangular wood board tied to a rope into the sea. The rope was wound around a spindle, marked with knots at intervals.

As the ship moved forward, the knots sped through the sailor's fingers.

"Stop!" Yue Yun shouted.

The hourglass was halted. The sailor counted the knots that had passed during that time.

Yue Yun did the math. "Your Highness, our current speed is eight knots."