

## I. Dynasty 621

### Chapter 621

The boisterous and noisy sounds from the East Market drifted into the Wei Family Restaurant, and outside the glass windows, people flowed like a river.

Wang Xi looked at the prosperous scene in Qingzhou, feeling a mixed emotion. In his opinion, Qingzhou was now much more prosperous and lively than Chang'an.

Facing Zheng Hao's somewhat agitated words, Wang Xi said in a deep voice, "At this point, this is the only way. We'll find out what Xiao Ming is truly capable of by trying."

Cui Zhang smiled. Wang Xi's words meant that the three families had reached a consensus. He said, "In that case, we should quickly return and prepare for this allied army."

Wang Xi and Zheng Hao nodded.

The three returned to pack their belongings and headed out of Qingzhou City. However, upon reaching the South Gate, they were immediately stopped by the guarding soldiers.

"Chief Grand Secretary Pang has given an order! The city is currently searching for Wei spies, and all outsiders are prohibited from leaving the city!" The South Gate commander said solemnly.

Their carriage was stopped, and Wang Xi and the other two disembarked. Seeing this, Cui Zhang angrily said, "You blind dog! I am the Crown Prince of Yan! How does your search for Wei spies concern me? Release us at once!"

A hint of hidden worry flashed in Wang Xi's eyes. He remained silent, while Zheng Hao stood beside Cui Zhang. He echoed, "We are the envoys of Prince Zhao, Prince Yan, and Prince Liang! Do you dare to stop us? Are you courting death?!"

The city gate commander had already received Pang Yukun's order. He repeated, "I don't care what kind of envoys you are! No one can leave Qingzhou City until the search is over!"

"Heh, today I insist on leaving the city! What can you do to me?" Cui Zhang was accustomed to acting unbridled in Yan. Today, he was already full of pent-up anger from Xiao Ming's words. He ordered his accompanying guards, "Out of the city!"

The Yan guards, hearing this, immediately drew their swords and charged towards the gate.

At this moment, the South Gate commander's eyes darkened. He waved his hand, and the guards at the city gate immediately aimed their muskets at the group. A conflict was about to erupt.

Seeing that things were going badly, Wang Xi immediately stopped Cui Zhang. He said, "Crown Prince, haven't you realized yet? This is probably at Prince Qi's instruction. Now that our three families have decided to attack Qi, he's probably trying to keep us in Qingzhou City for a few more days."

Cui Zhang's eyes darted around upon hearing this. He suddenly realized something and said with some alarm, "Will Prince Qi kill us?"

“When two countries are at war, envoys are not executed. If Prince Qi wanted to kill us, he would have acted long ago. Crown Prince, you need not worry,” Wang Xi advised. “It’s better to have your men put away their weapons, otherwise, while your life won’t be in danger, physical suffering will probably be unavoidable.”

“Ah!” Cui Zhang and Zheng Hao exchanged glances. Zheng Hao also nodded to him.

With his head slumped, Cui Zhang shouted at the Yan guards, “Who told you to be so rude? Put away your weapons!”

The soldiers immediately retreated upon hearing this.

The three men looked at each other, all feeling some regret. If they had known they would become hostages in the blink of an eye, they would never have come as envoys to Qingzhou. But since things were this way, they could only accept it.

Returning with their accompanying officials, the three then went to the government office again. This time they were turned away, with the government attendants merely telling them that Pang Yukun was out on business and not in the government office.

Prince Qi’s mansion.

Xiao Ming had been back for an hour. At this time, the princely estate’s kitchen was preparing the midday banquet. As he had told Fei Yuer yesterday, he was meeting Xiao Ziyang this afternoon to discuss the marriage alliance.

While he was waiting, the city gate guards came to the princely estate and informed Xiao Ming about blocking the three men, Cui Zhang and his companions.

Upon hearing this, Xiao Ming sneered twice and sent the guards back to tell the commanders of the four city gates to keep a close watch on the gates.

As soon as he had finished explaining this matter, a familiar sound suddenly came from outside the main hall. Hearing this sound, Xiao Ming smiled. It was indeed Xiao Ziyang.

Sure enough, shortly after, Xiao Ziyang, dressed in a cyan brocade robe, appeared calmly outside the main hall. Fei Yuer accompanied him into the hall.

“Seventh Brother!” Xiao Ziyang greeted Xiao Ming with a raised hand and a clear laugh.

Xiao Ming and Xiao Ziyang were both still princes, so their etiquette was simple.

“Ninth Brother!” Xiao Ming also smiled. Among the many princes, his relationship with Xiao Ziyang was the closest. Firstly, there was the connection through Fei Yuer, and secondly, Xiao Ziyang had never participated in the struggle for the throne.

Simply put, he was a very clean prince. Precisely because of this, he trusted Xiao Ziyang very much. Sometimes, the reason he paid attention to what Xiao Ziyang was doing was simply because he didn’t want him to become someone like the Third Prince.

Although emperors are said to be ruthless, who wouldn't want a trustworthy brother? Now, he finally understood Xiao Wenxuan's conflicted feelings at that time.

He dutifully helped Fei Yuer sit down beside Xiao Ming, then Xiao Ziyang sat in his own seat. He asked, "Seventh Brother, you specifically called me here today, so you must have something to tell me, right?" Xiao Ziyang still looked as calm as a spring breeze.

Ever since the chaos in Chang'an, he had accompanied his Imperial Mother to Qingzhou. There, he witnessed a world different from Chang'an, and after understanding it, he became completely immersed in various books.

In Chang'an, he was already an uninhibited figure. Now, coming into contact with different students and books, he was like a wild horse without a bridle.

Xiao Ming nodded and gestured to Fei Yuer. Fei Yuer then said, "Speaking of which, this is a happy occasion. His Highness has arranged a marriage for you."

"A marriage?" Xiao Ziyang was startled. Although surprised, he understood that only Xiao Ming could arrange his marriage now.

"I passed through the Sanmyo Kingdom this time, and the King of Sanmyo expressed interest in a marriage alliance with the Great Yu Empire. After much thought, it seems only you, an imperial prince, are suitable?" Xiao Ming said.

“This foolish brother has heard of the King of Sanmyo. But wouldn’t it be better for Seventh Brother to take the King of Sanmyo’s daughter as his consort, making the King of Sanmyo feel more at ease?”

Xiao Ziyang looked puzzled.

Before Xiao Ming could speak, Fei Yuer chastised him, “Nonsense! In the current situation of the Great Yu Empire, only His Highness can look after you. As the saying goes, ‘an elder brother is like a father.’ His Highness has his reasons for having you marry the King of Sanmyo’s daughter. Moreover, if His Highness were to take a consort, it wouldn’t be the King of Sanmyo’s turn; the Princess of Huainan would be the first choice.”

“Yes, yes, I had forgotten that.” Xiao Ziyang shook his head. He said, “Thank you, Seventh Brother, for your great kindness!”

Xiao Ming’s expression was awkward. Fei Yuer’s sudden mention of the Prince of Huainan caught him off guard, as Pang Yukun had also mentioned this matter in the government office today.

However, with Xiao Ziyang present, he found it inconvenient to ask Fei Yuer about it. So he said to Xiao Ziyang, “Ninth Brother, you need not worry. This daughter of the King of Sanmyo will only be your secondary consort. In the future, your Seventh Brother will surely choose another beautiful bride for you.”

“Thank you, Seventh Brother,” Xiao Ziyang said, bowing. For him, Xiao Ming’s words were an imperial edict, not to be defied.

The midday sun was warm. After enjoying lunch in the main hall, the three dispersed.

His reason for summoning Xiao Ziyang this time was purely out of courtesy. After all, once he decided on something, Xiao Ziyang had no choice but to comply. Who made him the one with the golden tongue now?

After seeing off Xiao Ziyang, Xiao Ming and Fei Yuer went to the pavilion outside the bedchamber. At this point, he suddenly asked, "Princess Consort, why did you suddenly bring up the matter of the Prince of Huainan just now?"

Fei Yuer chuckled softly, "During Your Highness's absence from Qingzhou, quite a few officials mentioned this matter. Father and Chief Grand Secretary Pang both seem to have this intention. Father anticipated that the three families would surely attack Your Highness, and Prince Yan is certainly the instigator among them. To the south of Yan is the Prince of Huainan's fiefdom. The two families fought a battle over the imperial cities, and the Prince of Huainan harbors considerable resentment towards Prince Yan for this. At this time, if Your Highness proposes an alliance, the Prince of Huainan might agree."

"Elder Fei Ji taught you to say that, didn't he?" Xiao Ming's gaze was profound. Speaking of which, he and Fei Yuer were merely in a political marriage, and now he seemed to be treading the traditional path of every emperor again.

Fei Yuer sighed. She said, "Your Highness, it's not just Father; I also think so. In this way, it can both help Your Highness stabilize the realm and allow Your Highness to extend your lineage. I will also not be criticized by the ministers."

Xiao Ming frowned. For these ministers, his family affairs were state affairs. Xiao Ming felt quite helpless about this, as he was currently unable to change the form of traditional imperial power.

As the two were speaking, Wang Xuan suddenly approached him. After saluting Fei Yuer, Wang Xuan opened his mouth as if to speak but hesitated.

Xiao Ming understood. He rose and went with Wang Xuan to the main hall. He asked directly, "Good news or bad news?"

"Both good and bad. Which would Your Highness like to hear first?" Wang Xuan was unusually humorous for once.

"I always prefer to gnaw on tough bones first. Tell me the bad news," Xiao Ming said.

"After the chaos in Chang'an, the King of Chu continuously seized imperial prefectures and counties to the south. A month ago, the King of Chu's army reached the vicinity of Annam. It is said that they encountered invading Annam and French forces," Wang Xuan slowly said.

"The French," Xiao Ming's heart skipped a beat. This Annam was later Vietnam. According to Claire, Annam had actually become a colony due to the joint invasion of the French and Spanish.

And the French had always been ambitious, wanting to open trade routes with the Great Yu Empire through Annam, so they had been instigating Annam to invade north. Now, the news Wang Xuan brought back confirmed this.

"This is indeed bad news. I hope the King of Chu will not collude with the French," Xiao Ming said, somewhat worried. The current foundation of the King of Chu's alliance with him was muskets and cannons.



If the King of Chu compromised with the French and sold out territory in exchange for technology and weaponry, the King of Chu might very quickly turn around and deal with him.

"What's the good news?" Xiao Ming suddenly felt a headache coming on.

"Our maritime merchant informants sent back news that Japan is mobilizing its army. They plan to cross the sea to invade Goryeo by the end of this month," Wang Xuan smiled.

Hearing this news, Xiao Ming's heart immediately relaxed. If this happened, the barbarians' attention would likely turn to Goryeo, thus preventing them from participating in the allied army of the three princes.

"Any other news?" Xiao Ming asked.

"Yes, the Fourth Prince is having a very difficult time in Yan. He has been humiliated several times by Cui Zhang and Cui Tong in Bozhou. He is now living under others' roofs, in great distress," Wang Xuan said. "I have secretly contacted the Fourth Prince. The Fourth Prince has now developed other intentions. He said that as long as Your Highness can help him take Yan, he will honor Your Highness as his sovereign."

"Help him take Yan? Does he have the ability?" Xiao Ming frowned.

"Your Highness, you might be mistaken. The powerful families in Yan are also full of contradictions. The Tian and Ji families in Yan have long been dissatisfied with Prince Yan. I have investigated, and it is

indeed as the Fourth Prince said. The Tian and Ji families are the maternal families of Prince Yan's two secondary consorts. In the past, to gain the reputation of a wise prince, Prince Yan ceded the land of these two families and their affiliated powerful families to the common people. Since then, the two families have harbored resentment."

"I see. To be a wise prince, one must inevitably offend powerful families. This Prince Yan is interesting," Xiao Ming said.

Wang Xuan laughed, "Your Highness is mistaken this time. This Prince Yan is just an old fox. He returned part of the land he seized from other powerful families to the common people, but another part fell into the Cui family's hands."

"Hmm, so it's possible that the Fourth Prince could succeed," Xiao Ming suddenly felt a little excited. He said, "This allied army of the three princes is an opportunity, but Prince Yan is not good, and neither is he."

Wang Xuan nodded. He said, "However, with Japan invading from the west, barbarians eyeing us covetously, Annam causing trouble in the south, and Tibet frequently invading from the west, I believe that Your Highness should, like the late emperor, appease the various vassal princes and make them honor Your Highness."

Xiao Ming sighed slightly. Wang Xuan's meaning was very simple: he wanted him to learn from Xiao Wenxuan to stabilize the country, and then, with imperial power in hand, deal with the disobedient minor powers one by one.

It was then that he realized how difficult it was for Xiao Wenxuan to maintain a unified Great Yu Empire.

"I understand your meaning," Xiao Ming said.

As Pang Yukun and Fei Ji had said, he now needed to unite all forces that could be united, including the powerful families. Only then could he unify the Great Yu Empire as quickly as possible, rather than exhausting national strength in a long civil war.

He knew the Fourth Prince's character well, but now, the enemy of his enemy was his friend. As long as the Fourth Prince could call him emperor, this deal could still be made. However, before that, he still needed to do one thing: ascend the throne!

Only by formally putting on the imperial robes could he hope to restore the Great Yu Empire to its state before the Chang'an chaos without bloodshed, or rather, it would be enough if he simply defeated Prince Zhao and Prince Liang.

"By the way, Your Highness, there's another happy piece of news," Wang Xuan suddenly smiled slyly. "Prince Huainan is threatened by Prince Yan to the north and Prince Chu to the east. Now, in the official circles of Jingzhou, many officials are suggesting a marriage alliance between Prince Huainan and Prince Yan. The rumors circulating in Qingzhou City were also deliberately spread by Huainan merchants to test Your Highness's reaction. It seems Chief Grand Secretary Pang and Elder Fei Ji both approve."

"Prince Huainan can both threaten Yan and also serve as a thorn in Prince Chu's side. His location is very important. Moreover, from Jinling City, my fleet can reach him in less than seven days. If we can build good relations with the King of Chu, it would naturally be icing on the cake," Xiao Ming mused.

Wang Xuan smiled upon hearing this. He said, "Your Highness, what I was going to tell you about important intelligence is this. This is the remaining intelligence."

As he spoke, Wang Xuan handed Xiao Ming a booklet.

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The dense information in the yellowish-brown booklet detailed the Great Yu Empire and its surroundings.

After informing Xiao Ming of the three important matters, Wang Xuan departed from the main hall. Now, as the Secret Guard's reach extended further and further, Wang Xuan was also much busier than before, and Xiao Ming often couldn't see him.

Many times, intelligence was delivered to the princely estate by other members of the Secret Guard.

After a rough glance at the intelligence, Xiao Ming frowned slightly. Although the information in the booklet was not as important as the three matters, it was enough for him to formulate plans based on its content.

For example, there was information about the Ji family and Tian family in Yan. Based on this information, he could have two preparations: one was to use the Fourth Prince, and the other was to bypass the Fourth Prince and cooperate directly with these two families.

However, which path to choose would depend on whether the Fourth Prince would be obedient.

Besides the conflicts in Yan, the document also recorded the current movements of the barbarians and Goryeo. One piece of intelligence, in particular, caught his attention: according to the information provided by Wang Xuan, Empress Zhao and Prince Zhao seemed to be on very bad terms.

Originally, Xiao Ming had thought that Prince Zhao had colluded with Empress Zhao to create the drama of the Crown Prince assassinating the emperor. Now, it seemed things were not as simple as he had imagined.

Nodding slowly, Xiao Ming had a plan in mind. According to the intelligence, generally speaking, the imperial princes who were once supported by the various vassal princes were now living lives of dependence.

This was true for the Fourth Prince, and probably also for the Third Prince. However, falling to such a fate could only be said to be their own doing, for blindly trusting the words of these vassal princes.

Putting away the intelligence, Xiao Ming stood up and walked outside. The matters Wang Xuan mentioned forced him to consider carefully. The Japanese invasion of Goryeo was now a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for him. If he couldn't use this opportunity to stabilize the northern territories, the barbarians would inevitably get involved in the future, and then he would truly face an unmanageable situation.

Stepping out of the main hall, the dazzling sunlight made Xiao Ming squint. He glanced at Fei Yuer, who was still in the pavilion, and smiled bitterly. Fei Yuer's mention of a marriage alliance with Prince Huainan's daughter at lunch was no coincidence. This must have been a consensus of opinion in the Qingzhou court.

And Fei Ji must have analyzed the pros and cons for Fei Yuer. Moreover, according to the tradition of the Great Yu Empire, the main consort had a responsibility to select secondary consorts for her husband.

While thinking about this, Xiao Ming walked towards Fei Yuer.

Seeing Xiao Ming approach, Xiao Huan put away her smile and stood with her hands by her sides, while Fei Yuer said, "Your Highness's brow is deeply furrowed. I suppose Wang Xuan has brought more troublesome news for Your Highness."

Xiao Ming nodded. He tentatively said, "Wang Xuan said that the news of this marriage alliance was deliberately released by Prince Huainan's merchants to test me. If that's the case, Prince Huainan intends to form an alliance with me through marriage."

"Your Highness, if so, wouldn't that just prove what I said?" Fei Yuer said, "Father said that the Prince of Huainan is much more loyal to the court than other vassal princes. His actions seem to be out of righteousness."

"Wang Xuan's intelligence also says so. After all, there are still people in this world who support the imperial family," Xiao Ming said slowly. "If that's the case, I cannot fail to reciprocate the Prince of Huainan's good intentions."

For a modern man, having one wife was actually enough. But in the face of reality, he found that political marriages were unavoidable in this era.

He had never seen the daughter of the Prince of Huainan, nor did he know if she was ugly or beautiful, but this time, even if she was a monstrous woman, he would have to take her as his wife. After all, if he could unify the Great Yu Empire, a sacrifice was worth it.

Although this was a very tough thought, as an emperor, sometimes he was truly not his own master. Now, to win an ally, he was truly giving it all.

Fei Yuer naturally understood Xiao Ming's meaning. This matter was basically settled. For her, she could say nothing, otherwise, a jealous empress would be criticized by the ministers as unworthy of being empress.

After a pause, Xiao Ming said, "Additionally, there's another matter. Before the allied army of the three princes arrives, I will ascend the throne. As empress, you must prepare. I will have the Ministry of Rites prepare your ceremonial robes."

"Ascend the throne!" Fei Yuer said in surprise.

Xiao Huan also gaped, her eyes wide.

Xiao Ming nodded, "Now that the thirteen prefectures of Wei have been incorporated into my state, I used to lack strength, but now it's time to rectify my name."

"Your Highness is absolutely right. The current enthronement of the Thirteenth Prince by Prince Zhao is quite absurd, and Prince Chu's reverence for the Third Prince as sovereign is equally laughable. Only Your Highness holds the secret imperial edict. These petty figures are merely taking advantage of others' power," Fei Yuer said solemnly.

Xiao Ming nodded, "I have thought a great deal about this decision. Prince Zhao, Prince Yan, and Prince Liang are ambitious and intend to destroy the imperial family. How could I fulfill their wishes?"

After a pause, he said, "Princess Consort, you should prepare now. I still need to discuss this matter with Pang Yukun."

"Yes, Your Highness," Fei Yuer said.

With that, Xiao Ming turned and headed towards the government office.

Seeing Xiao Ming depart, Xiao Huan mischievously said to Fei Yuer, "Xiao Huan greets Empress, and congratulates Your Majesty on ruling the world!"

"You little imp, I'll tear your mouth apart!" Fei Yuer was both shy and delighted. In the blink of an eye, she had transformed from an ordinary woman into an empress. Her emotions were equally complex.

At this time, Xiao Ming had already gone from the princely estate to the government office. In the government office, he found Pang Yukun and discussed the matter of ascending the throne.

"Your Highness, the officials of the entire state are waiting for this day!" Pang Yukun's face was excited. In fact, upon learning of the imperial edict, they had wanted to honor Xiao Ming as their sovereign.

However, Xiao Ming was unwilling to become the target of all at that time. Now, having obtained the thirteen prefectures of Wei, their strength had greatly increased, and they no longer needed to worry about the reactions of other vassal princes.



Xiao Ming sighed. He said, "Yes, a year has passed in the blink of an eye. How many years are there in a lifetime? I've also come to understand that I inherited Imperial Father's last will and testament. I am the true Emperor of the Great Yu Empire. There's nothing to hide. I want to tell the world that I am the Emperor of the Great Yu Empire!"

Tears seemed to well up in Pang Yukun's eyes, and his heart was also surging. For years, he had accompanied Xiao Ming through so much, and now they had finally reached this stage.

"Your Highness, I will immediately instruct the Ministry of Rites to prepare for the enthronement ceremony, and at the same time, proclaim the late emperor's last will to the world," Pang Yukun said.

"Yes, choose an auspicious day and time. Since I am to ascend the throne, it should be done grandly. Also, inform the imperial relatives in Qingzhou about this. After the enthronement, there will be a ceremony to offer sacrifices to Heaven, and I will need them to accompany me," Xiao Ming said thoughtfully.

Although he had made many preparations before this, and even started to enlighten the common people, his experiences during this period made him realize that only through the path of an emperor with the Mandate of Heaven could he unify the Great Yu Empire as quickly as possible.

## Chapter 624

The atmosphere in the government office immediately became fervent due to Xiao Ming's decision.

Besides Pang Yukun, other officials also heard the news, and their faces showed joyful smiles. Their mood had been somewhat suppressed lately.

After all, for them, Xiao Ming was the emperor of the Great Yu Empire, and now they were being suppressed by Prince Zhao. Now that Xiao Ming had decided to restore legitimacy, how could they not be happy?

“Yes, Your Highness, I will go prepare now,” Pang Yukun said.

“Wait, one more thing.” Xiao Ming’s gaze was profound. “You should also prepare for the matter concerning the Prince of Huainan.”

Pang Yukun was overjoyed upon hearing this. He said, “Has Your Highness finally come to your senses?”

Xiao Ming pondered and nodded gently.

As the two were speaking, a person suddenly rushed into the government office. Xiao Ming and Pang Yukun were both startled to see him. He looked at the newcomer and said, “Lu Tong, what’s wrong with you?”

At this moment, Lu Tong’s eyes were red and swollen, but his face held a nervous smile. He said to Xiao Ming, “Your Highness, I have solved the passivation problem of nitrocotton, and also produced granular smokeless gunpowder.”

“Granular smokeless gunpowder?” Xiao Ming was somewhat shocked. He said, “Did you replace the camphor in smokeless gunpowder with nitroglycerin?”

“Precisely,” Lu Tong began to explain to Xiao Ming.

Ever since the last failure of smokeless gunpowder, he had been leading the students of the chemical academy day and night to research the passivation problem of smokeless gunpowder. Now, he had finally solved this problem by soaking the smokeless gunpowder in an ether-ethanol solution.

Moreover, after studying the technical books on gunpowder, he also used glycerin treated with concentrated nitric acid and concentrated sulfuric acid, mixed into smokeless gunpowder, to obtain granular smokeless gunpowder.

This gunpowder could completely replace black gunpowder as the new generation of propellants for muskets and cannons.

As for ether, he produced it by co-heating alcohol and concentrated sulfuric acid at 140 degrees. After cooling this method, water was added, and it was left to stand for liquid separation. Alcohol and sulfuric acid dissolved in water, while ether was insoluble in water, allowing ether to be extracted.

“Lu Tong, you’ve brought another surprise to me! Granular smokeless gunpowder will greatly increase the range of flintlock guns and cannons. Coupled with the improvement in steel quality, it seems the state army’s weapons can be upgraded again,” Xiao Ming laughed heartily.

Lu Tong also smiled upon hearing this. However, after he smiled, his eyes suddenly closed, and his body swayed before falling to the ground.

Xiao Ming was startled and immediately rushed forward to support Lu Tong. However, when he looked closely, he heard faint snoring coming from Lu Tong’s mouth, which immediately relieved him. It seemed that for this smokeless gunpowder, this fellow was simply too tired.

Pang Yukun naturally did not understand granular smokeless gunpowder and such things, but seeing Xiao Ming's and Lu Tong's reactions, he understood that it was something very powerful.

He asked, "Your Highness, what is the use of this granular smokeless gunpowder?"

"It's of great use. Now, the state's army should surpass the West in terms of gunpowder," Xiao Ming mused. Granular smokeless gunpowder was a product of the 19th century.

Even if this era was fifty years ahead of contemporary times, this smokeless gunpowder was hoped to appear only a hundred years later. Before that, black gunpowder had always been used.

However, even though Lu Tong had produced granular smokeless gunpowder, mass production would probably take some time, but equipping a small quantity should not be a problem.

At least, with rifled guns plus granular smokeless gunpowder, his rifled guns will truly reach the level of the Minié rifle, with a terrifying range of nine hundred meters.

Pang Yukun smiled upon hearing this. The West was still just a concept in his eyes, but Xiao Ming saying that gunpowder surpassed the West was certainly something to be happy about.

He said, "Your Highness, this Lu Tong deserves a reward. Just as Your Highness is about to hold the enthronement ceremony, he has brought a great gift for Your Highness."

“Hmm, you are right. You should have the official responsible for this matter draw up a list. All students involved in the research and development of granular smokeless gunpowder must be rewarded,” Xiao Ming said.

Now, numerous incentive measures had made the students of Bowen Academy increasingly passionate. Not only were there public laboratories in Bowen Academy, but some students even jointly established private laboratories for relevant research.

Of course, these private laboratories were all under the supervision of the Secret Guard to prevent technology leaks.

As for the technology from private laboratories, Xiao Ming adopted an acquisition strategy. He would provide financial support for any mature technology or product.

In this way, Qingzhou’s fervent atmosphere for technology would further spread to the common people, making them pay more attention to the development and application of various technologies.

After having a guard summon a carriage to send Lu Tong back, Xiao Ming called another carriage and went to the military machinery department. Now that granular smokeless gunpowder was available, he needed to assemble an army equipped with Minié rifles.

Unlike before, this time when Xiao Ming arrived at the military machinery department, he heard the “rumbling” sound of steam engines. Since steam engines began production more than half a year ago, Lin Wentao had provided five more steam engines to the military machinery department during the half-year truce.

The advent of steam power greatly accelerated the production of rifled guns.

Xiao Ming arrived, and Song Changping quickly emerged from the workshop. “Your Highness hasn’t been to the military machinery department for a long time.”

“I did not wish to disturb your production. However, this time I have a serious matter. Eight months ago, I asked you to stockpile rifled guns and conical bullets. How are your preparations now?”

Song Changping, seeing Xiao Ming’s serious expression, put away his smile and said, “Your Highness, now that there are steam engines to rifle barrels, it’s much easier. I have already stockpiled 6,000 rifled guns and produced 120,000 conical bullets. I wonder if that’s enough?”

“The guns are enough, but the bullets are still too few. That averages only twenty rounds per gun,” Xiao Ming said. “Rifled guns are not needed for now. You are to reassign those artisans to produce bullets. Additionally, all 6,000 rifled flintlock guns are to be sent to the Yunzhou Grand Camp. War is approaching, and I have great use for them this time.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Song Changping said.

The three princes attempting to form an allied army to attack him, his resolute refusal to compromise, was also due to his confidence in his own strength, and this confidence came from these 6,000 rifled flintlock guns.

Because even without smokeless gunpowder, these guns could still shoot about four hundred meters. Now with smokeless gunpowder, the range of these guns is enough to take out the enemy’s artillery.

And in contemporary times, it was precisely because the Minié rifle posed a threat to artillery that cannons were further upgraded to improve their battlefield survival rate.

After instructing Song Changping on this matter, Xiao Ming prepared to return. At this moment, Chen Qi suddenly ran out excitedly from the workshop. He said to Xiao Ming, “Your Highness, the steel produced by the steel workshop can now completely replace bronze! The cost and production speed of field guns will be much faster now!”

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The constant whistling of steam engines echoed in the military machinery department, and Chen Qi’s approaching voice was somewhat muffled by the prolonged whistle.

Noticing this, Xiao Ming stopped and looked at Chen Qi. After asking him a few questions when he got closer, Xiao Ming understood what he was saying.

“Really?” Xiao Ming asked again.

Since adopting the converter steelmaking technology, he was very confident in the quality of Qingzhou steel. The advanced production process was now sufficient for Qingzhou steel to reach the 19th-century standard.

This standard was enough to drive the industrial revolution in his state because the quality of steel met the manufacturing requirements for most machinery.

The criterion for discerning the quality of this steel was to use it to manufacture cannons. If it could withstand the strength requirements of cannons, then applying it elsewhere would not be a problem.

“Your Highness, half a year ago, the military machinery department used steel produced by the steel machinery department to cast a cannon. For the past six months, we have been using this cannon for firing. This cannon is in no way inferior to bronze cannons.” Chen Qi stated.

Xiao Ming nodded. This indicated that the quality of the new steel was up to par, and its strength met the standards for use as cannon steel. This would allow him to save copper for manufacturing other items, as the Great Yu Empire was currently a copper-poor country.

“In that case, the production of field guns should be able to increase now, right?” Xiao Ming asked.

Overall, the number of cannons in the army was still a bit low. All the field guns combined totaled only about 200. These field guns were sufficient for one war, but not enough if facing two wars. Furthermore, Xiao Ming now had colonies like the Sanmyo Kingdom overseas, and these colonies also needed to be equipped with standardized weapons.

Chen Qi smiled, “Your Highness, that is exactly what I was going to say. It is no longer an issue to cast field guns using steel. Thus, the machinery department will no longer have to worry about copper. It is just that we do not know how many field guns the army still requires.”

“Producing another 300 units, bringing the total number of field guns in the army to 500, should be temporarily sufficient,” Xiao Ming said after a moment of thought.

For him, these field guns were primarily aimed at the barbarians. Compared to the cumbersome cannons of the past, these field guns were very convenient for transportation on the grasslands. He never forgot this barbaric tribe that had caused suffering to the Great Yu Empire. To achieve the revitalization of the Great Yu Empire, this northern hidden danger had to be resolved.



“Yes, Your Highness, I will then arrange for the artisans to continue production,” Chen Qi said.

After discussing this matter, the three also talked about other firearm production issues. According to Song Changping, he and Lin Wentao were attempting to establish a steam engine-based assembly line.

This assembly line would integrate gun barrel manufacturing, standardized parts production, and final assembly into a single production process. The first two steps would be achieved by using steam engines to power lathes. Currently, some lathes from the lathe workshop had already been transferred to the military machinery department, including drilling machines, milling machines, and grinding machines.

“This matter sounds simple, but it is very difficult to implement. For this, you must set up artisans specifically for inspecting the dimensions of parts,” Xiao Ming said after a moment of hesitation.

During Western industrialization, standardization and precision manufacturing were applied in various factories. Among the resulting innovations were inspectors who used toolboxes to check the product qualification rate.

Now, Lin Wentao and Song Changping were preparing to implement assembly line production using steam power, and this step was unavoidable.

“Lin Wentao also mentioned this. He has sent a batch of measuring tools to the military machinery department,” Song Changping said.

Xiao Ming looked at Chen Qi, who also nodded. Then, he sent someone to retrieve the toolbox from inside the machinery department.

Soon, an artisan came before the three. He opened the toolbox and spread it on the ground. Long and short measuring tools appeared before Xiao Ming.

“Your Highness, this is what Lin Wentao sent.” Song Changping took out a caliper from it. The values on it were precisely the units of millimeters, centimeters, etc., that Xiao Ming had drawn.

After he unified the measurement standards, the prefectures and counties within the state adopted this set of measurement units. Bowen Academy was the same, and Lin Wentao also learned these from there.

Scanning the wooden box, Xiao Ming felt at ease seeing rulers, compasses, protractors, and other measuring instruments arranged on the upper and lower layers of the box.

“Not bad.”

Xiao Ming smiled. For him, the industrialization of his state would always be the foundation of his standing. If his state could reach the level of industrialization in Britain now, he would not care about the other vassal princes of the Great Yu Empire.

However, time was limited to four years, and industry had remained in the small circle of Qingzhou, not extending to other prefectures and counties of the state.

It was not that Xiao Ming was unconcerned about the industrialization of his state. Rather, four years of continuous warfare had led him to invest most of his financial revenue into war consumption. It was already fortunate that his state had not suffered economic collapse during these years.

Therefore, military-related machinery departments were very prosperous, but extending to other consumer industrial products was not feasible.

And the most important point was that merchants profited from war. They were more eager to invest silver in war to earn quick money. Although Xiao Ming realized this, he had no choice, as war required money.

It was precisely because of this that he realized how extremely difficult it was to industrialize without a stable domestic environment. For this reason, he was eager to achieve a stable surrounding environment.

Wang Xuan's intelligence stated very directly that the King of Chu had already made contact with the French. If the King of Chu eventually cooperated with the French, this would be a threat to him because the French would not only bring advanced weapons to the King of Chu but also some different ideas.

And this thing called "ideas" was the most dangerous.

After discussing assembly line production with the two men, using various measuring tools, Xiao Ming returned to his princely estate. The emergence of such advanced industrial methods in the military machinery department was a good thing. According to Xiao Ming's experience, any technology was first applied for military convenience before slowly transitioning to civilian use.

If the military machinery department's production system matured, it would also drive changes in civilian industry.

Upon returning to his princely estate, Xiao Ming began preparations for his enthronement. Although he knew that this ascension to the throne was merely to legitimize himself and would not change the decision of Prince Yan, Prince Zhao, and Prince Liang to attack Qi, it was clear from Pang Yukun's reaction that this would cause a tremendous stir in the state.

This was because the soldiers of the state would no longer be fighting for a vassal prince, but for an emperor. This encouragement of belief would make his army display even greater will and power than before.

#### Chapter 626

A ray of sunlight fell upon the broken city wall of Jinling City. Under the golden glow, the laborers repairing the wall toiled, sweating profusely.

Although autumn had arrived, Jinling City remained hot. Just an hour into their work, the laborers' clothes were already soaked.

"Elder Fiji, is the news of His Highness's ascension true?"

In front of the city wall, Fiji stood with his hands behind his back. The city wall of Jinling City was severely damaged by the war. Since arriving in Jinling City, the first thing he tackled was this, as across the Yangtze River lay the King of Chu's fiefdom.

Although Xiao Ming and the King of Chu had signed an alliance, this was merely a temporary expedient for the King of Chu to obtain firearms. Therefore, repairing the city wall was, in his opinion, an urgent matter.

“Of course, how could this be false? The late emperor personally handed the imperial edict to Du Heng on his deathbed.”

Fiji stroked his beard, his face beaming with a smile. The news of Prince Qi’s ascension yesterday reached Jinling City, making him so happy that he couldn’t sleep a wink.

For him, as long as Xiao Ming had not ascended the throne, he was not the emperor of the Great Yu Empire, and the longer it dragged on, the more he would be questioned. Now that Wei’s thirteen prefectures had been swiftly recaptured and their strength greatly increased, it was the best time to ascend the throne. Xiao Ming’s decisive action also earned his great admiration.

Moreover, once Xiao Ming ascended the throne, Fei Yuer would be the reigning empress, thus solidifying the Fei family’s position in Qingzhou.

The person of Fiji’s stature was an old man in a cyan silk robe, similar in age to Fiji. He said, “If that’s the case, our Tong family should also make a trip to Qingzhou to congratulate His Highness on his ascension. His Highness is benevolent and generous, and the powerful families of Jinling City are all grateful to His Highness. If Elder Fiji doesn’t mind, Tong is willing to accompany the Elder to Qingzhou. How about it?”

“Master Tong is indeed an understanding man. The rumors outside that His Highness shows no mercy to powerful families are false and should not be believed!” Fiji said with a smile.

After arriving in Jinling City, he intervened in the handling of the powerful families. He was merciless towards the Zhang family, who had marital ties with Jinling City and Prince Wei. Those who deserved to be killed were killed, those who deserved to be exiled were exiled, and those who deserved to be conscripted into the army were conscripted.

Because of this, the powerful families of Jinling City were all on high alert, ready to revolt and fight to the death with him at any moment.

But after dealing with the Zhang family, he suddenly summoned the Tong family. After a pleasant conversation, the head of the Tong family walked out of the government office with a smile. Then, policies regarding the handling of powerful families spread among the powerful families. The powerful families, who had originally expected a fierce battle, immediately threw down their weapons and came to visit Fiji.

Tong Hongchang smiled upon hearing this, "If it weren't for Elder Fiji, we would have believed Prince Wei's words and made a huge mistake. Now, to prove the loyalty of Jinling's powerful families to His Highness, I, Tong, should also make a trip to Qingzhou."

Fiji nodded. "Actually, for His Highness, the most important thing is the stability and tax revenue of the thirteen prefectures. His Highness has experienced too many empty promises. Master Tong needs to show His Highness some tangible results."

Tong Hongchang showed an awkward smile upon hearing this. Although Xiao Ming's policy did not completely exterminate the powerful families, the disbandment of their private armies and the return of illegally occupied land to the common people still had to be enforced. Whether these two points could be carried out depended on the cooperation of local powerful families like the Tong family.

"Elder Fiji, rest assured. Tong will certainly handle this matter properly. Tong will be the first to not let off anyone who disobeys Your Highness's decrees," Tong Hongchang said decisively.

Fiji nodded upon hearing this. "In that case, Master Tong, please go back and prepare."

Tong Hongchang, upon hearing this, bowed and chose to leave.

Seeing Tong Hongchang walk away, Fiji's eyes turned cold. Just as he had told Xiao Ming, the powerful families of the thirteen prefectures were deeply entrenched, with strong roots. Even though the Southern Expeditionary Army had captured one city after another, the influence of the powerful families among the common people remained immense.

If not for their fear of the Southern Expeditionary Army's ferocity this time, the internal unrest in the thirteen prefectures would probably not have subsided so quickly.

But even so, resolving the powerful families' private forces without bloodshed would take some time. For this matter, he chose a strategy of both carrot and stick. This Tong Hongchang was a local powerful family he had courted, and now he was using Tong Hongchang to deter other powerful families.

Moreover, the autumn harvest season was fast approaching. Currently, the government office only controlled Jinling City and its nearby counties, and many villages still did not have officials from Qingzhou.

It wasn't that he didn't want to send them, but the thirteen prefectures had basically exhausted the available officials. Most counties and villages now had to rely on these local powerful families and village chiefs for governance.

Although the common people of Wei had been influenced by Qingzhou's ideas to some extent, traditional concepts could not be changed in a day or two. If there was no one to supervise tax collection, the losses in the autumn harvest this year would be significant.

The Southern Expeditionary Army painstakingly fought for the thirteen prefectures for the sake of taxes. On this issue, Fiji was very clear, which was why he had just hinted to Tong Hongchang that the effective results he needed were taxes.

As he was thinking, Jinling Governor Wei Yuan suddenly approached him.

This Wei Yuan was originally a minor official of the sixth rank in Chang'an, but he excelled in the written examination at Bowen Academy and also passed Xiao Ming's personal test. This was why he was sent to Jinling City to take charge of the governorship.

"Elder, the King of Chu's navy has appeared on the river," Wei Yuan said, somewhat nervously.

"The King of Chu's navy?" Fiji frowned. "When did this happen?"

"The guards at the dock just sent word. The Dengzhou army has already ascended the city walls and is on alert," Wei Yuan said.

Fiji immediately walked towards the South City Wall upon hearing this. The sudden appearance of the King of Chu's navy here was not a good sign. Even if it wasn't to take the opportunity to intervene in Jinling City, it was probably to guard against them. Just as he had thought, the King of Chu had never trusted them.



The two arrived at the South City and ascended the city wall. At this moment, Ye Qingyun was holding a telescope and looking at the river. The warships sent by the King of Chu this time were armed with cannons and were moving from west to east.

The leading warship was slightly larger, and faintly visible figures on it were pointing towards Jinling City.

"It's a missionary," Ye Qingyun put down his telescope and said to Fiji.

Fiji took Ye Qingyun's telescope and looked at the river. Indeed, on the leading warship, he saw a blond man wearing a black robe with a cross hanging around his neck.

He said, "Your Highness sent news that the King of Chu has had contact with the French. The King of Chu was once severely beaten by the Dutch, and since then, he has been very eager to contact other Western countries to obtain firearms. It's likely this is a missionary from France."

"But why are they here?" Ye Qingyun frowned tightly.

Fiji, being a shrewd and experienced individual, said, "Suzhou and Hangzhou are prosperous lands. Now that Your Highness has taken Jinling City, the King of Chu will surely worry about the safety of Suzhou and Hangzhou. Their ostentatious passing is a deliberate warning to us."

Chapter 627

The moist river wind whistled across the water and blew against the city wall of Jinling City.

Ye Qingyun said languidly, "A missionary can scare us? Is the King of Chu underestimating us too much?"

"The King of Chu's real intention is probably not that. Don't forget where our firearms came from. Perhaps he wants to tell us that they can also manufacture firearms now?"

Ye Qingyun frowned upon hearing this. "His Highness once said that the skills he knew were taught by a missionary. Could it be that the King of Chu has also found such a person?"

"That's what I'm worried about too," Fei Ji said with concern. He didn't know that the missionary Xiao Ming spoke of was merely an excuse.

At this moment, on the warship below Jinling City, the blond, blue-eyed missionary was also looking at Fei Ji and Ye Qingyun on the city wall through a telescope. Then he shifted his gaze to the soldiers on the city wall.

After confirming that the soldiers on the city wall were carrying flintlock guns with fixed bayonets, he put down his telescope.

"It's truly astonishing. These soldiers are actually carrying flintlock guns," the missionary exclaimed.

Beside the missionary stood a richly dressed middle-aged man. He said to the missionary, "Mr. Richard, do you believe it now?"

“Yes, now I believe it,” the missionary named Richard said solemnly. After the King of Chu’s army reached the vicinity of Guangzhou, he contacted the Chu army’s generals and led them to make contact with the French.

Richard had arrived in the Great Yu Empire to preach a long time ago, living in Guangzhou for fifteen years. During this time, he learned the language of the Great Yu Empire and had always observed the Great Yu Empire. That was why he was so surprised that such advanced firearms would appear in the Great Yu Empire.

Putting away his telescope, Richard entered the ship’s cabin. In the cabin was a black-haired, blue-eyed middle-aged man in a blue tailcoat, with a mustache curled up on both sides of his mouth.

“Basil, they weren’t lying. Indeed, an extraordinary vassal prince has appeared in the north of this country. He can manufacture flintlock guns and cast iron cannons,” Richard said.

Basil came from the French expeditionary force. This time, he was ordered to come to Chu to cooperate with the King of Chu. After brief contact, the King of Chu readily agreed to trade with the French, on the condition that France sent military officers to train their generals and provided them with weapons.

In fact, after occupying Annam, France was unable to fight a vast Great Yu Empire alone. Now, obtaining trading rights without war was what they hoped for.

Of course, they could also take the opportunity to sell a lot of arms, which suited their intentions even more. In this way, they could both get rich in Europe by selling Great Yu Empire’s goods and sell firearms at high prices to Great Yu Empire’s vassal princes.

"It's truly incredible. The Dutch said they were trading with a powerful vassal prince in the Great Yu Empire, and it turns out to be true. In that case, we French cannot fall behind. Now that this Great Yu Empire is in internal strife, it's time for us to delineate our spheres of influence," Basil said.

On the way, Richard had already informed him of the current situation in the Great Yu Empire. For him, a divided Great Yu Empire was precisely what they needed.

"The Dutch are very shrewd. This King of Chu's army is too backward, and his industry is a mess. It won't be easy to support him," Richard said.

Basil frowned. "But this King of Chu is our best option right now. His territory is in the south, which can connect with Annam, and goods can be transported to our country overland from Annam. Furthermore, this Prince Qi seems ambitious and might become our enemy in the future."

"The Dutch also said so. They are very worried about this Prince Qi. Both the occupation of Ryukyu and the stationing of troops in Zeelandia show that this Prince Qi is very strong. Claire was also forced to cooperate with him. It is said that Claire has sent someone to relay the news here back to the Dutch parliament, and the parliament will ultimately decide whether to continue cooperating with this Prince Qi."

Basil nodded. "Claire isn't too foolish. He should understand that a powerful regime appearing in East Asia is very disadvantageous to us Europeans. The Great Yu Empire is vast and populous. If this Prince Qi completes unification, it will be our disaster. Future trade will be dictated by him."

"You are absolutely right," Richard said with a smile. "Perhaps we should also cooperate with the British. After all, there are common European interests here."

“Not yet for now, otherwise, we’ll have to share another piece of our cake,” Basil shook his head.

The two were communicating, but the others on the ship couldn’t understand them at all because they were speaking their native language. After their conversation, Richard spoke to the middle-aged man responsible for this matter: “Lieutenant Basil said he will help your King of Chu train his army, and also contact merchants to provide weapons for your King of Chu.”

The middle-aged man breathed a heavy sigh of relief. He said, “Excellent! Please, gentlemen, accompany me to Suzhou City. I will give you a grand reception there.”

On the city wall, Ye Qingyun and Fei Ji witnessed the King of Chu’s warships appear and then disappear. Fei Ji said, “What on earth is the King of Chu thinking? I must discuss this matter with His Highness when I return.”

Upon this, Ye Qingyun sighed. He said, “Elder Fei Ji, the safety of Jinling City is of utmost importance. I cannot return to attend His Highness’s enthronement ceremony. I hope Elder Fei Ji can speak well of me before His Highness.”

“General Ye has been diligent and conscientious; I certainly see it. Rest assured,” Fei Ji said, then descended the city wall.

The message from Qingzhou urged him to return as soon as possible. After making some preparations, he set off for Qingzhou, accompanied by representatives of the powerful families from Jinling City.

Along the way, as they passed through other prefectures and counties, some more powerful families joined them. Ten days later, when they arrived in Qingzhou, Fei Ji's entourage had grown into a massive procession comprising thousands of people.

Such a large number of powerful families entering the city naturally quickly attracted the attention of the Qingzhou government office.

Pang Yukun was relieved to learn of Fei Ji's return. In this regard, he was inferior to Fei Ji, and the specific arrangements for the enthronement would have to depend on Fei Ji.

After the two met, they immediately went to the princely estate, where they saw Xiao Ming trying on his dragon robes.

"Your Highness, this dragon robe is truly grand and fitting, especially the nine golden dragons on it, they almost seem to leap forth!" At first sight of Xiao Ming in such attire, Fei Ji was startled, then profusely flattered him.

Pang Yukun, meanwhile, smiled, his eyes showing a sense of accomplishment. Previously, he had merely harbored a mentality of being content with minor wealth, but now his mindset had completely changed.

Xiao Ming smiled upon hearing this. The dragon robes had just arrived. He said, "Elder Fei Ji, your flattery is too old-fashioned. However, you just returned and immediately rushed to the princely estate, there must be something else, right?"

Chapter 628

"Your Highness truly has a keen eye; I truly cannot hide anything."

Fei Ji and Pang Yukun exchanged glances, their facial wrinkles bunching together with smiles.

Fei Yuer, who had been trying on clothes for him with Lu Luo, Ziyuan, and Xiao Huan, saw this and walked past Xiao Ming to another area, temporarily avoiding suspicion.

Fei Ji glanced at Fei Yuer, a hint of admiration flashing in his eyes. In formal settings, the harem was not to participate in government affairs. She was about to become empress and should remember this point even more.

After the four had left, Fei Ji said loudly, "Your Highness, among those who accompanied me to Qingzhou this time are also the powerful families from the thirteen prefectures. They are currently staying in the inns of Qingzhou City, eager to come and congratulate Your Highness."

"The powerful families of the thirteen prefectures?" Xiao Ming frowned. He still remembered the events of four years ago vividly, so he remained wary of the powerful families.

However, he also understood that killing them all was impossible. After all, the powerful families of the Great Yu Empire had existed for over a thousand years, and each powerful family represented a local clan force.

The former Wang family of Qingzhou alone had over 20,000 clan members, and the Wang family was merely a small fry compared to the powerful families in Wei. When he dealt with the Wang family, he only punished the ringleaders.

He then dismantled and distributed the other members of the Wang family throughout the state, thus completely dissolving the powerful families of the six prefectures.

Fei Ji keenly perceived the change in Xiao Ming's expression. He said, "Your Highness, now the thirteen prefectures have basically restored order, and local taxes are collected as usual. This is all thanks to the support of these powerful families." Fei Ji explained.

Xiao Ming nodded, his expression suddenly relaxing. He said, "Elder Fei Ji, do not worry. Since I have already issued a new decree, it will naturally not change."

Xiao Ming's purpose in taking Wei was for tax revenue. Otherwise, his occupation of Wei would be tantamount to America's occupation of Iraq, consuming enormous resources, and the Dengzhou army of the Southern Expeditionary Force would be dragged into a prolonged quagmire of suppressing rebellions in Wei, which would undoubtedly be a disaster for him.

After all, the Great Yu Empire was not a modern society. If the powerful families hid in the deep mountains and old forests, they would not be so easy to find. In such a case, a chaotic Wei, without taxes, would not only bring him no benefit but would be a burden.

Initially, he simply believed that force could solve everything, but the various intelligence reports collected by Li San from the thirteen prefectures gradually made him realize that this was merely his wishful thinking.

Li San's intelligence mentioned that many villages in Wei were based on clan surnames, with hundreds or even thousands of people in a single village sharing the same surname.

During this period, his production teams had been established, but the captains chosen by the common people in the villages were still those with high prestige in the village.



This intelligence differed from the situation in Qingzhou. The reason for this difference was that the powerful families in Qingzhou at that time were already very weak due to repeated barbarian invasions. Powerful family members with some property had all hidden in fortified villages and prefectures, while the impoverished common people had no choice but to remain in their villages.

It was then that he realized that governing a large country was like cooking a small fish: the heat had to be controlled just right, otherwise, too much or too little heat would only create a mess.

"I am now at ease. Your Highness, in fact, for the powerful families and gentry, they don't care who rules them. For them, as long as their interests can be protected, it is enough. Now that Your Highness and the powerful families of Wei are at peace, this news will reduce the difficulty of Your Highness conquering the world when it spreads to other places."

Pang Yukun agreed deeply. He said, "Your Highness, Elder Fei Ji's words are absolutely right. It is precisely for this reason that dynasties change, and these powerful families still live carefree lives."

"Chief Grand Secretary Pang, is that a compliment to their shrewdness, or a sarcasm towards their selfishness?" Pang Yukun's words were a double entendre, and Xiao Ming couldn't help but laugh.

"Your Highness, this is merely my rambling," Pang Yukun sighed. His mood was as complicated as Xiao Ming's now.

With the powerful families of the six prefectures wiped out, he had handled government affairs smoothly for the past four years, no longer having to deal with some powerful families. But now that Wei was added, he had to meet the people he hated again.

Xiao Ming naturally understood Pang Yukun's feelings, but if he were to carry out a full-scale massacre against the powerful families in the thirteen prefectures, the population of Wei would probably decrease by one-third.

And during his massacre of the powerful families, these desperate powerful families would surely slaughter the common people, and at that time, that number would continue to rise.

If he were to continue killing throughout the Great Yu Empire, the entire country might experience a loss of two-thirds of its population, similar to the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty or the early Tang Dynasty after the fall of the Sui Dynasty.

And he could not bear this cost, because the West had risen. At that time, his state would inevitably suffer heavy military losses, which would not give foreign tribes an opportunity to invade?

Therefore, in the end, he chose the method of first compromising and then governing. Firstly, disarming the powerful families, and then completely dismantling the powerful families' monopoly on educational resources through popular education.

As long as the common people at the bottom had a channel to rise to the court, the powerful families would not be able to control the court. This was the same principle as Li Shimin's implementation of the imperial examination system.

"Even if you have emotions now, you must endure them for me. Now, I must consider the overall situation, not just the six prefectures," Xiao Ming reminded Pang Yukun, lest he revert to his old bad temper.

“Yes, Your Highness,” Pang Yukun nodded in response.

Fei Ji’s expression showed relief at this moment. He said, “Your Highness, these powerful families have all arrived in Qingzhou. Should Your Highness take some time to meet them?”

“Meet them, of course, I must meet them, and grandly at that. Otherwise, how can I put their minds at ease?” Xiao Ming said solemnly.

As Xiao Ming put on his dragon robes, his state of mind changed. He was now thinking about how to govern this country, how to lead this ravaged country to stand shoulder to shoulder with, and even surpass, the Western powers.

For him, this was an arduous task. Although he possessed advanced technology, he could not control the hearts of every individual.

Besides the worry of being surrounded by wolves, he was also nervously anticipating the consequences that universal education would bring. The common people would no longer be ignorant, which would mean they would actively participate in politics.

At that time, whether his imperial power would be challenged by Western democratic politics would be an unknown. Although he understood this, he could not stop.

Because this was a contradictory problem: to lead the Great Yu Empire towards a modern state, the people's minds had to be opened. Conversely, continuing to keep the people ignorant would mean remaining in a feudal dynasty.

Sometimes Xiao Ming would ask himself if he could let go of the power in his hands and choose to compromise. His answer was no.

He had to admit that power was an addictive thing. Although he possessed immense knowledge, he was still not exempt from human nature, and he knew deeply that once he relinquished power, his fate would either be death or imprisonment. This was inevitable.

Having painstakingly lived a second life, he would not be so foolish. He had to be an emperor for life.

Chapter 629

"Yes, this subordinate will go back and arrange this matter."

Fei Ji's eyes held a hint of a smile, a self-satisfied smile that came from his suggestion being taken seriously.

On the matter of the powerful families, his suggestion had gained Xiao Ming's approval, which for Xiao Ming, was undoubtedly a recognition of his ability.

From serving Xiao Wenxuan to serving Xiao Ming, the person he served had changed, and he naturally wanted to prove his extraordinary talent to Xiao Ming.

Xiao Ming nodded upon hearing this. He said, "The enthronement ceremony will be one month from now. This month is enough time for you to spread the news of my ascension to the other vassal princes. We can use the enthronement as an opportunity to test their reactions."

"Yes, Your Highness," Pang Yukun and Fei Ji both nodded. Before the enthronement ceremony, they still had many matters to handle.

Having finished speaking, the two were about to leave. At this moment, Fei Ji suddenly remembered the matter of the King of Chu. He said to Xiao Ming, "Your Highness, a strange thing happened before I came to Qingzhou."

"Tell me about it," Xiao Ming was in a good mood these past two days.

"The King of Chu's fleet once appeared outside Jinling City, and on the ships, we also saw Western missionaries," Fei Ji said.

"Western missionaries?" Xiao Ming showed an interested expression. He said, "Wang Xuan said that the King of Chu had contact with the French. Now, it seems this contact is quite deep."

"The King of Chu's army has occupied Guangzhou. It is said that many Western merchants and missionaries live in Guangzhou. Perhaps these are not Frenchmen," Fei Ji mused.

"No matter where these missionaries are from, in any case, this is not a good thing for us." Xiao Ming frowned. In Xiao Ming's opinion, the King of Chu's acceptance of firearms surpassed that of other vassal princes.

Just as the Qing Dynasty was severely taught a lesson by Western powers, the King of Chu was also severely taught a lesson by the Dutch. Now, it was unknown what psychological changes the stimulated King of Chu would undergo.

In other words, the current King of Chu might be more willing to accept change. This was also a habit he had developed from dealing with the Dutch. And it was precisely because of this habit that he probably established relations with the French so quickly, instead of putting on airs of a celestial empire and cursing them as barbarians.

Now, with the north unsettled, and the state unable to look south, Fei Ji frowned and said, "Your Highness, I believe that Prince Zhao is a threat, and now it seems that the King of Chu is also not simple."

Xiao Ming looked south, his gaze profound. He wasn't worried about the King of Chu causing too much trouble.

Because now, even with French assistance to the King of Chu, Chu would not be able to catch up with Qingzhou's level of industrialization, and the essence of war in the Age of Exploration was nothing more than a competition of industrial capability.

Moreover, if the French participated in the Great Yu Empire's internal strife, he would then have a reason to deal with Annam.

"The King of Chu in the south, Prince Zhao in the north. Imperial Mother said Imperial Father always had reservations about them. Now it seems that's true. But even if the King of Chu cooperates with the French, he won't rashly tear up the alliance. He still has many goods he hasn't received. While this is happening, I must unify the north as quickly as possible," Xiao Ming said calmly.

“Your Highness, as long as you adhere to the policies towards the powerful families in Wei, then once the armies of Prince Yan and Prince Liang are defeated, the powerful families of Yan and Liang will rush to pledge their loyalty to Your Highness,” Fei Ji said confidently.

Xiao Ming nodded. Fei Ji’s idea was tantamount to reducing the difficulty of unification from high to low. Of course, everything comes at a price, and in this way, the problem of the powerful families remained.

After discussing the situation in Wei, Xiao Ming began to discuss the details of the enthronement ceremony with the two. A prominent issue now was that Qingzhou had no imperial palace.

And building an imperial palace in a month was clearly impossible. The three discussed and decided to hold the enthronement ceremony at the Qingzhou government office.

Compared to Prince Qi’s mansion, the Qingzhou government office was much larger and divided into front and back halls. The back hall could be used as a temporary court.

Besides the court for political discussions, there were also various troublesome issues like arranging for the late emperor’s concubines. Xiao Ming was also at a loss about this and simply handed the matter over to Imperial Concubine Zhen.

These concubines, relying on their seniority, might be somewhat dissatisfied with his arrangements, but with Imperial Concubine Zhen personally handling it, they would have to endure even if they had opinions. After all, Imperial Concubine Zhen would become the Grand Empress Dowager after he ascended the throne.

Having settled these detailed matters, the two left the princely estate.

Fei Ji, being proficient in the procedures of the enthronement ceremony, would be responsible for arranging the entire sequence of the enthronement during this month, while Pang Yukun would only be responsible for conveying the news of Xiao Ming's enthronement to the other vassal princes.

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Five days later, Jizhou.

Prince Yong fell silent after seeing off the envoy from Qingzhou.

Princess Yong, seeing Prince Yong's state, asked in confusion, "Your Highness, what on earth happened?"

"Xiao Ming is preparing to ascend the throne. The Imperial Brother really gave him the imperial edict," Prince Yong sighed slowly.

Princess Yong gently shook her head. She said, "During the chaos in Chang'an, I already said that His Majesty would surely pass the throne to Xiao Ming. Now, which other imperial prince in this world can turn the tide?"



“Princess Consort has always been intelligent, and she guessed right again this time. If it weren’t for Princess Consort’s help all these years, with my reckless nature, I would have lost my life long ago,” Prince Yong said, his eyes filled with affection as he looked at Princess Yong.

Princess Yong showed a faint smile. It was widely known that Prince Yong had a volatile temper, but what others didn’t know was that he exclusively doted on her.

“Then what does Your Highness plan to do?” Princess Yong asked.

Thinking of this, Prince Yong’s face showed a hint of fear. “The Third Imperial Brother is already dead, and he was no match for Xiao Ming. How could I be Xiao Ming’s match? Moreover, I promised Imperial Brother that no matter who ascended the throne, I would be loyal to the imperial family.”

“Your Highness is absolutely right,” Princess Yong held Prince Yong’s hand. “In that case, we might have to make a trip to show our sincerity when Xiao Ming ascends the throne this time.”

Prince Yong nodded. “Now that Xiao Ming has Wei, plus my own state, he essentially occupies half of the northern territory. This makes stabilizing the north much simpler.”

“Your Highness, you are mistaken. Is not the King of Kang’s state also in Xiao Ming’s hands? Now, Xiao Ming commands the strength of four states,” Princess Yong said with a smile.

At the same time, the envoy from Qingzhou was driven out of Bozhou City by Prince Yan.

Inside Prince Yan's mansion, Prince Yan was furious.

"Xiao Ming, you little brat! Do you really think this world still belongs to the Great Yu Empire? Do you think this realm will forever be dictated by your Xiao family?" Prince Yan roared.

The officials and generals in the princely mansion were all silent, no one daring to provoke him at this moment.

After venting his anger, Prince Yan sneered, "He wants to ascend the throne, doesn't he? I will give him a surprise. Generals, listen to my command! Immediately gather the army! It's clear that Xiao Ming isn't prepared to hand over Wei. I don't believe he can stop the allied forces of Yan, Zhao, and Liang."

Chapter 630

Linnan City.

At midday, bursts of beautiful orchestral music drifted from the King of Chu's mansion in Lin'an City.

The main hall of the princely mansion was filled with guests. On both sides sat officials and generals of Chu, and there were also two particularly striking individuals, due to their appearance being different from the people of the Great Yu Empire.

These two were none other than Richard and Basil. After their trip to Jinling City, they came to Lin'an City, and they would likely spend a long time there.

“Two envoys, as long as you can train my army to be like Prince Qi’s army, I will certainly not treat you poorly.”

After three rounds of wine, the King of Chu, his eyes blurred with drink, wished to express all his displeasure.

Despite his alliance with Xiao Ming, he felt truly wronged. If it weren’t for Qingzhou’s cannons and muskets being so slow to arrive, why would he have to be so subservient?

Now that more than half of the southern prefectures and counties had fallen into his hands, his ambition swelled even further, and he was already envisioning himself unifying the Great Yu Empire.

Richard enjoyed the delicacies in the princely mansion, occasionally translating the King of Chu’s words to Basil. This time, the King of Chu had reached an agreement with Ocaso, the French governor responsible for East Asian affairs.

The French obtained exclusive trading rights with Chu, and at the same time established a trading port between the Great Yu Empire and Annam. In return, the French sold firearms to the King of Chu and sent military officers to train Chu’s army.

Basil was the instructor whom the King of Chu had hired with heavy money. Every month, the King of Chu had to pay Basil a salary of one thousand taels of silver, and also pay Richard five hundred taels for translation.

Richard translated the King of Chu’s words, and Basil frowned, “Your esteemed King of Chu, your current firearms are too poor. With matchlock guns and cannons with a range of only 500 meters, you cannot defeat Prince Qi.”

“Envoy, you jest. Xiao Ming also uses these firearms; it’s just that my army training is not as good as his,” the King of Chu had not yet realized anything.

Basil frowned. He said, “King of Chu, do you not understand yet? You have probably been tricked by this Prince Qi. We learned from the Dutch that Prince Qi’s army is equipped with flintlock guns, and their cannons have a range of three to four li. Moreover, they also have field guns. The gap in your weaponry is not small.”

“What are these flintlock guns and field guns?” the King of Chu asked, puzzled.

Basil showed a look of disdain. To him, the natives of this place were no different from those in America or Africa.

Despite having a large population, their rulers were still very ignorant. They knew nothing of science and had no faith, merely autocratic and brutal oppression of their own common people.

However, they were happy to see such rulers, because it was conducive to them extracting benefits from them.

“This flintlock gun is a more powerful firearm than the matchlock gun. Not only does it have a long range, but its loading speed is also very fast, and it is more adaptable to combat in rainy weather. And the field gun is a very convenient cannon. This cannon can advance with the musketeers and be deployed on the battlefield at any time,” Basil briefly introduced. “This time, I also brought firearms with me to your esteemed country for self-defense. This is a flintlock gun.”

With that, Basil stood up and presented a short-barreled flintlock gun to the King of Chu.

The King of Chu was now fully sober. He picked up the flintlock gun and looked at it, instantly understanding where the differences lay. Then his surprise turned into an extraordinary anger.

“Damn it! Xiao Ming has been deceiving me all this time!” the King of Chu roared.

The officials and generals in the main hall also showed indignant expressions, each whispering among themselves, clearly cursing Xiao Ming.

Li Chu Yuan, the King of Chu’s Crown Prince, and the Third Prince were seated on the left and right sides of the King of Chu. At this moment, Li Chu Yuan fanned the flames, saying, “Imperial Father, this Xiao Ming is simply too malicious! My devastating defeat against the Dutch last time was all Xiao Ming’s fault! If he hadn’t sold us those kinds of cannons, how could I have lost?!”

The last disastrous defeat had made Li Chu Yuan lose face. Now he had finally found an excuse. Although his words were cursing Xiao Ming, the excitement in his eyes was hard to conceal.

The King of Chu looked at Li Chu Yuan and said slowly, “Imperial Father was wrong to blame you.”

“Imperial Father being wrong to blame me is nothing to fear. It is right for me to suffer some grievances. I only hope that Imperial Father will no longer trust the imperial family. This Xiao Ming is so cunning, and others are probably the same,” Li Chu Yuan said, looking at the Third Prince.

After Prince Zhao enthroned the Thirteenth Prince, they had enthroned the Third Prince as their sovereign. If by seniority, they should all call the Third Prince “Emperor.”

However, the reality now was that the Third Prince was nothing more than a puppet, but even so, Li Chu Yuan remained wary of the Third Prince.

In his heart, this state of Chu belonged to him; how could it be someone else’s turn to lay hands on it?

Li Chu Yuan’s indirect accusations reached the Third Prince’s ears, but the Third Prince merely pretended not to hear, continuing to eat his dishes and drink his wine, as if Li Chu Yuan’s words had nothing to do with him.

Just as everyone was cursing Xiao Ming over the firearms, an imperial courier arrived outside the door and said, “Your Highness, an urgent dispatch from Qingzhou.”

“Qingzhou!” The King of Chu became even angrier upon hearing this. He said to all his civil and military officials, “Hmph, I want to see what tricks this Xiao Ming is playing now! Present it!”

The imperial courier, hearing this, handed the letter from Qingzhou to the King of Chu.

The King of Chu took the letter, tore it open, and read it. After just one glance, he threw the letter to the ground, his face turning from red to purple.

Li Chu Yuan carefully glanced at the King of Chu. He picked up the letter from the ground, looked at it, and was instantly shocked. "Xiao Ming is going to ascend the throne!"

As the words spread, the Third Prince, who had been feigning nonchalance, stiffened, then calmly continued to eat.

However, a faint, imperceptible smile appeared at the corner of his mouth.

He no longer viewed Xiao Ming with apprehension, nor did he hate him, nor did he harbor any of the suspicion and jealousy among princes. After living in Lin'an for a year, the cruel reality made him understand that he was merely a dog of the King of Chu.

What imperial throne, what realm, were to him merely illusions. He only resented that he had been blinded by the throne and met such a fate.

From the time he left Chang'an, he knew that Xiao Wenxuan would pass the throne to Xiao Ming. Now that Xiao Ming had ascended the throne, he felt a sense of relief and ease.

"Xiao Ming actually ordered us to attend his enthronement ceremony! What a joke!" Li Chu Yuan said furiously. "Imperial Father, in my opinion, why not learn from Xiao Ming and bombard Jinling City? Consider it a grand gift for him."

The King of Chu gasped violently. Xiao Ming's ascension meant his ambition was for the entire realm, which negated the legitimacy of the Third Prince he had supported. Although Li Chu Yuan's suggestion made him somewhat impulsive, he understood that now was not the time to openly break ties with Xiao Ming.

Although Xiao Ming did not give him the best firearms, they were enough to deal with other vassal princes.