

## **I. Dynasty 671**

### Chapter 671

Overcast clouds covered the sky.

The sounds of battle on the field echoed like rolling thunder from time to time.

The Black Armored Iron Cavalry, relying on the flexibility of their warhorses, galloped across the battlefield. From time to time, they would charge into the Huainan King's formation, but then they would immediately disengage, often killing some soldiers and then quickly retreating.

Although the Huainan King's soldiers fought bravely, they often failed to achieve significant results against cavalry that came and went like the wind.

After Cui Shang'an's cavalry collided with the Black Armored Iron Cavalry, they began to chase and fight on the battlefield. However, the Huainan Army's cavalry was clearly at a disadvantage.

Facing the seasoned Black Armored Iron Cavalry, the Huainan Army's cavalry, who had never fought an enemy on the battlefield, appeared very clumsy and suffered thousands of casualties in a very short time.

All of this was witnessed by the Prince of Huainan. Although anxious, he maintained a calm demeanor to steady morale.

“Bang, bang, bang...”

Outside Qingzhou City, the soldiers of the Western Expeditionary Army fought the Black Armored Iron Cavalry from behind a chariot formation. The soldiers inside Qingzhou City this time were led by Di Ying, a Qi army captain.

When the Black Armored Iron Cavalry appeared outside Qingzhou City, encircling it but not attacking, he realized that Juyong Pass might be in danger.

However, the Black Armored Iron Cavalry were numerous, and the troops in Qingzhou City were all infantry. He was helpless against these cavalry.

Yesterday, he sent out a chariot formation to protect the musketeers and fight the Black Armored Iron Cavalry. However, these Black Armored Iron Cavalry never engaged them. But once the chariot formation moved too far from the city, these cavalry would try to cut off the musketeers for encirclement and annihilation.

The musketeers in Qingzhou City outnumbered those Lu Fei had taken, but there were still only 60,000 of them. And 20,000 of these 60,000 had to remain to defend the city. After all, if Qingzhou City fell, Juyong Pass would become a completely isolated city.

And with 40,000 men against 50,000 Black Armored Iron Cavalry, even if they forced a breakthrough, they would likely suffer heavy losses. So, for the past two days, Di Ying had been thinking about how to get rid of the Black Armored Iron Cavalry.

So, when the Prince of Huainan's forces arrived today, Di Ying was overjoyed. He immediately led the musketeers from the city to join forces with the Huainan Army.

As soon as the chariot formation appeared, the Black Armored Iron Cavalry immediately panicked. Protected by the chariots, the musketeers relied on the chariots' bodies for cover, moving and firing at the Black Armored Iron Cavalry.

The Black Armored Iron Cavalry had already experienced this troublesome chariot formation yesterday. Now, with the addition of the Huainan Army, they became somewhat flustered.

Maintaining a distance from the chariot formation, the Black Armored Iron Cavalry felt powerless for the first time. This chariot formation was like a hedgehog; getting too close would only lead to death. The only way to break through such a chariot formation was for infantry to charge and break it.

"Bang, bang, bang..."

The chariot formation continued to move, and the Black Armored Iron Cavalry continuously fell along the chariot formation's path. The Huainan Army soldiers, seeing this, were greatly boosted in morale.

The Prince of Huainan saw hope at this moment. As long as their soldiers entered the chariot formation, these cavalry would be helpless against them.

"Kill!" the Prince of Huainan shouted loudly.

"Kill!" The Huainan army, re-formed into battle array, integrated and advanced towards the chariot formation.

The Black Armored Iron Cavalry tried to prevent the Huainan Army and Prince Qi's army from joining forces, but to stop them, they would have to charge the Huainan Army head-on.

But at this time, the Huainan army had formed dense formations. If they clashed head-on, they would surely suffer heavy casualties.

On a hill, Wang Chuan, the commander of the Black Armored Iron Cavalry, looked at the battlefield before him, his brows deeply furrowed by the intense fighting.

"General, Prince Zhao's power is waning. Now that the Prince of Huainan has also brought troops, coupled with Prince Yong's army, Prince Zhao will certainly be unable to resist," Wei Shaojie, his deputy, stood beside Wang Chuan.

Wang Chuan frowned upon hearing this. He said, "What do you mean, Captain Wei? Isn't this boosting others' morale and diminishing our own prestige?"

"General, you are mistaken. As the saying goes, 'a wise man knows when to submit.' Prince Liang and Prince Yan are dead, and the barbarians are fighting in Goryeo with Japan, so they cannot send troops to assist. Prince Zhao will not be able to escape this calamity. Moreover, even if the barbarians send troops, how can they easily defeat the combined armies of Prince Yong, the Prince of Huainan, and Xiao Ming?"

Wang Chuan snorted softly, "So what? Even so, we can only fight to the death."

Wei Shaojie sighed. He looked at the battlefield again. At this time, the musketeers and the Prince of Huainan's army were getting closer and closer, while the Black Armored Iron Cavalry were becoming increasingly helpless, only able to watch as the chariot formation and the Huainan Army converged.

When the chariot formation and the Huainan army merged, the Huainan army soldiers immediately entered the chariot formation and, together with Prince Qi's army, formed an even more formidable chariot formation. At this point, even if there were still infantry present, they probably wouldn't be able to easily break through this chariot formation.

Di Ying saw the Prince of Huainan at this moment. He said, "Your Highness, the Huainan army must follow the chariot formation."

The Prince of Huainan breathed a heavy sigh of relief. He said to Di Ying, "I will temporarily hand over full command of the Huainan army to you."

Di Ying felt a headache coming on. In just this short time, the Huainan army had lost over ten thousand men. Fighting cavalry on flat terrain probably terrified the Prince of Huainan quite a bit.

"In that case, this subordinate will presume."

Di Ying said, and immediately dispersed the Huainan army among the various chariot formations, placing the Huainan army's provisions and supplies in the center of the chariot formations.

At the same time, he had the pikemen protect both sides of the chariot formation, forming a rectangular shape, and marched towards Juyong Pass.

Facing the continuously moving chariot formation, the Black Armored Iron Cavalry continuously charged, but the increasingly tight defenses of the chariot formation left them helpless.

Wang Chuan and Wei Shaojie witnessed all this with growing anxiety. He said to Wei Shaojie, "You immediately lead 20,000 cavalry to Juyong Pass. I will lead the Black Armored Iron Cavalry to follow them. If there's an opportunity, delay their speed towards Juyong Pass."

"Yes, General." Wei Shaojie assented and immediately led his men towards Juyong Pass.

Now, they were clearly unable to stop this batch of soldiers from reinforcing Juyong Pass; they could only go to Juyong Pass to converge.

Di Ying and Prince Huainan's expressions gradually relaxed. For the next three days, they marched and rested. Prince Huainan also learned a lesson; he had the supply wagons, which transported provisions, also protect the army like chariots to avoid cavalry attacks.

The two armies simultaneously advanced towards Juyong Pass.

At the same time, Chen Xinran, who was resting in Yanzhou, also received news of Juyong Pass being besieged.

He immediately ordered a small number of soldiers to guard the city, and the majority of his soldiers set off for Juyong Pass.

Three days passed in the blink of an eye. During these three days, the barbarians and Deng Yuan repeatedly launched attacks on Juyong Pass, but were repeatedly repelled.

Under the fierce firepower of muskets and cannons, both the barbarians and Deng Yuan suffered losses.

Niu Ben was also having a hard time. After three days of bitter fighting, his soldiers suffered many casualties, and ammunition dwindled day by day. If this continued, it would be extremely disadvantageous for them.

On this day, after repelling another round of attacking soldiers, Niu Ben habitually picked up his telescope and looked into the distance. At this moment, the Western Expeditionary Army musketeers, protected by a chariot formation, appeared in his sight.

Niu Ben immediately burst out laughing. He said, "The time for a decisive battle has come! Deng Yuan, this general will meet you now!"

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"General, the Huainan army and the Yong army will arrive at Juyong Pass soon."

In the Zhao army's grand camp, Wei Shaojie reported to Deng Yuan.

He had arrived under Juyong Pass a day earlier, awaiting Deng Yuan's orders.

“How many men do the Huainan army and the Yong army have in total?” Deng Yuan asked.

“The Huainan army should have 80,000 men, and the Yong army is estimated to have 70,000. This time, there are also 40,000 musketeers accompanying them.”

Deng Yuan’s face seemed to have aged a little. With the convergence of these three armies, their numbers reached over 200,000, and the tide of the battle had been reversed.

Moreover, these past few days, he had grown increasingly less confident of victory. Prince Qi’s army was highly skilled in the use of firearms. In the siege these past few days, he had already lost 20,000 men, and this had only caused minimal casualties to Juyong Pass.

“Retreat!” After pondering for a long time, Deng Yuan softly uttered a single word.

“Retreat!” The generals in the tent were greatly alarmed.

Deng Yuan nodded. He said, “Prince Qi’s army alone is already difficult to deal with. Now, with the addition of the Huainan King’s and Prince Yong’s armies, we are bound to lose this battle. Instead of fighting, it’s better to retreat to Yuanzhou and use its strategic importance to defend against Niu Ben’s attack.”

As his voice fell, a sharp voice suddenly rang out, “Retreat! General Deng speaks lightly! If Juyong Pass cannot be taken this time and Prince Qi’s army is not defeated, then what will be lost next is Chang’an! General Deng, I ask you, can you bear this responsibility?”



“Assistant Minister Wang.” Deng Yuan was startled to see the newcomer. It was none other than Wang Xi, the eunuch by Prince Zhao’s side.

Wang Xi snorted softly. He said to Deng Yuan, “This time, His Highness was worried that General Deng would act on his own temperament, so he specifically sent this humble one to supervise the army. It shows how truly farsighted His Highness is. If this humble one had arrived a little later, General would surely have led the army to retreat to Yuanzhou.”

Deng Yuan explained, “Assistant Minister Wang, the art of war says: ‘When you are ten to one, surround them; five to one, attack them; two to one, fight them; if equal, you can divide them; if fewer, you can escape; if unequal, you can avoid them. Therefore, a small force that holds firm can capture a large enemy.’ At this moment, our forces are fewer than the enemy. At this time, we should avoid fighting them and instead maneuver using the natural defenses.”

Wang Xi grew even more displeased upon hearing this. “Five to one, attack them! Then why couldn’t the General take Juyong Pass when we had more men? Now that you see the enemy has more men, you want to run away, and you still have the nerve to talk about the art of war with me, a mere eunuch!”

The generals around Deng Yuan all showed anger. This Wang Xi, relying on being Prince Zhao’s favorite, had always looked down on them, the generals who fought on the front lines.

And he often took credit for the capture of Chang’an for himself.

For this eunuch, the Zhao army generals harbored much resentment but dared not offend him.

Deng Yuan, though a seasoned veteran, had to bow before Wang Xi. He said, "Assistant Minister Wang, Prince Qi's firearms are indeed formidable. These past few days, due to heavy casualties during the siege, morale has plummeted. The timing, terrain, and harmony are all gone."

Wang Xi, however, paid no mind to this. When Prince Zhao dispatched him here, he ordered him to absolutely prevent Prince Qi's army from moving south towards Chang'an. If they couldn't take this opportunity to annihilate Prince Qi's army at Juyong Pass, then Chang'an would inevitably become the next target.

"Assistant Minister Wang, if we don't leave, all of His Highness's troops will perish here," Deng Yuan said urgently. This Wang Xi was proficient in schemes and tricks but utterly ignorant of military maneuvers.

Wang Xi snorted coldly. He said, "That's not up to you. Although Zheng Chengwen is leading the troops this time, in reality, it is Wuzhu Gu Taiji who instructed Zheng Chengwen to attack Juyong Pass with His Highness. If you retreat at this time, where will you place His Highness? And how will you explain yourself to Wuzhu Gu Taiji?"

Hearing Wuzhu Gu's name, Deng Yuan's eyes narrowed. He said, "Assistant Minister Wang, the barbarians are man-eating wolves. Colluding with them will not end well."

"Deng Yuan!" Wang Xi shrieked, "How dare you! You are slandering His Highness! When we return to Chang'an, I will certainly report this to His Highness."

Deng Yuan laughed bleakly upon hearing this. He had long been dissatisfied with Prince Zhao's submission to the barbarians.

In his battles against the barbarians, his three sons had all died in combat. If not for Prince Zhao's benevolence towards him, he would not have come to help the barbarians attack Prince Qi's army, even if it meant his own death.

Now Wang Xi was constantly talking about worrying about offending Wuzhu Gu. He immediately became furious and said, "Assistant Minister Wang, you can say whatever you want to His Highness when you return to Chang'an. But this subordinate does not want the soldiers of Zhao to die in vain. Retreat!"

"You dare!" Wang Xi's chest heaved rapidly with anger. He then took out a golden fish tally. "This is the military tally bestowed upon this humble servant by His Highness. Without this humble servant's word, you are forbidden to move a single soldier."

Deng Yuan's face changed dramatically upon seeing the golden fish tally.

Wang Xi sneered, "General Deng, if Prince Qi's army attacks Chang'an, neither you nor I will survive."

Deng Yuan sighed and stomped his foot heavily. He left the tent in anger.

While the two were arguing, the Prince of Huainan's army had already set up camp on the spot. At the same time, Chen Xinran also arrived with his troops.

He immediately led his army to join forces with the Prince of Huainan.

“General Niu said to wait for his order before attacking,” Di Ying said, looking at the flag signaler on the city wall.

The flag signaler had just conveyed the order to him.

Chen Xinran, the Prince of Huainan, and Cui Shang’an stood together. All three nodded upon hearing this.

In Juyong Pass, Niu Ben was deploying troops. At this time, he had Qi Guangyi and Bai Mu reorganize the cavalry, and the musketeers in the city were responsible for defending the North City.

Now the balance of offense and defense had shifted. They no longer needed to defend the city; a full-scale attack would be enough.

With the cavalry assembled, Niu Ben glanced at the sun. It was noon now. Then he ascended the city wall. At this time, Prince Zhao’s camp still showed no signs of retreat.

“What is this Deng Yuan thinking? Does he really believe he can defeat an army of 200,000?” Niu Ben was very puzzled.

However, he only thought about it for a moment. For him, he would prefer to retaliate against Deng Yuan’s fierce attack from a few days ago.

After waiting for an hour, Niu Ben had the flag signaler convey a series of orders. At this moment, Qi Guangyi and Bai Mu, having gathered their strength, simultaneously led their cavalry out of Juyong Pass.

At the same time, Di Ying immediately led the chariot formation towards the Zhao army's grand camp, with the cooperation of the Huainan army and Yong infantry. At the same time, Luo Xin concentrated all his field guns and began to bombard the Zhao army's grand camp fiercely.

These past few days of defending the city had also made him feel quite suppressed. Now he wished he could fire all his shells.

Cui Shang'an and Chen Xinran simultaneously mounted their horses. Chen Xinran led 15,000 cavalry, and Cui Shang'an led 5,000 cavalry to join forces with Qi Guangyi.

With the armies converged, they pressed down on the Zhao army's grand camp like a dark cloud.

Deng Yuan looked at the fiercely charging allied forces, his eyes filled with a trace of despair. At this moment, even if he were possessed by a god of war, he could not avert the fate of defeat.

However, he had already understood Prince Zhao's intention. Just as he sent soldiers to their deaths to consume cannonballs, this battle was merely for them to exhaust the enemy

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The strong wind stirred up dust on the battlefield, tinting the sky yellow.

The allied forces, consisting of the Huainan Army, the Yong Army, and the Western Expeditionary Army, advanced step by step towards the Zhao Army's camp.

Deng Yuan concentrated 50,000 infantry in the center and 50,000 cavalry on both wings, forming a battle array of 100,000 troops in front of the camp.

Suddenly, a series of urgent bugle calls for charge rang out.

The sound came from Juyong Pass. This was the signal to launch an attack on the Zhao army.

Qi Guangyi and Bai Mu each led 20,000 troops to protect the flanks. The central formation was composed of musketeers from the Western Expeditionary Army, while the Huainan Army and the Yong Army were responsible for close combat during engagement.

Outnumbering the enemy, the Western Expeditionary Army's morale was high. The soldiers of the Western Expeditionary Army, the Huainan Army, and the Yong Army were all filled with the conviction of victory.

"Boom, boom, boom..."

The war drums of the Zhao army pounded, and 100,000 Zhao army soldiers marched in unison towards the Western Expeditionary Army.

Luo Xin had already dispatched some artillerymen to establish artillery positions outside the city. As the two armies drew closer, these artillerymen continuously unleashed shells into the Zhao army's formation.

“Ah...”

Screams continuously rose from the Zhao army. Solid shot and explosive shells from the Western Expeditionary Army’s artillery simultaneously caused casualties among the densely packed Zhao army soldiers and horses.

Facing the artillery attack, Deng Yuan was helpless. If they were to disperse into smaller formations at this point, they would surely be slaughtered by the enemy’s dense formations.

The principle that battle formations must not be broken on the battlefield was understood by every general.

However, for the Zhao army, this was just the beginning. When they were 400 meters apart, the artillery suddenly switched to grapeshot.

This type of shell had the ability to inflict mass casualties on the enemy on the battlefield, but its range was only four to five hundred meters.

“Fire!” an artillery general shouted.

“Boom, boom, boom...” With a series of roars, the front ranks of the Zhao army, covered by artillery fire, fell like mown wheat.

Finally, facing the sharp lethality of firearms, the front of the Zhao army fell into confusion.

Deng Yuan gritted his teeth, watching all this. He had already foreseen that this war would be a desperate one. During the siege, he had gradually understood the power of firearms in the hands of the Western Expeditionary Army.

The chaos of the Zhao army was noted by Niu Ben. A smile appeared at the corner of his mouth.

Then he drew the saber from his waist and pointed it directly at the Zhao army.

Suddenly, the bugle call for charge blared loudly, and battle flags fluttered in the strong wind. The cavalry on both wings, led by Qi Guangyi and Bai Mu, charged first. The central army, composed of the Western Expeditionary Army, the Huainan Army, and the Yong Army, advanced with neat strides, like towering mountains, pushing forward.

“Kill!”

“Kill!”

Every time they advanced five steps, the army would shout “Kill!”, their morale soaring, composed and unhurried.



The two sides drew closer. At this point, the cavalry on both wings also roared in response. The Zhao army's center, composed of matchlock musketeers, also advanced steadily.

"Bang, bang, bang..."

Finally, the two armies met. Relying on the advantage of distance, the Western Expeditionary Army fired first.

The Zhao army's musketeers suffered heavy casualties before they could even open fire, and their formation immediately fell into chaos.

Although some matchlock musketeers continued to advance, their dispersed formation could no longer pose a threat to the Western Expeditionary Army.

Braving the Western Expeditionary Army's fire, the remaining musketeers reached firing range and began to shoot at them.

Sporadic gunshots rang out, and only dozens of Western Expeditionary Army soldiers fell.

The Western Expeditionary Army then continued to advance. At a distance of fifty meters, they fired another volley, and a large swath of Zhao troops immediately fell.

This strike basically crippled the Zhao army's musketeers, and the remaining musketeers immediately scattered.

"Kill!"

The distance of fifty meters had reached the range for both sides to charge. The Western Expeditionary Army immediately fixed their bayonets. At this moment, the Zhao army's shieldmen were already charging towards them.

A booming, muffled sound echoed through the valley, like a furious wave crashing against a shore. At the moment of contact, swords clashed, emitting fierce impacts.

Bayonets and spears clashed, sabers and scimitars flashed. A dense rain of arrows, like locusts, covered the sky. Furious shouts of "Kill!" and screams before death filled the entire battlefield.

"Prince Zhao's military training is quite capable." Niu Ben surveyed the entire battlefield, continuously using flag signals to command the chaotic Western Expeditionary Army to change their direction of attack and battle formations.

Although his words praised the Zhao army, a victorious smile had already appeared on his face.

Under the bombardment of cannons, the Zhao army had already lost many men and horses. Coupled with the musketeers' firing, they had lost one-tenth or two-tenths of their forces before even engaging in close combat.

At this time, the engaged Zhao army was already overstretched.

And the Black Armored Iron Cavalry, reputedly the elite of the Zhao army, were also entangled by Qi Guangyi and Bai Mu. The long period of warfare had turned Qingzhou's cavalymen into seasoned veterans. At this moment, they were giving the Black Armored Iron Cavalry no quarter. The two sides fought to a draw, neither gaining an advantage.

However, this meant that the Zhao army, having lost the cooperation of the Black Armored Iron Cavalry, scattered even faster.

The central army, under the absolute superior attack of the allied forces, soon could not hold out, and soldiers began to rout and flee.

"Assistant Minister Wang, this is what you wanted to see, isn't it?" Deng Yuan sat on his horse. The tide had turned, and he was powerless to reverse it.

Wang Xi's face was pale. He was both shocked and angry. "How can 100,000 men be so easily defeated? These are all the elites of my Zhao army!"

Prince Zhao's insistence that Deng Yuan not retreat was partly to capture Juyong Pass, and partly due to his confidence in the Zhao army.

Now, the scene of the army's devastating defeat made Wang Xi somewhat stunned.

“The Zhao army is elite, but Prince Qi’s army is no pushover. This general repeatedly reminded Assistant Minister Wang, but Assistant Minister Wang ignored it, insisting on fighting them under Juyong Pass. The responsibility for this defeat lies entirely with Assistant Minister Wang.”

“Nonsense! This is all due to your poor command, Deng Yuan!” Wang Xi roared furiously, but Deng Yuan no longer paid him any mind, instead ordering the retreat horn to be blown.

Wang Xi no longer dared to stop him. He mounted his horse and fled with Deng Yuan towards Yuanzhou.

The Black Armored Iron Cavalry, hearing the horn, immediately galloped back. However, Qi Guangyi and Bai Mu held on tightly, pursuing them for five li before turning back to pursue the Zhao army’s infantry. Only when the sun set did they gallop back to Juyong Pass.

By then, the Prince of Huainan and Chen Xinran had already entered Juyong Pass ahead of them. After their great victory, they saw the troops stationed outside the city, and the small Juyong Pass was enough to accommodate the Western Expeditionary Army.

“This great victory makes this king very happy. Thinking of Prince Zhao’s exasperation, this king is pleased, haha...” The Prince of Huainan laughed incessantly in Niu Ben’s tent.

Cui Shang’an said, “Prince Zhao often spoke contemptuously of Imperial Father when he was in Chang’an. This time, we can be considered to have avenged ourselves.”

Chen Xinran echoed with a smile. He said to Niu Ben, "General Niu, having received orders to come this time, what are His Imperial Majesty's instructions?"

Niu Ben put away his smile, picked up his saber, and pointed towards Chang'an, saying, "Now, we must seize the victory, break through Hulao Pass, and enter Chang'an City! This is the imperial decree His Imperial Majesty has given to this subordinate."

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"Chang'an!"

The generals in the camp all showed complex expressions.

Chang'an was the capital of the Great Yu Empire. As long as Chang'an remained untaken, the Great Yu Empire would always be under Prince Zhao's shadow.

"Prince Zhao has been entrenched in Chang'an for over two years. It's time to make him get out of Chang'an," the Prince of Huainan said.

Niu Ben nodded. He said, "This time, the Zhao army suffered a great defeat and is powerless to stop us from advancing towards Chang'an. After a few days of rest, we will drive Prince Zhao out of Chang'an and restore the capital."

"Yes, General," the generals said in unison.

The Prince of Huainan showed a hint of a smile. Prince Zhao had also been defeated this time, which further solidified his choice. Prince Yan and Prince Liang were dead, and Prince Zhao was merely a trapped beast in a cage. He would eventually become the most glorious vassal prince in the Great Yu Empire.

Thinking of this, he couldn't help but think of his daughter, wondering if she had entered the palace yet.

...

Qingzhou.

The debate against abolishing the four social classes of scholars, farmers, artisans, and merchants, and unifying all the common people of the Great Yu Empire under the term "commoners," continued, and it seemed to be escalating.

Due to the successive conquests of Wei, Yan, and Liang, the vast majority of the northern territories were now under the jurisdiction of the imperial court.

As a result, scholars from these three areas flocked to Qingzhou. After all, Qingzhou was now the capital of the Great Yu Empire, and also the political and commercial center. The prosperity and flourishing of Chang'an were destined to shift here.

"Yu Ming is still kneeling in the council hall?"

In the study of the traveling palace, Xiao Ming shelled melon seeds while looking at memorials. Since his enthronement, he felt he was not as busy as before.

Although the scope of court administration was expanding, with Fiji and Pang Yukun's diligence, government offices in various prefectures and counties were also established.

Now, everyone in the court performed their duties, presenting a flourishing scene. The only drawback was perhaps the conflict between old systems and old ideas, and new systems and new ideas.

In contemporary times, reforms in feudal dynasties often ended in failure for no other reason than that the reforms infringed upon the interests of the powerful.

Even if a powerful figure appeared and forcefully pushed for reform during their lifetime, after this person's death, things would immediately revert to their old ways.

Even the Qing Dynasty, facing the invasion of Western powers, failed to complete reforms under humiliation and was ultimately completely overthrown.

Therefore, in Xiao Ming's view, the reason for the reform's obstruction was simply that it infringed upon the interests of those in power.

This time, he abolished the four classes of scholars, farmers, artisans, and merchants. The scholars were the most affected by this, and the scholar class included officials, powerful families, and scholars among the common people. It was precisely for this reason that he encountered fierce opposition this time.

Simply put, the current court was full of representatives from the scholar class. The farmer, artisan, and merchant classes had no voice in court, which also led to this decree being popular among the common people but unpopular in court.

“Your Imperial Majesty, Minister Yu is still kneeling. It’s been seven days! He doesn’t even go back to handle government affairs every day, alas!” Qian Dafu sighed.

Xiao Ming remained indifferent. “Then let him continue to kneel.”

Qian Dafu smiled bitterly. “Your Imperial Majesty, Minister Yu kneeling is nothing, but the government affairs in his ministry are not being handled and are piling up.”

Upon hearing this, Xiao Ming frowned. This Yu Ming would attend court as usual, and then he would bring up the matter of withdrawing the decree. If Xiao Ming didn’t agree, he would kneel.

However, Xiao Ming couldn’t see Yu Ming kneeling anyway, and naturally couldn’t be bothered to pay him any mind. It was just that his behavior was a form of strike, and the government affairs under his purview couldn’t be left unhandled.

“We can’t let Yu Ming continue to make trouble, otherwise, what will become of my imperial authority?” Xiao Ming stood up, his tone resolute. “These old officials from Chang’an are truly hateful. In that case, I will dismiss him.”

If the Great Yu Empire were likened to a company, then for Xiao Ming, whether it was Pang Yukun, Fiji, or Yu Ming, they were merely employees.



He was the chairman, while Pang Yukun and Fiji belonged to the board of directors. Yu Ming was a layer below, belonging to senior management.

Now, one problem was that he clearly understood the current ailments of this Great Yu Empire company and wanted to reform these ailments so that this company could compete with the companies of Western powers.

However, the management led by Yu Ming still insisted on sticking to methods that caused the company losses and openly opposed him. In this situation, he had no choice but to make an example of someone and dismiss him.

‘Four-legged chickens are hard to find, but two-legged officials are everywhere for the taking.’

Qian Dafu was startled. He knew Xiao Ming was genuinely angry this time, but this Yu Ming was truly lacking in foresight, simply running headfirst into trouble.

“Issue an imperial decree! Yu Ming, Minister of Revenue, neglecting government affairs and disrupting court order, his conduct and virtue are unworthy of the responsibility of the Minister of Revenue. From this day forward, he is dismissed from office and awaits further assignment.” Xiao Ming said word by word.

Qian Dafu immediately brought brush, ink, paper, and inkstone and wrote down the imperial decree according to Xiao Ming’s words. After Xiao Ming reviewed it, he stamped the imperial seal on the decree.

“Go to the council hall and proclaim it. I will certainly put an end to this unhealthy trend.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Qian Dafu took the imperial decree and headed towards the council hall.

After Qian Dafu left, Xiao Ming frowned. He now doubted whether Fei Ji and the other Chang'an officials had truly accepted the new political ideas from Bowen Academy.

Or perhaps they had only learned the methods of governance, but their thinking had not kept pace with the times at all, and it was precisely their thinking that was the most difficult for him to control.

If that was the case, he had to strengthen the ideological education at Bowen Academy, cultivating a group of officials who were ideologically aligned with him. Otherwise, these conservative officials would become obstacles to his reforms.

Although he could kill all these officials, without officials, no one would work for him. So now he had no choice but to continue coexisting with these officials.

And for him, this situation would clearly continue for some time, and he also did not want to take too big a step, after all, reform was a double-edged sword.

If he suppressed the gentry class, the capitalist class would inevitably rise, and later generations' experience told him that if the capitalist class truly gained power, it would no longer be reform but revolution.

To prevent this situation, he decided not to favor any one side while implementing reforms.

While he was contemplating, a eunuch announced, “Your Imperial Majesty, Secret Guard Commander Wang Xuan seeks an audience.”

“Let him in!” Xiao Ming said.

The eunuch left, and soon Wang Xuan walked in.

Xiao Ming smiled and said, “Your visit to me surely brings no good news.”

“Your Imperial Majesty, this subordinate has truly become an annoying crow now,” Wang Xuan said with a bitter smile.

Xiao Ming shook his head. “However, what I need is precisely a crow like you. Speak your piece.”

Wang Xuan nodded, his expression grim. “The barbarians and Japan have been fighting in Goryeo for several months, with victories and losses on both sides. This subordinate has received news that Beshan is prepared to cede two southern prefectures of Goryeo to Japan in exchange for Japan no longer advancing northwards, so that they can concentrate on dealing with us.”

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The lingering scent of sandalwood in the study was invigorating.

Xiao Ming stood up and walked to the west wall of the study, looking at the map before him.

The map covered the entire west wall of the study, a huge world map marking all the countries he knew of in the current world.

“Southern two prefectures?” Xiao Ming looked at the map. After Goryeo submitted to the barbarians, it seemed to show its determination to distance itself from the Great Yu Empire. The King of Goryeo changed all the prefectures within the country to counties.

And these so-called southern two prefectures were merely the former Wuju and Jeonju, which, according to contemporary divisions, would be South Korea’s South Jeolla Province and North Jeolla Province, two prefectures close to Japan.

“Goryeo is mountainous, and Japan mainly fights the barbarians from occupied cities as strongholds, which prevents the barbarians from leveraging their cavalry advantage. After months of maneuvering, and given Beishan’s fundamental unwillingness to fight Japan, this complex situation has only now arisen,” Wang Xuan said, his brow furrowed.

“It’s that Beishan again!” Xiao Ming snorted softly, “Even banishing him to Goryeo, his desire to destroy us is still strong.”

“Your Imperial Majesty, Beishan has always been a person who seeks revenge, and the barbarians are very wary of Your Imperial Majesty unifying the north. That is why they are eager to withdraw troops from Goryeo to deal with Your Imperial Majesty.”

Xiao Ming nodded, “I originally hoped that Japan could keep the barbarians tied up in Goryeo, letting them fight to a mutually destructive end. I didn’t expect this Beishan to be a clever man. But since Japan and the barbarians intend to reconcile, I don’t have much time left.”

“Indeed. Japan has occupied Wujun and Jeonju in Goryeo, which means they have taken root in Goryeo. Japan’s ambitions are no longer small, which in itself is a threat to the Great Yu Empire, let alone with the addition of the barbarians. If Japan and the barbarians collude, the Great Yu Empire could be in danger.”

Wang Xuan’s words were not alarmist. The barbarians and Japan clearly now shared common interests, and this interest was the carving up of the Great Yu Empire.

However, currently, due to Goryeo, the two were at odds. If one day they found themselves unable to deal with the Great Yu Empire alone, they would inevitably form an alliance.

Although the history of the Three Kingdoms period and earlier in this timeline was the same, since then, 1,500 years of history had completely changed.

For Xiao Ming, it was difficult to draw lessons from contemporary history because the nations he faced were unfamiliar, and he could not rely on old experiences to deal with them.

Furthermore, his arrival had once again influenced the course of history. For him, anything was possible now.

Because countries, like people, adjust their survival strategies based on the environment. Now, the environment in East Asia has changed, and this is the butterfly wing of history.

“So the war in the north should end sooner,” Xiao Ming clenched his fists. Now that he had committed his entire army, he didn’t believe Prince Zhao could still hold out.

After a pause, he asked, “Is there any other important intelligence besides this?”

“Also about the King of Chu, he is now cooperating more closely with the French. Besides selling firearms to the King of Chu at high prices, it is said that the French have also sent a hundred missionaries to Lin’an. According to the information this subordinate received, these missionaries are merely disguised artisans, and the King of Chu has also sent some noble children to France to study.”

Wang Xuan’s words made Xiao Ming’s heart sink. The King of Chu’s numerous actions now showed that he was preparing to learn from the West. Having been soundly defeated by the Dutch and constantly facing his threat, the King of Chu now seemed to cling to the French as a last straw.

“Keep an eye on the King of Chu,” Xiao Ming said thoughtfully. “No matter how much the King of Chu struggles now, everything he painstakingly built will be mine.”

The cooperation between the King of Chu and the French would undoubtedly increase the difficulty of his attack on Chu. However, he was confident that his own progress would surely be faster than the King of Chu’s.

In terms of technology, the French could not save the King of Chu. After all, the West’s overall industrial level was simply much higher than his own, and they had no particular advantage in specific technologies.

Although Xiao Ming also wanted to eliminate the threat of the King of Chu in time, the new developments with the barbarians and Japan immediately left him no time to attend to the King of Chu south of the Yangtze River.

Prince Zhao had not yet been brought to justice, and the barbarian threat was imminent. Moving south now would not be a wise move. Moreover, this northern war had consumed vast resources, and ammunition supplies were gradually becoming an issue. At the same time, the conquered cities also needed to be taken over and managed, which further tied his hands.

“Yes, Your Imperial Majesty!” Wang Xuan bowed.

The two then discussed some other matters from various regions, and then Wang Xuan chose to leave. No sooner had he left than Li San walked in.

“Your Imperial Majesty.” Seeing Xiao Ming, Li San bowed.

After completing the mission concerning the Fourth Prince, Li San returned to Qingzhou to oversee various domestic affairs.

Sitting in his chair, Xiao Ming resumed reviewing memorials, and at the same time said, “You and Wang Xuan have a good understanding. Speak, what is it?”

Li San chuckled twice. He said, “Your Imperial Majesty’s kindness to this subordinate is as vast as a mountain. This subordinate certainly cannot lose to Wang Xuan.”

“Hmph, you only rely on that mouth of yours to show off,” Xiao Ming said without looking up.

Li San still chuckled. Now that Xiao Ming had betrothed Liu Li to him, and the Empress Dowager had taken Liu Li as her adopted daughter, he was quite prominent in Qingzhou for a time.

However, getting to the main topic, Li San’s expression turned serious. He said to Xiao Ming, “I wonder if Your Imperial Majesty knows of a school called the ‘Legal Society’?”

“Legal Society?” Xiao Ming’s movement froze. From his experience in later generations, he was always very sensitive to such things. “What does this Legal Society do?”

Seeing that Xiao Ming knew nothing about this, Li San said, “This Legal Society was founded by a student named Miao Guo’an from Bowen Academy. This Miao Guo’an once studied in the Political Affairs Academy of Bowen Academy and has always revered Legalist classics. This Legal Society was also founded to revitalize Legalist theories.”

“Miao Guo’an.” This name was somewhat familiar to Xiao Ming. He said, “Chief Grand Secretary Pang did mention this person’s name to me.”

Li San continued, “Then that’s right. This Legal Society was established with the support of Chief Grand Secretary Pang.”



Whether it was Confucianism or Legalism, these were both means used by rulers to govern the world. In contemporary times, from the Han Dynasty to the Qing Dynasty, the prevailing thought was “Legalist within, Confucian without.”

As the name implies, “Legalist within, Confucian without” means outwardly promoting Confucian ideology, but in actual practice, relying on Legalist ideology, often a combination of Confucianism and Legalism, complementing each other.

However, the Legalist thought here was definitely not “the common people and even gentlemen are equal before the law.” Instead, the monarch was the law, the monarch was the core of everything. What the monarch said was law, and the essence of the rule of law was obedience to the monarch’s commands. This was the true meaning of “Legalist within, Confucian without.”

Thinking of this, Xiao Ming said, “You find a way to place an informant inside and see what kind of legal philosophy this Legal Society is promoting.”

For him, if the Legal Society intended to strengthen his power, that was acceptable, as it served to uphold imperial authority.

If this Legal Society were to stir up any trouble or introduce Western ideas, he would have to intervene.

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“Yes, Your Imperial Majesty.”

Li San’s eyes narrowed slightly. He was utterly loyal to Xiao Ming. In his view, everything he had was given by Xiao Ming.

The two continued to talk for a while longer. Xiao Ming instructed Li San to strengthen the supervision of Qingzhou before dismissing him.

After seeing off Li San, Xiao Ming fell into contemplation. It was easy to conquer a realm, but difficult to hold it. The north was not yet unified, and troubles were appearing one after another.

First, Yu Ming opposed abolishing the four social classes of scholars, farmers, artisans, and merchants. Then came this Legal Society, and it was even supported by Pang Yukun.

As a monarch, Xiao Ming trusted all his ministers, yet at the same time harbored a hint of wariness towards all of them. This contradictory psychology made him immediately experience what it meant to be a lone wolf.

He was no longer a political novice. He understood that as he ascended to this position, he and the bureaucracy formed a relationship where one's gain came at the other's expense.

A cruel truth was that a monarch, in order to establish his unique status, would inevitably strike at bureaucrats and powerful figures to prevent the emergence of individuals who threatened him from within this class.

At the same time, bureaucrats and powerful figures, fearing that the monarch might at any moment place a knife to their necks, would also try to find ways to limit the monarch's power.

Thus, the result of this confrontation was the emergence of parliaments in the West, leading to constitutional monarchies where the monarch's power was hollowed out, and ultimately, the powerful individuals triumphed.

And this contradiction in the history of the Great Yu Empire manifested as treason and rebellion.

Therefore, although he trusted Pang Yukun, he also maintained a slight reservation. Pang Yukun was a supporter of this Legal Society, and no one knew what ideology this Legal Society would ultimately propagate. He had to be on guard.

However, the establishment of the Legal Society also proved that the trend of a hundred schools of thought contending was reviving. Ideas were a double-edged sword, and he needed to guide them in a timely manner.

Because of these matters, Xiao Ming lost his enthusiasm for reviewing memorials. He stretched and headed towards the Ciren Hall, as the saying goes, "Know yourself and your enemy, and you will never be defeated."

Always considering ancient people's thoughts with a modern mindset was very dangerous. This disconnect was detrimental to the governance of the country, so he preferred to directly ask the Empress Dowager, because the Empress Dowager's thoughts often reflected those of these ministers.

Only by understanding the essence of the ministers' thoughts could he choose the methods and ways to implement reform.

As he headed towards the Ciren Hall, Qian Dafu arrived at the council hall.

Facing Yu Ming, who was still kneeling in the council hall, Qian Dafu said, “Minister of Revenue Yu Ming, receive the imperial decree!”

“This subject receives the decree!” Yu Ming’s heart skipped a beat, and he suddenly had an ominous premonition.

“Yu Ming, Minister of Revenue, neglecting government affairs and disrupting court order, his conduct and virtue are unworthy of the responsibility of the Minister of Revenue. From this day forward, he is dismissed from office and awaits further assignment. By imperial command!” Qian Dafu proclaimed loudly.

“Thank Your Imperial Majesty for your grace!” Yu Ming bowed deeply.

Qian Dafu then handed the imperial decree to Yu Ming and said earnestly, “Minister Yu, why bother? Abolishing the scholars, farmers, artisans, and merchants was something His Imperial Majesty had already decided. It’s impossible for it to change just because Minister Yu kneels like this.”

Yu Ming took the imperial decree, his expression still stubborn. He said, “Abolishing scholars, farmers, artisans, and merchants is shaking the foundation of the nation and indulging merchants to gain power, which will surely lead to chaos in the future. This subject is wholeheartedly devoted to the nation; how can I disregard the rise and fall of the dynasty because of personal gains and losses?”

Qian Dafu sighed. He said, “How could His Imperial Majesty not have thought of what you are thinking? Alas!”

With that, Qian Dafu turned and left.

After Qian Dafu had walked far away, the ministers who had followed Yu Ming immediately panicked. Yu Ming, the Minister of Revenue, was dismissed just like that. If they continued to cause trouble, their fate might be even more tragic than Yu Ming's.

They helped Yu Ming up from the ground. An official said, "Minister Yu, it seems His Imperial Majesty is determined. It's better not to go against His Imperial Majesty on this matter anymore."

Yu Ming's face was sorrowful. He looked at the startled officials. His Imperial Majesty's move was truly ruthless, instantly dissolving his efforts of many days.

For these officials, their official robes were naturally more important than these classes of scholars, farmers, artisans, and merchants.

Sighing, Yu Ming stood up and walked shakily out of the council hall. At this moment, he felt disheartened. His proposal had been rejected, and he had lost his official position. The excitement of coming to Qingzhou from Chang'an had vanished.

Meanwhile, Qian Dafu quickly returned to the traveling palace. After inquiring, he went directly to the Ciren Hall.

"Your Imperial Majesty, the imperial decree has been proclaimed. Seeing the apprehension on the faces of the other officials, after Yu Ming's dismissal, no one will likely oppose Your Imperial Majesty anymore."

Upon seeing Xiao Ming in the Ciren Hall, Qian Dafu spoke directly.

“Dismissed, then let him be dismissed. These ministers are simply outrageous. His Imperial Majesty has only just ascended the throne for a few days, and they are already trying to coerce him as they did the late emperor.” Now that Imperial Concubine Zhen was the Grand Empress Dowager, her tone carried more authority.

Xiao Ming had naturally discussed this matter with the Empress Dowager. He said, “When the late emperor was alive, this Yu Ming was one of the few incorruptible officials in Chang’an, and even Elder Faji praised him highly. I have always thought highly of him and even intended to have him join the cabinet. It’s just that Yu Ming has a stubborn personality and likes to be obstinate. He won’t do without some tempering.”

The Empress Dowager nodded, “Your Imperial Majesty is absolutely right. Let this Yu Ming live as a commoner in Qingzhou for a period. He will naturally understand the pros and cons of scholars, farmers, artisans, and merchants. If he understands, then let him return. If he doesn’t, then there’s no need to keep him.”

Xiao Ming nodded. Indeed, the Empress Dowager understood him best.

Qian Dafu flattered, “What the Empress Dowager said is truly insightful.”

The Empress Dowager put down the Buddhist scripture in her hand. She said, “I don’t bother myself with these court matters. What I am most concerned about is the Emperor’s continuation of the lineage. Your Imperial Majesty, Cui Xue’er has been in Qingzhou for some time now. It’s time for her to enter the palace.”

Unlike the Empress, who was formally married, the Emperor taking a consort required no elaborate ceremony. As long as the Empress Dowager and the eunuchs presided, the consort could be sent into the palace.

And on the second day of the consort's entry into the palace, the eunuchs would have the Emperor "turn the tablet." If the Emperor was interested in the consort, he would turn her tablet. If not, he might never turn it in his lifetime.

"Imperial Mother can decide this matter." Like Fei Yu'er, Cui Xue'er was also the result of a political marriage. This kind of marriage was more about mutual respect, and the emotional foundation was even less than that of Lu Luo and Ziyuan.

Xiao Ming maintained a composed demeanor. The Empress Dowager said, "Since Cui Xue'er is entering the palace, some matters should be handled together. Lu Luo and Ziyuan have also been with you for a long time. It's truly unsuitable for them to remain mere maids. Moreover, they are, after all, your people, so it's even more inappropriate for them to leave the palace. In that case, let's confer titles upon them together this time. However, these two girls' status is ultimately a bit low, so perhaps a title of 'Guiren' (Noble Lady) would suffice."

Xiao Ming had always wanted to discuss this with Imperial Concubine Zhen. Since both the Empress and the Imperial Noble Consort were political marriages, it seemed not too much to bestow the title of Guiren upon the two maids. After all, Guiren was already the lowest rank among concubines.

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"Her Imperial Majesty is absolutely right. Lu Luo and Ziyuan are both sensible girls; they are most suitable to serve by His Imperial Majesty's side."

Qian Dafu still liked Lu Luo and Ziyuan very much. The Empress Dowager's order made him quite satisfied.

Xiao Ming naturally had no reason to refuse. He said, "In that case, I will issue a decree to officially confer the titles of Guiren upon Ziyuan and Lu Luo."

The Empress Dowager nodded. She said to Xiao Ming, "You should also inform the Empress about this matter, lest she feels uncomfortable. After all, the Empress is the mistress of the six palaces, and whether the six palaces can be harmonious in the future depends on the Empress."

"Yes, Imperial Mother," Xiao Ming said.

After chatting for a while, the two departed from Ciren Hall, and Xiao Ming returned directly to his bedchamber.

At this time, Fei Yu'er, accompanied by Xiao Huan, was feeding fish in the pond on the stone bridge.

Seeing Xiao Ming approach, Fei Yu'er was about to salute. Xiao Ming immediately helped her up and said, "The Empress is already eight months pregnant. There's no need to bother with these formalities now."

Ever since she became pregnant, Fei Yu'er had been able to eat much more, and the delicacies in the kitchen were always insufficient.

Now that the kitchen was proficient in stir-frying, Xiao Ming naturally introduced various modern dishes to it.



It could be said that Fei Yu'er's daily meals would absolutely not be repetitive.

Fei Yuer's face was filled with a smile. Ever since she came to Qingzhou, Xiao Ming had always treated her with respect and meticulous care. As a woman, being cared for in such a way naturally filled her heart with joy, and her admiration for Xiao Ming grew stronger.

Gently holding Xiao Ming's arm, Fei Yuer asked, "Your Imperial Majesty must have something to tell this wife at this time, right? Normally, at this hour, Your Imperial Majesty would be in the imperial study."

After a pause, Fei Yuer blinked her eyes. She was intelligent and quickly thought of a possibility. So she asked, "Your Imperial Majesty, is it about Cui Xue'er entering the palace?"

"The Empress is clever. I just returned from Imperial Mother's place. Imperial Mother and I discussed this matter, saying it's time for Cui Xue'er to enter the palace."

Fei Yuer's expression remained unchanged. In her opinion, it was perfectly normal to add more consorts for Xiao Ming. The homes of these high-ranking court officials also had four or five concubines, not to mention Xiao Ming was the monarch of a country. She said, "This wife also wishes to meet this younger sister Xue'er. I hear Cui Xue'er is fair-skinned and beautiful, a little beauty herself. With her company, this concubine will not be bored."

Nodding, Xiao Ming continued, "Besides the matter of Cui Xue'er, Imperial Mother wants me to confer the titles of Guiren upon Lu Luo and Ziyuan. What does the Empress think?"

“Lu Luo and Ziyuan?”

Fei Yuer repeated, a smile playing on her lips. She had long been aware of Xiao Ming’s relationship with the two, so she never treated them as mere maids. She had a vague premonition that this day would come. So she said, “Lu Luo and Ziyuan are utterly loyal to His Imperial Majesty, and both are intelligent and skillful, even handling some government affairs for His Imperial Majesty. They are truly capable assistants. This wife had long intended to have the two serve by His Imperial Majesty’s side. Now that the Empress Dowager has spoken, it saves this concubine from having to say it.”

Xiao Ming carefully observed Fei Yuer’s expression. He could not discern any unusual emotions on her face, as if she had long been prepared for all of this.

Coming from modern times, Xiao Ming could now truly experience the horror of feudal etiquette. This ideology simply reduced ancient women to mere appendages of men.

“Your Imperial Majesty, what are you thinking?” Fei Yuer asked, seeing Xiao Ming somewhat dazed.

Coming to his senses, Xiao Ming asked, “Empress, are you truly not uncomfortable at all?”

“Why should this wife be uncomfortable? If i were to harbor such thoughts, wouldn’t this empress become a jealous woman?” Fei Yuer said, smiling. She continued, “This wife has read some of the books Your Highness provided. These books also contain some novel ideas, but in this wife’s opinion, some of those ideas are not suitable for the Great Yu Empire.”

Hearing this, Xiao Ming showed an interested expression. He had forgotten that Fei Yuer was also a capable woman. Understanding her reading experience of his books was more reliable than guessing the thoughts of other ministers.

“Empress, why don’t you tell me?” Xiao Ming said as he helped Fei Yuer to sit down in the pavilion.

Fei Yuer first said, “Your Imperial Majesty’s doubts must be about monogamy, right?”

Xiao Ming nodded.

“Your Imperial Majesty said that some of the books’ ideas came from Western countries, so in this wife’s opinion, these ideas do not conform to the current situation of the Great Yu Empire. The Great Yu Empire has been engaged in continuous warfare, and the number of men has sharply declined, while the number of women, who do not participate in warfare, exceeds that of men. After this war, the northern population has plummeted even further. If Your Imperial Majesty wishes to recover and recuperate, it will surely require the common people to bear more children to restore the population. If that is the case, why should Your Imperial Majesty change the old customs?” Fei Yuer said.

Xiao Ming nodded. “Empress, it seems you did not merely skim through, but deeply read these books. I also think so. Policies should be formulated based on the current situation of the Great Yu Empire, not by copying other countries’ models.”

Fei Yuer smiled, “Your Imperial Majesty already has a plan in mind. This empress has made a fool of herself.”

“Empress, what you said is not wrong. As long as you can understand my painstaking efforts, I will be at ease,” Xiao Ming said.

As a person with modern ideas, he sometimes had no common topics with ancient people. If Fei Yuer could accept modern values, he would truly have someone to confide in.

Fei Yuer also heard about Yu Ming’s matter and knew that Xiao Ming was speaking from his feelings on this. She said, “Your Imperial Majesty’s thoughts are unlike ordinary people’s, but they are often beneficial to the Great Yu Empire. Many ministers are short-sighted and cannot see the long-term benefits. At such times, why should Your Imperial Majesty care about these ministers’ opinions? Just do as you think best.”

Xiao Ming grew even happier. It was a good thing that Fei Yuer understood him more and more. He said, “So I’ve come to a realization as well. That’s why I dismissed Yu Ming. Otherwise, the policies I promote in the future will be constantly obstructed.”

Fei Yuer’s face carried a faint smile, happy to be able to share Xiao Ming’s burdens.

The two chatted for a while, and the sky gradually darkened. At this time, Lu Luo and Ziyuan returned together from outside.

Now, their division of labor was very clear: one was responsible for the theater, and the other for textiles. As more and more people watched plays and the textile industry gradually flourished, the two were now so busy that they were rarely seen.

Seeing the two, Fei Yuer beckoned for Lu Luo and Ziyuan to come over.

Of course, she had to personally announce the conferment of titles, as this concerned their harmonious coexistence in the future.

“Greetings, Your Imperial Majesty, Empress.”

Lu Luo and Ziyuan smiled. They were busy now, and Xiao Ming was also busy, so they hadn’t seen Xiao Ming for a while. At this moment, seeing Xiao Ming naturally made them happy.

Fei Yuer excused them from formalities and said, “From now on, you two can call this Empress ‘Elder Sister.’ The Empress Dowager has issued a decree: from today onwards, you two are Noble Ladies.”

Ziyuan and Lu Luo were instantly stunned.

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“Empress, please don’t tease us servants. We are of humble status; how can we possibly have the virtue or ability to serve by His Imperial Majesty’s side?”

The air seemed to freeze for a moment. Ziyuan was the first to react, filled with apprehension.

Lu Luo also panicked slightly. Ever since Xiao Ming ascended the throne, the distinction between high and low had become increasingly insurmountable. At this moment, Fei Yuer’s words sounded to them like a veiled way of telling them to leave.

Seeing their faces turn pale, Xiao Ming smiled helplessly and said, "I assure the Empress, this matter is absolutely true."

As Xiao Ming spoke, Ziyuan and Lu Luo now believed him. Their panic gradually turned into joy.

The two had followed Xiao Ming for five years and had long developed deep affection for him. If they were to leave this place one day, they wouldn't know how to live.

On countless nights, they had harbored such extravagant hopes, but they never expected that one day, this extravagant hope would become reality.

"Thank Your Imperial Majesty, thank Empress." Ziyuan and Lu Luo bowed joyfully.

Xiao Ming and Fei Yuer also smiled. He said to the two, "If you're going to thank anyone, you should thank the Empress Dowager. Why don't you go now?"

"Yes, Your Imperial Majesty." Lu Luo and Ziyuan cheerfully headed to Ciren Palace.

Seeing the two walk away, Fei Yuer gave Xiao Ming a chiding look and said, "Now His Imperial Majesty doesn't have to secretly meet them every now and then, does he? Tonight, His Imperial Majesty can turn a tablet."

Xiao Ming immediately felt a little awkward. Some things really couldn't be hidden from a woman's keen eyes. During Fei Yuer's pregnancy, he had indeed often secretly met the two maids.

After all, Xiao Ming was a normal man and had some physiological needs.

He chuckled twice. Xiao Ming said, "I won't turn anyone's tablet. The Empress is pregnant, so I should be accompanying the Empress."

Fei Yuer, hearing this, covered her mouth and laughed.

The next day, the imperial decree enfeoffing Cui Xue'er as Imperial Noble Consort and Lu Luo and Ziyuan as Guiren was delivered to the three. That day, Cui Xue'er entered the traveling palace and temporarily resided in the Chunhua Pavilion of the traveling palace.

This Chunhua Pavilion was located behind Xiao Ming's and Fei Yuer's bedchamber. Xiao Ming could reach it by taking a small path from his bedchamber.

With this matter settled, Xiao Ming felt a weight lifted from his mind.

In this northern war, the Prince of Huainan performed very actively, not only distinguishing himself in the destruction of Yan but also actively participating in the attack on Prince Zhao.

Xiao Ming was well aware that the Prince of Huainan's actions were all to ensure Xiao Ming would treat his daughter well.

However, the northern war had now reached a critical juncture. Xiao Ming's decision to have Cui Xue'er enter the palace at this moment was also to reassure the Prince of Huainan, so that he could bravely fight the enemy on the battlefield.

"Congratulations, Your Imperial Majesty, on winning back a beauty this time."

The first thing Cui Xue'er did after entering the palace was to go to Ciren Hall to pay her respects to the Empress Dowager. Then she, Ziyuan, and Lu Luo went to the bedchamber to pay their respects to Fei Yuer. Fei Yuer had already met Cui Xue'er earlier.

He had just returned from the council hall when Fei Yuer began telling him about this Cui Xue'er.

"I don't believe there's a woman more beautiful than the Empress in this world," Xiao Ming said smoothly. Deeply influenced by modern culture, he was very skilled in flattering his wife.

These words sweetened Fei Yuer's heart. She said, "I'm only afraid that His Imperial Majesty will forget what he's saying now once he sees this Cui Xue'er."

As the two were speaking, Qian Dafu suddenly walked over and said to Xiao Ming, "Your Imperial Majesty, Lu Tong seeks an audience."

"Lu Tong? Let him in."



Xiao Ming said blandly. Lu Tong had been busy with various chemical experiments during this time. One of the experiments he had ordered Lu Tong to do was the preparation of fulminate of mercury.

Through nearly five years of teaching, he now had a group of basic talents, but although these people had mastered some techniques, they sometimes didn't know where to start or what to research first.

So, after ascending the throne, Xiao Ming simply formulated a research and development plan, having technical talents like Lu Tong, Lin Wenyang, Song Changping, and Chen Qi produce various technological items one by one according to the plan he listed.

For Lin Wentao, it was the steam engine and steam locomotive. For Lu Tong, it was fulminate of mercury, the most basic priming compound.

After all, smokeless gunpowder was merely a propellant. If firearms were to be upgraded to percussion guns, this priming compound had to be used.

As it involved government affairs, Xiao Ming no longer received Lu Tong near the bedchamber, but waited for him in the main hall.

Soon, Lu Tong appeared outside the main hall and walked towards Xiao Ming.

"Greetings, Your Imperial Majesty!" Upon approaching, Lu Tong bowed and said.

Xiao Ming looked at Lu Tong. "This time you've come to see me, have you made any progress?"

"Your Imperial Majesty has divine foresight. This subordinate is here to speak of fulminate of mercury. This priming compound has been successfully synthesized in the laboratory," Lu Tong said excitedly.

Xiao Ming smiled with satisfaction upon hearing this. In 1799, Edward Charles Howard synthesized fulminate of mercury, and in 1814, fulminate of mercury began to be used in the manufacture of percussion caps.

At this time, the percussion caps were not yet used for metallic fixed ammunition, but merely as separate percussion caps inserted to replace the flint.

But even so, this significantly increased the firing rate of firearms, as it eliminated the step of pouring gunpowder into the flash pan.

And after the birth of the percussion cap came the birth of the percussion device and the breech-loading gun, followed by the metallic fixed ammunition.

Now that Lu Tong had produced fulminate of mercury, for Xiao Ming, he could manufacture percussion caps and percussion devices to upgrade flintlock guns into the most rudimentary percussion guns, increasing the firing rate of firearms.

However, metallic fixed ammunition was still impossible for him, as it was said that only thirteen countries in the world could produce bullets and shells even in contemporary times.

It was evident that the production of bullets and shells required a sufficiently strong industrial system, and for Xiao Ming, Qingzhou's industry had just begun, making the production of metallic fixed ammunition an insurmountable challenge.

"Not bad, not bad," Xiao Ming said with a smile. Although the percussion device could only increase the firing rate and not change the range or power, this was still a huge step forward for him, because on the battlefield, victories were often achieved by being able to fire two more shots.

Lu Tong looked relaxed. This was a task Xiao Ming had given him, and now that it was completed, a weight had finally been lifted from his heart.

"Your Imperial Majesty, although fulminate of mercury has been synthesized, in this subordinate's opinion, this fulminate of mercury is somewhat unstable and prone to explosion. If this is to be used in firearms, care must be taken in its storage."

Xiao Ming nodded. He said, "Don't think your task is over. This fulminate of mercury has been developed, but next, you still need to help Song Changping with the manufacture of percussion caps using mercury sulfate."

"Percussion caps?" Lu Tong scratched his head. He knew nothing about such things. After all, he was currently only responsible for synthesizing various substances.

Xiao Ming then had Qian Dafu bring paper and brush. He began to draw the structure of a percussion cap on the paper stroke by stroke. At the same time, under the influence of the technology crystal, Lu Tong gradually gained a clear understanding of what a percussion cap was.

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“Your Imperial Majesty, this subordinate understands. I will go discuss this matter with Song Changping now.”

Lu Tong’s expression was somewhat excited. He was quite interested in this type of percussion cap.

Xiao Ming nodded. Overall, Qingzhou’s current firearm standard was basically no different from Europe’s. Both sides used flintlock guns, small batches of rifled guns, field guns, and other firearms.

If fighting with the same weapons as Western armies, Xiao Ming would basically have no advantage and would likely fall into a prolonged war of attrition.

Therefore, any progress was needed at this moment. If the percussion cap manufacturing succeeded this time, he could gain a slight edge over Europe in firearms.

Just as Lu Tong was about to leave, Xiao Ming suddenly remembered something. He said, “By the way, you, Lin Wentao, Song Changping, Chen Qi, and others should communicate frequently. In this way, you can exchange information. Perhaps what Lin Wentao manufactures is what you need, and what you manufacture is what Lin Wentao needs. This way, Qingzhou’s technology can improve as a whole, instead of each of you doing your own thing.”

“Yes, Your Imperial Majesty, this subordinate has noted it.” Lu Tong bowed.

After discussing this, Xiao Ming asked Lu Tong about the chemical industry, and then dismissed him.

Now, the north was about to be unified. After unification, it would be a phase of recuperation and industrial upliftment. He was already preparing for this.

Thinking of this, he couldn't help but think of Niu Ben and the others. The war in the north was now in their hands. He only hoped it would end quickly.

After all, the situation was constantly changing, and the longer it dragged on, the more disadvantageous it would be for them.

Qingzhou (Liang Capital).

After the Battle of Juyong Pass, Niu Ben concentrated most of his forces in Qingzhou. At the same time, he had the Prince of Huainan and Chen Xinran each leave 20,000 men to guard Juyong Pass, and the Western Expeditionary Army also left 20,000 men to assist them in battle.

On the day the Zhao army was defeated, the barbarians chose to retreat. The barbarians were not foolish; if they stayed, they would only suffer greater casualties.

"After the Battle of Juyong Pass, the Zhao army suffered heavy losses and is no longer able to fight us in the open. They can only rely on natural barriers to stop us. Overall, the balance of offense and defense has changed. Now, we should take the initiative to completely deal with Prince Zhao."

Niu Ben said in the camp.

The Prince of Huainan nodded, "General Niu is absolutely right. That day at Juyong Pass, the barbarians and the Zhao army colluded, which shows that these barbarians intend to profit from the situation. If this war continues to drag on, it will only become more difficult once the barbarians intervene."

"General Niu, just give the order. Speed is of the essence in war. As long as we capture Hulao Pass and Chang'an, the Great Yu Empire will be settled." Chen Xinran said. Now, the only remaining rebel in the Great Yu Empire was Prince Zhao.

Although the King of Chu still occupied the area south of the Yangtze River, he had, after all, pledged allegiance to Xiao Ming.

Niu Ben nodded upon hearing this. "This is also why this general gathered you all here today. Starting today, the grand army will set off, determined to take Hulao Pass and Chang'an in one fell swoop, and pacify the north."

"Yes, General." The generals said in unison, their expressions excited. They were waiting for the day they could ride into Chang'an.

The Prince of Huainan and Chen Xinran exchanged glances, and also had their subordinates gather soldiers to prepare for sallying forth.

Three days later, the allied forces appeared before Hulao Pass.

Hulao Pass was a formidable pass east of Luoyang. Capturing this pass would allow them to occupy Luoyang, and from Luoyang, they could then attack Tong Pass to reach Chang'an directly.

This time, with the determination to capture Chang'an, Niu Ben immediately subjected Hulao Pass's city walls and gate to merciless artillery bombardment.

In the Battle of Juyong Pass, Prince Zhao had committed almost all of Zhao's elite forces. The commander left at Hulao Pass was merely a surrendered official who had pledged allegiance to him when Chang'an was breached.

The general of Hulao Pass had never seen such a formation. He was immediately terrified, his legs trembling from the cannon fire.

Being able to beg for mercy from Prince Zhao, the commander of Hulao Pass could naturally also beg for mercy from Niu Ben. In the fourth round of cannon fire, the commander of Hulao Pass ordered the city gate to be opened and personally came out to welcome Niu Ben.

"Chen Guodong, you're quite the opportunist." Luo Hong was familiar with the general of Hulao Pass and couldn't help but speak sarcastically at this moment.

Chen Guodong was a man of medium height with a dark complexion. Seeing Luo Hong and Niu Ben, he immediately put on a subservient demeanor and said, "General Niu, General Luo, although this subordinate served in the Zhao camp, my heart has always been with His Imperial Majesty. Precisely for this reason, this subordinate took the initiative to come out and surrender. I hope the generals will understand."

Niu Ben and Luo Hong, upon learning that the commander of Hulao Pass was still Chen Guodong, decided to bombard him to scare him. They both knew this Chen Guodong well, being fully aware that he was a very adaptable man.

“Let’s not talk about this for now. I only ask you how many people and how many troops are in Luoyang City?” Niu Ben asked.

Upon this, Chen Guodong sighed deeply. He said to Niu Ben, “General Niu, you might not know, but Luoyang is now an empty city!”

“Empty city!” Niu Ben was greatly alarmed.

Chen Guodong nodded, “Just ten days ago, Prince Zhao suddenly ordered the common people of Luoyang City to be driven inside Tong Pass, and then set the entire Luoyang City ablaze. Any common people who refused to leave were tragically killed. Moreover, Prince Zhao spread word that if the General attacks Tong Pass, he will burn Chang’an and drive all the common people back to Zhao.”

“Outrageous!” Niu Ben roared in anger. He cursed, “How is this fellow any different from Dong Zhuo?”

Chen Guodong wore a sorrowful expression. He said, “General, it is precisely because this subordinate was unwilling to collude with Prince Zhao that I refused to go to Tong Pass and waited here for the General’s arrival.”

“Nonsense! It must be that Prince Zhao looked down on you and left you here in Hulao Pass to risk your life for him. You certainly speak well,” Luo Hong snorted.



Chen Guodong's words also enraged him. His relatives were in Chang'an City.

Scolded by Luo Hong, Chen Guodong dared not speak again, trembling with fear.

Lu Fei then said to Niu Ben, "General, Prince Zhao is forcing us to retreat. If we fall for his trick, and the barbarians arrive, this war will be difficult. At the very least, we must take Tong Pass. In this way, if the barbarians want to enter, they must break through the pass."

Niu Ben's gaze gradually became resolute. He said, "You are right. At this time, one cannot sacrifice the greater good for a minor act of benevolence."

He looked at Chen Guodong and said, "If you want to live, you must obey this general now. You are to immediately order your soldiers to take off their military uniforms."

"Take off military uniforms?" Chen Guodong asked, puzzled.

"Less nonsense!" Luo Hong rebuked.

Chen Guodong seemed to fear Luo Hong somewhat and immediately had his soldiers take off their armor.

At this time, Niu Ben ordered the Qingzhou army to take off their own military uniforms and change into the military uniforms of Chen Guodong's soldiers.

"Chen Guodong, this is your chance to live. If you can help this general take Tong Pass without anyone noticing, this general will speak a few good words for you before His Imperial Majesty."

Niu Ben said thoughtfully, having already formed a plan in his mind.

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The cold wind from the north made the battle flags on Hulao Pass flutter.

Chen Guodong's heart at this moment was colder than the wind. He looked at the menacing Niu Ben and had no choice but to have his subordinates take off all their armor.

Because Chen Guodong took the initiative to surrender, Hulao Pass was easily taken. However, Niu Ben did not believe this was merely due to Chen Guodong's duplicity.

Chen Guodong had always been an opportunist. His choice to surrender at this time indicated that Prince Zhao's power was waning, and those who had once submitted to Prince Zhao were now like stray dogs.

But even so, Niu Ben would not fully trust Chen Guodong.

War was a serious matter for the state. If Hulao Pass were entrusted to Chen Guodong's soldiers, and an unexpected event occurred, their retreat route would be cut off, trapping them like caged beasts.

Having the Qingzhou army soldiers change into the traditional armor of the Great Yu Empire, Niu Ben temporarily detained the Hulao Pass soldiers.

In Niu Ben's view, Prince Zhao was making a dying struggle, because no one who truly desired to conquer the world would commit such deranged acts at this time.

For him, the longer it dragged on, the more likely Prince Zhao would do something crazy. So, he prepared to have Chen Guodong lead soldiers disguised as Hulao Pass defenders to sneak into Tong Pass, thereby capturing Tong Pass in one fell swoop and simultaneously blocking the news of Tong Pass's breach.

In this way, they could quickly reach Chang'an City and catch Prince Zhao by surprise.

After a night's rest, the next day, Niu Ben led his army directly to Luoyang. They arrived in Luoyang in the evening.

Just as Chen Guodong had said, Luoyang was now an empty city. There was no trace of common people in this city, only burnt-out civilian districts and ravaged streets.

"This Luoyang was once a prosperous city second only to Chang'an, and now it has become like this!" Luo Hong said, heartbroken.

Lu Fei said, "This area around Chang'an and Luoyang will probably be completely devastated by Prince Zhao."

“The former place of prosperity has now become like this; it’s truly a pity,” Ye Qingyun sighed, looking at the empty Luoyang City. However, he continued, “The area around Chang’an and Luoyang is densely populated, while Dengzhou is sparsely populated. This time, if we can rescue the common people, relocating some of them would also be an option.”

Niu Ben frowned. “That’s a matter for His Imperial Majesty and the ministers. We only need to obey His Imperial Majesty’s commands.”

With that, Niu Ben had the army camp in Luoyang City and prepare meals.

With Liang and Yan taken, the routes from Yunzhou to Chang’an were now safe, and provisions could be delivered smoothly.

One could say that in this western campaign, they held all the advantages in timing, terrain, and popular support. If they were to fail, he would truly have difficulty facing Xiao Ming.

The next day, the grand army set off from Luoyang towards Tong Pass. This time, the army led by Chen Guodong marched in front, while Niu Ben led the subsequent army from behind.

Their strategy this time was to have Chen Guodong trick open the city gate of Tong Pass. The disguised Qingzhou army would immediately launch an attack after entering the city to seize control of the city gate.

Upon receiving the signal, the subsequent troops would quickly attack and seize control of Tong Pass in one fell swoop. Then, using Tong Pass as a base, they would directly advance to Chang'an City.

Three days later, Chen Guodong and Ye Qingyun arrived under Tong Pass.

To prevent Chen Guodong from causing trouble, Niu Ben ordered Ye Qingyun to enter the city with Chen Guodong. In this way, if Chen Guodong dared to play any tricks, Ye Qingyun could immediately kill Chen Guodong.

"Oh, isn't that General Chen?"

When Chen Guodong and Ye Qingyun arrived under Tong Pass, a figure who looked like a defending general appeared on the city wall.

Seeing this person, Chen Guodong smiled. This person was Sun Lirong, a trusted confidant of Prince Zhao. He said fawningly, "Oh, it's General Sun. Please, General Sun, open the city gate and let this younger brother in."

Sun Lirong looked down from above. He said, "General Chen, weren't you at Hulao Pass? How did you return? His Highness said that to prevent spies from mixing into Tong Pass, no one is allowed to enter the city."

"To be frank with you, Brother Sun, Prince Qi's army is truly formidable. This younger brother resisted for a day but simply couldn't hold out, so I led my army here, hoping to fight the Qi army to the death here."

Sun Lirong's face changed upon hearing this. "You mean Hulao Pass has fallen?"

"Brother Sun, it has fallen," Chen Guodong stated honestly. "Prince Qi's army only needs one day to conquer a city. This is not an exaggeration."

Sun Lirong's face grew increasingly grim. He glanced at the soldiers below the city and said, "If that's the case, then all the more reason I cannot let you in."

"Why is that? You and I both serve Prince Zhao. Why do you treat me like this, Brother Sun?" Chen Guodong grew anxious, and at the same time, he began to curse Prince Zhao inwardly.

Now he understood. He was merely a pawn, and Prince Zhao leaving him to guard Hulao Pass was simply to send him to his death.

Thinking of this, he gnashed his teeth with hatred, wishing he could personally kill Prince Zhao.

Sun Lirong said languidly, "It's just that Prince Zhao doesn't trust you at all."

The conversation between the two made Ye Qingyun frown. Using this method to take Tong Pass was their first plan.

The second plan was to attack with force, just like attacking Hulao Pass. However, this would inevitably alert the enemy.

However, from the current situation, it seemed that only the second plan could be adopted.

Chen Guodong noticed Ye Qingyun's expression. He then gave Ye Qingyun a reassuring look. Turning his head, he said to Sun Lirong, "Brother Sun, this younger brother doesn't mind, but it's a pity that the silver I plundered can't be brought back."

With that, Chen Guodong pointed to the boxes carried by the soldiers.

In Luoyang, Chen Guodong had already told Niu Ben about Sun Lirong, the defender of Tong Pass. According to Chen Guodong, Sun Lirong was an extremely greedy person, known for frequently embezzling military pay.

So, he requested to bring the silver from Hulao Pass, also to tempt Sun Lirong to open the pass.

Indeed, Sun Lirong's face showed greed when he learned that the boxes contained silver.

News of the defeat at Juyong Pass had already spread. In this battle, the elite of the Zhao army suffered heavy losses, and many people understood that Chang'an could not be saved.

Precisely because of this, Prince Zhao ordered his army to plunder Luoyang and escort the common people of Luoyang to Zhao. If Prince Qi's army continued to attack Tong Pass, Chang'an would be the next target for the Zhao army's plunder.

So, in Sun Lirong's opinion, they would retreat sooner or later anyway. Since that was the case, it was better to collect more silver before going back.

His eyes darted around. Sun Lirong said, "How much silver is there in total here?"

"Over a million taels at least," Chen Guodong knew that Sun Lirong was tempted.

After a moment of hesitation, he glanced at the over 5,000 soldiers below the city. Sun Lirong felt that this small number of men could not pose a threat to the 30,000 men in the pass.

He finally nodded and said, "Open the pass!"

A smile appeared at the corner of Ye Qingyun's mouth. At Sun Lirong's command, the gate of Tong Pass slowly opened. As long as they took the city gate, Tong Pass would be theirs.