

I. Dynasty 691

Chapter 691

The rest of the council hall was filled with veteran officials of the feudal states.

As Pang Yukun's words fell, everyone looked at Xiao Ming. The Prince of Yong and the Prince of Huainan were indispensable to this smooth victory.

At this moment, Pang Yukun's proposal to reclaim the feudal lords' military power surprised the generals somewhat. Most of them were straightforward by nature, and for them, the Prince of Yong had been meritorious and faultless this time.

However, as generals, they could not participate in political affairs, as this was an iron rule set by Xiao Ming for the army.

"Senior Grand Secretary Pang, I know you are devoted to the country, but sometimes haste makes waste. The matter of the Prince of Yong is a royal matter, and I will resolve it in a royal manner," Xiao Ming said tactfully.

Pang Yukun nodded upon hearing this. He was indeed a bit impatient. After Prince Zhao's capture, he had been pondering strategies to weaken the feudal lords. For him, as long as the feudal lords of the Great Yu Empire were not eliminated, the country would never truly be at peace.

Having sidestepped the issue, Xiao Ming stood up and said, "I have seen the merits of all of you in this Western expedition. I have already drafted a list of commendations, and I will personally announce it during the morning court session in a few days."

Lu Fei and the other generals were delighted. They had been somewhat worried about Niu Ben's situation earlier, but Xiao Ming's words immediately put their minds at ease.

After saying this, Xiao Ming prepared to leave, but then Niu Ben suddenly said, "Your Majesty, I have one more matter to report."

"Speak."

"As soon as I returned to Qingzhou Province, I received a report from Lei Ming. According to Lei Ming, the frequency of barbarian scouts appearing in the past two days has increased significantly, and barbarian scouts even shot a letter into Shanhai Pass during the night." Niu Ben's expression became somewhat angry.

"The barbarians are now withdrawing their troops from Goryeo precisely to focus on dealing with the Great Yu Empire. After all, we swiftly captured the Princes of Liang and Zhao one after another, which completely disrupted their plans and prevented them from taking advantage of the situation."

Thinking of the letter Niu Ben mentioned, he asked, "What letter?"

Niu Ben seemed to find it difficult to speak, saying with difficulty, "Your Majesty, I dare not say."

"What's there to be afraid of saying?" Xiao Ming frowned. "When did you become so indecisive?"

Not only Niu Ben, but the expressions of Lu Fei and others were also very strange. After a moment of hesitation, Niu Ben took out a piece of cloth covered in writing from his bosom.

“The barbarian scouts said this was what their Khan demanded to be handed over to Your Majesty.” Niu Ben presented the cloth strip to Xiao Ming.

Picking up the cloth strip, Xiao Ming glanced at it, and his chest instantly surged with anger, almost bursting. He furiously threw the cloth strip away and cursed, “These barbarian vile creatures, akin to beasts, I will surely reduce them to ashes!”

Pang Yukun was somewhat puzzled. He picked up the cloth strip and looked at it. It read: “Great Yu, a despicable nation. From your Son of Heaven down to your common people, you are nothing but rats! Hiding behind your city gates and strategic passes is hardly a heroic act. How dare you call yourselves a superior nation? Why not call yourselves ‘Son Emperor’ to this Khan, lest war breaks out and I take your dog lives!”

“This is utterly arrogant! Your Majesty, I am willing to lead troops with General Niu Ben to suppress these barbarian foreigners.”

Pang Yukun trembled with rage. In his heart, Xiao Ming’s status was special. Anyone who dared to insult Xiao Ming in front of him, he would fight to the death.

Taking a deep breath, Xiao Ming said, “This is a cunning trick of the barbarians, meant to enrage me and make me rashly attack the grasslands. The former Emperor also encountered such petty tricks. It’s been decades, and these barbarians still haven’t improved.”

Pang Yukun sighed and said, “Your humble servants are incompetent, allowing Your Majesty to suffer such humiliation.”

Although Xiao Ming was angry, he knew that impulsiveness was the devil. The more unscrupulous the barbarians were, the more it proved that they were desperate now.

Only insecure enemies would resort to such despicable means. For him, who was gradually gaining the upper hand, he only needed to wait for the opportunity to deliver a fatal blow to the enemy.

“All you beloved ministers, do not blame yourselves. If it benefits the nation, one should sacrifice their life; how can one avoid it for fortune or misfortune? What is this small grievance to me? I only hope that all of you, my beloved ministers, can work with me to revitalize the Great Yu Empire and return today’s humiliation in the future.”

As he spoke, Xiao Ming exuded an aura of grandeur.

Pang Yukun showed a look of shame upon seeing this. He suddenly knelt down and said to Xiao Ming, “Your Majesty, I am guilty.”

“What do you mean, Senior Grand Secretary Pang?” Xiao Ming looked puzzled.

Pang Yukun prostrated himself and wept loudly, “Since Your Majesty ascended the throne, my selfish desires have grown day by day. For my own self-interest, I constantly excluded old officials from Chang’an, and in official appointments, I mostly used my own people. I even selfishly opposed Your Majesty’s decree to abolish the four classes of society, disregarding its benefits to the Great Yu Empire. For all these things, I deserve to die ten thousand times over.”

"If it benefits the nation, one should sacrifice their life; how can one avoid it for fortune or misfortune!" Pang Yukun recited. When Xiao Ming recited this sentence with a serious expression, a long-forgotten sentiment surged within him. Was this not what he had once pursued? Yet now, his eyes were blinded by self-interest, completely ignoring his original aspirations.

Not only Pang Yukun, but the generals in the council hall also lowered their heads in shame. Lu Fei said, "Your Majesty, I am also guilty. In the past, I fought for the country and for the common people, but now I fight solely for military merits. I am truly ashamed."

"I am also guilty."

"I am also guilty."

"..."

The generals knelt one by one behind Pang Yukun.

Xiao Ming was momentarily stunned. His biggest worry these days had been the change in these people's mindsets. Sometimes, in the council hall, he saw Pang Yukun almost becoming a copy of Fei Ji.

His original intention in heavily relying on Fei Ji was not to counterbalance Pang Yukun, but to stabilize the powerful families and old officials. However, Pang Yukun's performance increasingly disappointed him, which is why he had a backup plan. After all, what he least wanted to see was his own cultivated officials eventually being assimilated.

“No one is perfect; who can be without fault? To make a mistake is human, to reform is divine.” Xiao Ming smiled. He still remembered what Pang Yukun told him five years ago, that for the sake of the country, he was willing to go through fire and water. “As long as Senior Grand Secretary Pang can continue to assist me with all his might in the future.”

His single sentence today causing Pang Yukun to suddenly awaken was beyond his expectation.

However, he always looked only at the results, not the process. If Pang Yukun, the officials, and the generals reunited their hearts with him, that would naturally be a great blessing.

Because for him, he needed neither reformers nor conservatives, for no matter who prevailed, it would lead to the imperial court being controlled by one faction.

For example, in the late Ming Dynasty, after the Eunuch Party fell, the Donglin faction that came to power was equally troublesome.

His ultimate goal was still to have each minister perform their duties, and to have no factional disputes in the imperial court.

Pang Yukun stood up and bowed, saying, “Your Majesty, I hereby make a military pledge. If I ever again, for my own selfish gain, disrupt Your Majesty’s reforms, I will personally take off this official attire and go home to farm.”

“Hahaha...”

Hearty laughter burst from Xiao Ming’s lips. He said to Pang Yukun, “Good, with your words, I am relieved.”

He looked at Niu Ben and the other generals and said, “It is my fault not to reward merits, but you must not forget your original intention, nor betray my trust in you.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Niu Ben and the others said in unison.

Their visit to the council hall today was originally to discuss the matter of Prince Zhao and his son, and Empress Zhao and the Thirteenth Prince. Unexpectedly, there was another gain.

Pang Yukun’s stance this time greatly pleased him. This way, the reforms in the six provinces would at least proceed unhindered. However, he was past the age of believing someone after just a few sentences. How Pang Yukun would lead this group of officials and follow him would ultimately depend on their actual actions.

After a few more words, Xiao Ming dismissed Pang Yukun. At this moment, he looked at the humiliating letter on the ground. After some hesitation, he picked it up.

Today’s humiliation filled his heart with desolation and anger. The kind and industrious Han people, for thousands of years, had been as docile as sheep, yet they were repeatedly bullied by foreign tribes.

Now, as the monarch of a nation, in an era where the nation was the monarch, the barbarians' humiliation of him was an humiliation of the Great Yu Empire.

Having come to this world, was he to let the Great Yu Empire live like a lamb?

No, he would raise this lamb into a lion that could devour wolves. To achieve this, the Great Yu Empire must foster a martial spirit, and even move towards militarism.

After all, the Western countries during the Age of Discovery were practically no different from militarism. Militarism refers to the worship of force and military expansion, taking armed aggression and expansion as the foundation of a nation. Is this not the essence of the Western powers now?

Of course, the Great Yu Empire also had a truly militaristic nation before it, and that was the Golden Tent Khanate. Compared to the Western powers, the Golden Tent Khanate was no less formidable.

So, in such an environment full of bandits, he must adopt more aggressive military policies to preserve the Great Yu Empire's wealth and maintain the nation's stability.

As he was thinking, Fei Ji returned. "Your Majesty, Empress Zhao and the Thirteenth Prince have both been properly settled. I have ordered guards to strictly guard the courtyard and not allow anyone to approach."

Xiao Ming nodded, "From now on, let Empress Zhao and the Thirteenth Prince live in this courtyard. All their food and expenses will be provided by the prefectural office."

Fei Ji had already had a premonition. This meant that Empress Zhao and the Thirteenth Prince were virtually under lifelong imprisonment, but this was undoubtedly the best outcome for them.

If they lived outside, they might suffer various humiliations, which would also be bad for the imperial family's reputation.

Having settled the matter of Empress Zhao and the Thirteenth Prince, Xiao Ming continued, "Prince Zhao and his son are guilty of heinous crimes. This time, you will be responsible for supervising their execution."

Fei Ji's eyes flickered. He said, "Yes, Your Majesty."

After saying this, Xiao Ming waved his hand, dismissing Fei Ji. His instruction for Fei Ji to supervise Prince Zhao's execution was not without reason.

To expedite the unification of the Great Yu Empire, he had indeed adopted a "boil the frog slowly" approach to the issue of powerful families.

But since then, Fei Ji had become the representative voice of the powerful families. Sometimes, what Fei Ji said in the council hall represented the interests of these powerful families.

Although Fei Ji spoke for the powerful families to avoid exacerbating conflicts among the common people, he had to warn Fei Ji, lest he completely collude with them.

This supervision of Prince Zhao's execution was a reminder to Fei Ji, because Prince Zhao was from a powerful family, and powerful families could also become like Prince Zhao.

He wanted Fei Ji to understand his attitude.

Fei Ji departed, and Xiao Ming threw the barbarian's humiliating letter into the brazier, letting it turn to ashes, but he kept the words in his heart.

Today's humiliation was the driving force for his future endeavors.

The next day.

The news of Prince Zhao and his son's beheading in the East Market was published in the Qingzhou newspaper, instantly becoming a hot topic of discussion among the common people.

In Room 1 on the fourth floor of the Wei Family Restaurant, Li Chuyuan was enjoying the food provided by the restaurant. Compared to when he first came to Qingzhou Province, he had gained a significant amount of weight.

Attending to him was his butler, Wang Cheng, who came from the State of Chu, and lying in his arms was the courtesan from Qingzhou's Cuihong Tower.

“Your Highness, the newspaper says that Prince Zhao and his son Zhao Yuanliang will be beheaded in three days. Elder Fei sent word, asking Your Highness to also observe on that day.”

Li Chuyuan was drinking wine and playfully teasing the woman in his arms when his expression suddenly changed. “Hmph, why should I be called to witness the execution of Prince Zhao and Zhao Yuanliang? It’s nothing more than ‘killing the chicken to scare the monkey.’”

Wang Cheng chuckled and said, “Your Highness jests. Prince Zhao is not a chicken, and Your Highness is not a monkey. Since Elder Fei personally sent someone, Your Highness should still go, lest you displease the Emperor. After all, the person who truly wants His Highness to see is the Emperor.”

Li Chuyuan’s hand gripping the wine cup suddenly turned white at the knuckles. He had the woman in his arms leave, then said to Wang Cheng, “The Emperor, the Emperor, the Emperor, you call him ‘Emperor’ so readily.”

This Wang Cheng was nominally his butler, but in reality, he was sent by the Prince of Chu to supervise him, for fear that his impulsive nature would ruin important matters.

At the same time, Wang Cheng was also responsible for collecting intelligence on Qingzhou Province.

Wang Cheng smiled and said, “When one is under someone else’s roof, one has to bow one’s head. If our State of Chu had the ability to sweep across the world, we wouldn’t have to now depend on Xiao Ming’s goodwill.”

Li Chuyuan dejectedly slammed the table. "Sigh, I've been in Qingzhou Province for at least two or three months now, and I still don't understand why Qingzhou Province can manufacture so many types of firearms."

"That is why Xiao Ming is truly formidable. However, Your Highness need not worry. According to Xiao Ming, this knowledge of firearms merely came from Western missionaries. Now that the French have sent a large number of missionaries to Lin'an, it won't be long before we have these things too."

Li Chuyuan nodded, he suddenly remembered something and said, "I heard that my imperial father now trusts that French missionary, Richard, very much. Is that true?"

"This Richard knows everything from astronomy to geography. His Highness the Prince of Chu truly trusts him greatly. After all, now the only ones we can rely on are the French. Look at the fate of Prince Zhao and his son now. If we can't protect the State of Chu's land, our fate will be the same as theirs."

Li Chuyuan sighed softly and said, "However, the longer I live in Qingzhou Province, the more I feel its uniqueness. Look at the items in this guest room; each one is ingeniously crafted. How can our State of Chu compare? And this food is also so delicious, simply a delicacy on earth. No wonder the Wei Family Restaurant can earn so much every day."

Wang Cheng's expression became serious. "Your Highness, this is not the time to indulge in the pleasures of the palate. Although Your Highness is a hostage, you must shoulder the heavy responsibility of revitalizing the State of Chu."

Chapter 693

"This State of Chu will be mine in course, I naturally have a plan for it."

Li Chuyuan glanced at Wang Cheng, his words carrying a deeper meaning.

Wang Cheng immediately bowed upon hearing this. Li Chuyuan was clearly reminding him to know his place; even as a hostage, he was not a subject to be admonished by him.

Picking up his chopsticks, Li Chuyuan picked up a piece of braised pork and said, "Since Elder Fei has invited me, I will go and see, after all, this blade isn't falling on me."

...

In the Princess's Mansion, Princess Pingyang was reading the "Qingzhou Daily." Upon seeing the news that Prince Zhao was about to be beheaded and publicly displayed, she frowned, then suddenly sighed.

"Alas, I remember how, back in Chang'an, I would know about every little stir immediately. Now, I can only read about it in the newspaper."

Visiting the Princess's Mansion today was Lady Liu, the wife of the Duke of Song. She said, "Who isn't? The Emperor is keeping a close eye on us imperial relatives. No one dares to overstep."

Princess Pingyang pursed her lips and smiled. After the imperial relatives in Chang'an fled to Qingzhou Province, Xiao Ming neither allocated land nor issued monthly stipends to them, which caused many imperial clan members to be dissatisfied and privately criticize Xiao Ming.

"That 'thunder pool' naturally cannot be crossed, otherwise, one might fall and be shattered to pieces. It's safer for us to walk steadily on the shore. After all, this Emperor is different from the late Emperor; he even dares to kill feudal lords, so who else would he not dare to kill?" Princess Pingyang said with a knowing smile.

Lady Liu's face turned red and then pale. She understood the hidden meaning in these words. Among all the imperial clan members in Qingzhou Province, only Princess Pingyang held the highest prestige, so whenever they felt injustice, they would come to Princess Pingyang to complain.

Lady Liu was no exception. Although Xiao Ming did not issue stipends to these imperial clan members, he had once given them a large sum of silver based on their titles to encourage them to engage in business.

Furthermore, he had instructed Li Kaiyuan to establish a special imperial merchant team for these imperial relatives. As long as these imperial clan members were willing to do business, the Chamber of Commerce would offer great convenience.

However, some imperial clan members considered this disgraceful and refused to engage in business, such as the Duke of Song.

He took the eight thousand taels of silver Xiao Ming gave him and gambled it all away, losing every penny. If it weren't for Princess Pingyang's relief, the Duke of Song would not even have food.

Being subtly criticized by Princess Pingyang, Lady Liu could only endure it. She said, "Your Highness is right, but not everyone has Her Highness's talent for business. It is said that Her Highness now earns tens of thousands of taels of silver per month. I hope Her Highness can give me some pointers."

"It must be the Duke of Song who sent you again," Princess Pingyang gently snorted. "No wonder the Emperor is angry. Each one is more useless than the last. How can the Emperor trust you?"

Lady Liu stopped speaking. She could only complain and complain.

Sighing slightly, she said to Lady Liu, "Even so, the Emperor is now too negligent of the imperial relatives. This cannot go on. If these people cause trouble one day, it will give Pang Yukun and his officials an excuse to criticize us."

With that, she had Ouyang Mu fetch fifty taels of silver for Lady Liu. Now that Xiao Ming wasn't managing them, she had to. These people truly gave her a headache.

Lady Liu left with endless gratitude. Ouyang Mu then said, "Your Highness, this cannot continue. Although the Princess's Mansion business is very profitable, today it's the Duke of Song, tomorrow it will be the Duke of Tang. Sooner or later, they will drain everything. Besides, each of them is generous, and there are many family members, so no amount of silver is enough."

"How could I not know this? It's precisely because of this that the Emperor gave us a sum of silver and sent us imperial relatives away. When the late Emperor was alive, the stipends alone accounted for a large portion of the national treasury's expenditure. This Emperor is very shrewd, but on this matter, the Emperor is somewhat wishful thinking. Leaving them unsupervised might lead to trouble. Today, Lady Liu's words were full of dissatisfaction towards the Emperor, with much resentment. This is by no means accidental; they must be discussing it often."

After a pause, she said, "It seems I need to make a trip to the imperial palace to see the Emperor and also ask about this reform. Perhaps I can gain an advantage by being close to the source."

Ouyang Mu gave a wry smile. Although Princess Pingyang cared for these imperial relatives, she wouldn't specially go to the imperial palace just for them.

Her true intention concerned the reforms. Princess Pingyang was extremely intelligent, and she had already prepared once the reforms showed their first signs.

After having Ouyang Mu make some preparations, she went directly to the temporary palace. After reporting her arrival, she met Xiao Ming, who was in the imperial study, reviewing memorials.

“Your Majesty, being diligent in governance is correct, but you must not overwork yourself,” Princess Pingyang said with a slightly intimate tone.

Xiao Ming smiled. He had to admit that Princess Pingyang was very good at handling people, which was why Xiao Wenxuan was so fond of this younger sister.

After she permanently resided in Qingzhou Province, Princess Pingyang would occasionally come to the temporary palace to chat with the Empress Dowager and Fei Yuer, and would also bring him some strange and curious items.

One could say he saw Princess Pingyang almost every other day.

However, it was rare for Princess Pingyang to come directly to him, so he said, “Your Imperial Highness must not have come here just to inquire about my health, right?”

Previously, when Xiao Ming was King Qi, he could address Princess Pingyang as “aunt,” but after ascending the throne, he could only address her as “Imperial Highness.”

Pingyang had long been accustomed to Xiao Ming's straightforward way of speaking. In her opinion, her imperial nephew disliked complexity and preferred simplicity.

So she said, "To be honest, Your Majesty, I have come this time concerning the imperial relatives. I presume Your Majesty is already aware of the matter concerning the Duke of Song."

"I am aware of that," Xiao Ming said calmly, "Not just the Duke of Song, but many imperial princes and their sons are quite dissatisfied with me, aren't they?"

Princess Pingyang said earnestly, "Why should Your Majesty pay them any mind? As long as it benefits the Great Yu Empire, why care about them? If the imperial family ceased to exist, they would all starve to death."

"Your Imperial Highness is righteous." Xiao Ming smiled, "However, it is also improper for them to constantly ask the Imperial Highness for money. Wouldn't that suggest that I am unkind?"

Princess Pingyang's expression remained unchanged. She said, "Your Majesty worries too much. My silver was also given by Your Majesty. In the end, they will still thank Your Majesty."

Actually, even without Princess Pingyang mentioning it, he was already preparing to deal with these imperial relatives, because these imperial clan members, who were accustomed to being unruly in Chang'an, had already caused him a lot of trouble in Qingzhou Province.

If this continued, it would inevitably cause public dissatisfaction, because these people represented the imperial family.

So he said, "I can give them another opportunity. In this reform, I have decided to encourage private individuals to engage in commerce and open workshops. If they actively participate, they will certainly have no worries about food and clothing. If they still cling to old ways and complain about me after spending all their silver, then they should not blame me for being heartless."

Chapter 694

"Private businesses and open workshops?"

Princess Pingyang's face lit up with joy. She had come for this very matter; Xiao Ming clearly understood her thoughts.

However, she had always harbored doubts about Xiao Ming's enthusiasm for business, so she asked, "Why does Your Majesty have such a special preference for commerce?"

Xiao Ming smiled, "Imperial Highness is mistaken. Industry is the pillar of commerce, so for me, I value industry more than commerce."

After a moment of contemplation, he said, "The strength or weakness of a nation depends on the wealth or poverty of its people, and the wealth or poverty of its people depends on the abundance of its products, and the abundance of its products arises from industry."

Princess Pingyang frowned slightly. Although her vision was not as broad as Xiao Ming's, she understood the meaning of Xiao Ming's words.

So she said, “Does Your Majesty intend to have merchants build a large number of workshops this time?”

Xiao Ming nodded. The fundamental purpose of this reform was to revitalize industry. The scarcity of war materials during this northern war made him deeply realize that Qingzhou Province’s industrial capacity was insufficient.

If he wanted to establish an industrial system similar to those of Western countries, he must encourage the common people and merchants to participate in industrial construction.

With more workshops, the Great Yu Empire’s products would become abundant. With abundant products, they could be sold to other places, which would bring money to the common people, and the nation would become rich and powerful.

“Yes, this time I not only want to encourage the building of workshops, but also plan to sell steam engines to merchants, allowing them to build workshops within the six prefecture of Qingzhou”

This was something Xiao Ming had hesitated about for a long time. The steam engine could no longer be kept hidden. As a source of power, he had to popularize it among the people to unleash its maximum value.

And with the sale of steam engines, he would open up industries such as textiles to merchants, ensuring that the people had clothes to wear after ensuring they had food to eat.

“Steam engines?” Princess Pingyang was shocked.

The steam engine had always been a very mysterious thing. She had only heard of it and never seen its true form. Now that Xiao Ming openly stated that he would sell steam engines, this made her momentarily unable to react.

These were the things Xiao Ming wanted to tell Princess Pingyang. He exhorted, "Imperial Highness, tell them this is a rare opportunity. Whether they can seize it depends on themselves."

Princess Pingyang nodded, "Your Majesty, after I return, I will summon them and discuss this matter, and also give them a good talking-to on behalf of Your Majesty."

Xiao Ming was naturally pleased with this. Throughout history, imperial relatives were strictly guarded against, hence they were not allowed to engage in business or politics, being raised almost like pigs.

After a few more words with Princess Pingyang about industry and commerce, Princess Pingyang bid farewell and departed. At this point, Xiao Ming continued to write an imperial edict, which would mark the beginning of industrial prosperity in the six prefecture.

The next day, at the morning court session, Xiao Ming had Qian Dafu read out the imperial edict, officially establishing the support and protection for the establishment of private workshops.

At the same time, in the imperial edict, he introduced three new terms: the first was capital, the second was industry, and the third was company.

The main purpose of this imperial edict was to use the power of the imperial court to foster the development of private capital. For this purpose, the imperial edict proposed four policies.

The first policy was to abolish checkpoints in various parts of the north, connecting the north into a single entity, allowing goods to be freely sold in the north. At the same time, it fully took over and expanded the mines of rebellious feudal lords and powerful families, transforming them into imperial court-controlled mining enterprises and building modern mines and smelting workshops.

The second policy was to open up advanced technologies and machinery such as steam engines and textile machines to the common people, and at the same time, transform previously backward crafts and equipment.

The third policy was to open up industries such as textiles, white sugar, and soap to the common people. The fourth policy required the Qingzhou Bank to provide financial support to individuals, and also required the imperial court to provide silver to encourage the development of private capital.

As soon as this policy was announced, the council hall was in an uproar. In their view, the Emperor's reform steps this time were far too drastic.

"Your Majesty, merchants do not focus on production or farming, and agriculture is the foundation of the nation. If this continues, there will be problems with grain," Fei Ji said.

"Your Majesty, please reconsider. We, your humble subjects, are not opposing Your Majesty, but merely hope that Your Majesty can also consider agriculture," the ministers said one after another.

In a time of insufficient productivity, Xiao Ming would naturally not be so foolish as to abandon agriculture. So he said, "Promoting commerce and encouraging agriculture are not contradictory. After all, those who can engage in commerce are a minority. In the future, the prefectural office will not only pay more attention to agriculture, but also use tools such as grain drillers and steam pumps for agricultural purposes."

Fei Ji and others whispered upon hearing this; Xiao Ming's words reassured them.

Pang Yukun did not raise any objections this time, as this was within his expectations. Xiao Ming had previously encouraged commercial development, and this time it was merely more thorough.

In his opinion, the fundamental reason for Xiao Ming's determination this time was that the north was now basically stable and could make great strides forward, so that in the future they would have sufficient resources to defeat the barbarians.

Seeing that none of the ministers had any objections, he said, "If you have anything to say today, speak now. After this morning court session, the contents of this imperial edict will be implemented in the six provinces. If anyone obstructs it then, do not blame me for being merciless."

"Yes, Your Majesty," a group of ministers bowed and said.

After the Yu Ming incident, these ministers were noticeably more docile. Now that Xiao Ming held great power and his position was unshakable, they could only be more obedient in front of him.

Nodding, Xiao Ming looked at Pang Yukun, "Senior Grand Secretary Pang, how much silver is left in the imperial treasury?"

“Reporting to Your Majesty, there are now only thirteen million taels of silver,” Pang Yukun said succinctly. He was most familiar with the imperial treasury.

Xiao Ming had a headache. This long war had impoverished him. He said, “Take out six million taels of silver to support and encourage the development of private workshops.”

“Six million taels!”

The ministers in the council hall gasped. This time, Xiao Ming was truly determined.

The expressions of the ministers were seen by Xiao Ming. He said to them, “After discussing the support and encouragement for the development of private capital, I will talk about you. All this silver is going to the common people. If any of you dare to reach out, I will chop off your hands. At the same time, any official is forbidden from engaging in business or seeking private gain. Otherwise, once discovered, you will be immediately dismissed and punished according to your crime.”

In the Western world, officials were merchants, and merchants were officials, so the state always served capital.

But now, the Great Yu Empire still prioritized officials. He did not want officials and merchants to collude and harm the interests of the Great Yu Empire, so he gave them a warning in advance.

He was very clear that as he unleashed this beast of capital, a double-edged sword hung over his head.

He wasn't sure when this double-edged sword would fall, but at least one thing was clear: after this court session, the Great Yu Empire would, like Western countries, unleash the spark of capital.

Chapter 695

The council hall was silent.

This series of political decrees caught the officials somewhat off guard. At this moment, a minister stepped forward and asked, "Your Majesty, officials are not allowed to engage in business, but are their relatives allowed to?"

"No," Xiao Ming said decisively. In his opinion, allowing officials' relatives to engage in business would be tantamount to allowing officials to engage in business through proxies, because officials would inevitably use their power to seek personal gain for their relatives.

The ministers fell silent for a moment. The Emperor intended to completely eliminate their opportunities for abuse of power for personal gain.

Surveying the ministers in the council hall, Xiao Ming continued, "In addition to fostering the establishment of private workshops, the imperial court will focus on establishing a batch of official workshops to control the nation's lifelines. I have instructed Senior Grand Secretary Pang to allocate six million taels of silver, a large portion of which will be used to build official workshops. This includes the management of military weapons, shipbuilding, salt, and tea."

Pang Yukun asked, "Your Majesty, if that is the case, there will be quite a number of official workshops. Who will manage these official workshops, and will officials be appointed?"

The establishment of state-owned workshops this time was a plan with two objectives for Xiao Ming.

The development of private capital would inevitably bring tremendous changes to the Great Yu Empire. If Xiao Ming completely handed over the Great Yu Empire's commerce to private capital, he would become very passive in the future, and even the nation's lifelines would be controlled by merchants, just like in the West.

So, since he was vigorously developing capital, it was better to simultaneously create his own state capital. This way, he would represent both the official and the capital. He was the Emperor, and also the largest capitalist. Imperial governance would not change due to the interference of merchants, and he could even use state-owned capital to regulate the market.

Merchants seek profit. In the country where he lived in contemporary times, there were many instances of merchants profiting from national calamities, such as the spread of a certain disease leading to a sharp rise in salt prices due to rumors, and private salt being hoarded by merchants and sold at high prices.

In such circumstances, if the salt industry was not controlled by the state, it would inevitably lead to the deterioration of the situation.

It was precisely because of these personal experiences that he encouraged capital while also putting a leash on it.

At the same time, the second purpose of these official workshops was to help him manage the imperial relatives. The "opportunity" Xiao Ming offered to the imperial relatives this time was to completely extinguish their ambition to participate in politics.

According to the statistics compiled by Pang Yukun a few days ago, the current number of imperial relatives in the Great Yu Empire was as high as 470,000. This was even after many imperial family members were massacred by the feudal lords during the northern war.

Such a huge number truly startled Xiao Ming. It was then that he truly understood why the imperial family was called the largest powerful family.

According to Xiao Ming's understanding, the Great Yu Empire and the Ming Dynasty made the same mistake: providing for the imperial family without compensation.

However, after centuries of reproduction, this gradually became a serious problem for the Great Yu Empire, and now this problem had fallen into his hands.

If he were not of the imperial family, starting from scratch to conquer the world, he naturally wouldn't need to concern himself with these people. However, since he had inherited the throne, improper handling would inevitably lead to another upheaval within the imperial family.

During this time, Li San had been closely monitoring the movements of these imperial relatives. Now, these imperial family members, who lacked the ability to make a living, seemed to be on the verge of causing trouble for him.

Therefore, he intended to use this opportunity to completely solve this problem by incorporating these imperial family members into official workshops, making them "employees" of these official workshops, giving them the treatment of an "iron rice bowl" (guaranteed employment), exchanging labor for money and grain.

Of course, this “iron rice bowl” would only last for two generations within their family; the third generation would no longer receive this treatment, thereby completely resolving the problem of the tail wagging the dog.

Of course, this was only for ordinary imperial family members, because the relationship between these imperial family members and the imperial family was already very distant, infinitely close to common people, and they would be happy to enjoy this treatment, and their number was also the largest.

As for people like the Duke of Song, they naturally would not be content to be ordinary artisans. Therefore, Xiao Ming planned to incorporate Princess Pingyang into the ranks of official merchants, no longer allowing her to engage in her own private trade among the common people, thereby preventing imperial family members from privately engaging in business.

The logic was simple: it was essentially changing the “pig-raising” model into a “worker” model. At the same time, Princess Pingyang and others who gained profits would also become bound by interests with him.

With the status of official merchants, and still able to receive profit dividends, they could only enjoy all this by supporting Xiao Ming. If they were still not satisfied and caused any trouble, he would have no choice but to resort to force.

Thinking of this, Xiao Ming expressed his thoughts.

Fei Ji and Pang Yukun listened quietly, becoming more and more excited as they listened. As soon as Xiao Ming’s words fell, Fei Ji loudly said, “Your Majesty is wise! This will completely solve the problem of the imperial relatives, and the imperial treasury will save a huge amount of expenditure, while also avoiding the dissatisfaction of the imperial relatives.”

Pang Yukun nodded, but he raised some concerns, “Your Majesty, forgive my disrespect, but from what I understand, imperial relatives like the Duke of Song are merely good-for-nothings. If they are allowed into official workshops, what if they cause trouble?”

“I am letting them enter official workshops, but I never said I would let them hold power. The positions in these official workshops will naturally go to the capable. I believe most imperial family members are willing to change. As for the stubborn ones, I will not tolerate them; they will be dealt with according to the law,” Xiao Ming said.

Pang Yukun nodded. He was now reassured. As he had thought, Xiao Ming’s true purpose was still to resolve the problem of the imperial family.

Among these imperial family members, there were both lazy good-for-nothings and diligent and ambitious individuals. These official workshops would act like a sieve, separating the good from the bad.

Virtuous and capable individuals were naturally more trustworthy than outsiders. Incorruptible and useless individuals could be kicked out when the time came.

And most importantly, these individuals would also be under their constant supervision as a result.

The main task of today’s morning court session completed, Qian Dafu, at Xiao Ming’s signal, announced the adjournment of court.

Xiao Ming was very satisfied with the reaction of the hundreds of officials in the court this time. He had to admit that after his ascension, he felt that these officials somewhat underestimated him.

After all, he was young, and these old foxes thought they could manipulate his decisions with a few tricks.

But after Yu Ming was dismissed, these officials suddenly realized that the Emperor before them was also a ruthless character. It was then that they put away their contempt and recognized the distinction between ruler and minister.

“Report any matters early, otherwise, adjourn the court!” As Qian Dafu’s shrill voice rang out, the morning court session ended.

The hundred officials cheered, “Long live!” and stood up, preparing to leave. At this moment, Xiao Ming kept Fei Ji and Pang Yukun behind.

“What are Your Majesty’s commands?” Fei Ji bowed.

The most taboo thing in reform was officials feigning compliance and decrees not leaving the imperial palace. This was also the reason why Xiao Ming kept Fei Ji and Pang Yukun behind.

After his ascension, his mindset was also slowly changing. Five years ago, he was just a modern, ordinary young man. Five years later, he became the Emperor of the Great Yu Empire.

His psychology had also gradually changed over five years. Now that he was the Emperor, he must be supreme and keep his word!

The chaotic imperial governance during Xiao Wenxuan's time could not be repeated under him.

Chapter 696

"I kept you two here for the matter of this reform. You are the heads of all officials, and I do not wish to see decrees twisted in the hands of some officials."

With his hands clasped behind his back, Xiao Ming's tone was unwavering.

Fei Ji's heart sank. Xiao Ming's tone was resolute; in his view, this new monarch was gradually adapting to his position as the supreme ruler.

He dared not be negligent and solemnly said, "Yes, Your Majesty, I will personally supervise their execution."

"me as well," Pang Yukun said.

Nodding, Xiao Ming said seemingly casually, "Elder Fei, I understand that you harbor suspicions towards Senior Grand Secretary Pang and the former officials of the feudal states. Sometimes, you oppose for the sake of opposition, regardless of right or wrong. During the recent urgent war, I turned a blind eye, but if this happens again in the future, I will never tolerate it. Whether it is you, Fei Ji, or you, Pang Yukun, if you dare to engage in factional struggles in my council hall, I will not spare you!"

As these words were uttered, fine beads of sweat appeared on Fei Ji's forehead. He plopped down onto his knees, "Your Majesty, I, your old servant, have indeed looked after the old officials from Chang'an in some areas, but I absolutely have not engaged in factional struggles. I implore Your Majesty to investigate clearly."

"It's best if you haven't," Xiao Ming looked at Pang Yukun. "You two are both Grand Secretaries. You should cooperate with each other for the revitalization of the Great Yu Empire. Do not spend all your energy on internal strife. I will not tolerate even a speck of dust in my eyes, and this murky atmosphere in the council hall should also change."

Pang Yukun nervously said, "Yes, your humble servant will keep Your Majesty's teachings in mind."

"Alright, I have said what I needed to say. As for what happens next, you both weigh it yourselves," Xiao Ming said calmly.

The two exchanged glances and exited the council hall.

Qian Dafu then chuckled, "Your Majesty was truly majestic today. I saw that both Elder Fei and Senior Grand Secretary Pang were quite scared."

"I just want to remind them. During the Western expedition, I couldn't move, but now that the north is stable, it's time to eradicate the malpractices in the Great Yu Empire's officialdom. This is also part of the reform," Xiao Ming said with a faint smile.

Qian Dafu said, "Your Majesty is absolutely right. The ministers in the council hall are so focused on attacking each other; who has the mind to assist Your Majesty in governing the country?"

“You see through it clearly. That is the purpose of my summoning the two of them individually. Differing political views are acceptable, but if they engage in factional struggles, I will deal with them.” Xiao Ming’s gaze was firm. For him, he had inherited a mess, just like Emperor Chongzhen.

His only good fortune was that he had established a “state within a state” centered on the six prefecture, cultivating a group of officials who did not rely on the imperial examination to enter officialdom. It was precisely because of this that he dared to undertake drastic reforms.

While the two were speaking, Fei Ji and Pang Yukun had already reached outside the council hall.

Stopping at the doorway, Fei Ji and Pang Yukun simultaneously paused and wiped cold sweat from their foreheads with their sleeves.

Sensing each other’s actions, the two turned around, their expressions somewhat awkward. Pang Yukun was the first to speak, “Elder Fei, please forgive me for any offenses I may have committed in the past.”

“Senior Grand Secretary Pang, you are too polite. I also have my shortcomings. Your Majesty’s words this time truly gave me a sense of enlightenment. I have indeed been a bit muddled lately,” Fei Ji said.

With his daughter now the Empress, and he himself virtually the head of all officials, he had become somewhat disoriented by the flattery of some officials.

It was only when Xiao Ming pointed it out this time that he realized everything he had was given by the Emperor, and the Emperor could take it away at any time if he was displeased.

“Since that is the case, I hope Elder Fei can assist me in the implementation of this decree. Otherwise, you and I might not keep our official posts. It is said that when His Majesty dealt with Yu Ming, he said that a three-legged toad is hard to find, but two-legged officials are everywhere. Elder Fei, do not forget, there are many ministers hoping to enter the Grand Secretariat.”

Fei Ji nodded, “That is natural. This time, I will absolutely not shield any official.”

Pang Yukun chuckled inwardly. The double act he and the Emperor performed still had its effect.

After a heart-to-heart conversation, Fei Ji and Pang Yukun walked towards the prefectural office, chatting and laughing.

The next day, the “Qingzhou Daily” prominently featured the content of the court discussions. The decree concerning the encouragement of private capital development and the establishment of official workshops instantly ignited the entire Qingzhou Province.

The happiest among them were naturally the merchants of Qingzhou Province, as this meant they could enter more industries, and also receive policy support.

Among the common people, those who wanted to engage in business were equally excited, because many of the decrees favored them.

Just as the people of Qingzhou Province cheered, the decree targeting the imperial family also quietly reached the ears of the various imperial relatives living in Qingzhou Province.

At the Princess's Mansion, Princess Pingyang was calm upon receiving this news, because in the study, Xiao Ming had already mentioned this matter to her.

After the decree was implemented, she would transform into an official merchant, and her first duty would be to work with officials to establish the Railway Department.

She also had some understanding of railways and steam locomotives. She gladly accepted this matter. Compared to her previous idleness and being excluded from Xiao Ming's circle, she suddenly became an insider. This change in position made her completely side with her imperial nephew, the Emperor. After all, even when the late Emperor was alive, she had never enjoyed such favorable treatment.

Although she was not in the council hall, she was now also working for the Emperor.

She was secretly pleased when Ouyang Mu suddenly walked over and said, "Your Highness, the Duke of Song has arrived."

"Him again!"

Princess Pingyang frowned. She didn't want to see him, but after a moment's hesitation, she decided to see why the Duke of Song had come in person.

She had Ouyang Mu let the Duke of Song in. Soon, the Duke of Song, reeking of alcohol, staggered into Princess Pingyang's presence.

Seeing Princess Pingyang, the Duke of Song sat on the ground and wailed, "Your Highness, you must advocate for us imperial relatives! The Emperor's decree yesterday is going to completely cut off our livelihood!"

Pinching her nose, Princess Pingyang was somewhat annoyed. She said, "Duke of Song, your words are mistaken. The Emperor is finding a way for us to live."

The Duke of Song was sobbing, "Your Highness, when the late Emperor was alive, imperial relatives enjoyed imperial court sustenance for generations. Now, the Emperor has explicitly canceled it, and even wants us to enter some workshops. Isn't this clearly humiliating us? I ask you, which imperial relative would do such a lowly thing?"

Princess Pingyang's face changed. "I have always engaged in business. Is the Duke of Song calling me lowly?"

The Duke of Song, heavily inebriated, slurred, "A dignified princess has to rely on business to support herself? That's a joke to be spread around."

"Hmph, if that's the case, Duke of Song, don't come to me to borrow silver anymore. As for this decree, if the Duke of Song has the courage, why not go find the Emperor? Why come to me to complain?" Princess Pingyang's face grew uglier.

"So, Your Highness won't care about us anymore?" The Duke of Song, using his drunkenness as an excuse, slurred, "If that's the case, I'll go find Pang Yukun and Fei Ji, those two treacherous villains! These bad ideas must have come from them!"

With that, the Duke of Song turned and staggered away.

Chapter 697

“Your Highness, should we stop the Duke of Song?”

Ouyang Mu asked, worried.

Princess Pingyang was fuming. She said to Ouyang Mu, “There’s no need to stop him. This Duke of Song is acting arrogant with his age; it’s time for the Emperor to deal with him.”

Ouyang Mu nodded and said, “Perhaps the Emperor’s decree this time is correct. If the Great Yu Empire continues to support these idle imperial relatives, sooner or later, it will be bankrupted by them.”

“Alas, who isn’t saying that? This Xiao Ming, in my opinion, is a monarch of restoration. With him, at least we don’t have to worry about being invaded by barbarians again.”

While the two were speaking, the drunken Duke of Song, accompanied by his servants, went directly to the prefectural office. Before he even reached the office gate, he encountered Fei Ji and Pang Yukun, who were about to leave.

The Duke of Song was filled with indignation, and being drunk, he didn’t care about anything. He threw a punch at Pang Yukun, cursing, “Dog villain! If it weren’t for you constantly nagging the Emperor, how would the Emperor have ordered the cancellation of support for the imperial relatives?”

Pang Yukun had no idea the Duke of Song would hit him. How could a frail scholar react in time? He took a punch to the nose and fell to the ground, clutching his nose.

Fei Ji was shocked. He immediately stopped the Duke of Song and angrily said, "Duke of Song, Pang Yukun is a Senior Grand Secretary of the Grand Secretariat. How can you hit him?"

"Pah! What's wrong with hitting him? Even the late Emperor was respectful to me. What is he?" The Duke of Song pushed Fei Ji away and cursed, "Not only will I hit him, I'll hit you too! You're simply a disgrace to the late Emperor! If you could stop him, would the Emperor be so reckless?"

Fei Ji's face turned ashen. Originally, he had some sympathy for these imperial relatives and nobles, but now he completely understood. The Emperor's actions were perfectly justified.

These people could not be allowed to hold official positions, nor could they be allowed to engage in business themselves, otherwise, relying on their status as imperial relatives and nobles, they would surely turn the world upside down.

The guards at the gate of the prefectural office rushed over upon seeing this. They surrounded the Duke of Song. The guard leader asked, "Senior Grand Secretary Pang, should we arrest him?"

"You dare!" The Duke of Song suddenly drew his ceremonial sword.

Pang Yukun and Fei Ji already knew why the Duke of Song was causing trouble. It was nothing more than the end of his days of free food and drink, and he wanted to vent his dissatisfaction.

However, the Duke of Song held a respected position, so they dared not act rashly. Thus, the guard went to report the matter to Xiao Ming, while he and Fei Ji continued to deal with the Duke of Song, lest he go mad and do something outrageous.

The guard, receiving the order, immediately headed towards Xiao Ming's temporary palace.

At this time, Xiao Ming was in his study, using the technology crystal to search for currently achievable technology. This search was sometimes similar to finding a book in a library; the only difference was the speed at which he could retrieve information.

However, even so, the vast knowledge in the technology crystal sometimes drove him crazy.

But sometimes he also enjoyed immersing himself in this pleasure of searching, because the technology crystal always held unexpected surprises for him.

Since the technology crystal came from a prehistoric civilization, it naturally included many astonishing theories, among which the theory of parallel universes was similar to contemporary theories.

This theory posits that other universes, similar yet different, exist parallel to the original universe. In these universes, there might also be universes born under the same conditions as the original universe, or planets identical to those inhabited by humans, or with the same history. There might even be people completely identical to humans. At the same time, in these different universes, the development of things would have different outcomes. Species that have become extinct in the original universe might be continuously evolving and thriving in another universe.

Xiao Ming's transmigration naturally personally confirmed this theory. In fact, many scientists in contemporary times also firmly believe in the existence of parallel universes and have conducted many experiments to verify it.

The only question, however, was what caused history to begin to change after the Three Kingdoms period?

Xiao Ming consulted a large number of Great Yu Empire documents on this question, but he found no unusual points, and this remained a knot in his heart.

As he was contemplating, Qian Dafu suddenly arrived outside the door, saying urgently, "Your Majesty, something has happened! The Duke of Song hit Senior Grand Secretary Pang!"

Xiao Ming snapped back to reality. Hearing this, he angrily said, "The Duke of Song!"

"Indeed! The prefectural office guards said that the Duke of Song even drew his sword in front of Senior Grand Secretary Pang. If someone dies, it will be disastrous!"

"Bang!" Xiao Ming slammed the table. "I didn't have time to deal with them before, but now they're getting arrogant! Go! I'd like to see what kind of trouble this Duke of Song can stir up."

At the gate of the prefectural office, the Duke of Song was still throwing a tantrum, fueled by alcohol. Soon, Xiao Ming and Qian Dafu arrived at the prefectural office under the protection of imperial guards.

Seeing Xiao Ming, Pang Yukun walked over, clutching his bleeding nose. “Your Majesty, the Duke of Song is simply too unruly.”

Fei Ji also chimed in, “Your Majesty, look at this Duke of Song! He gambles and drinks all day, then causes trouble when he’s drunk. This is simply a disgrace to the imperial family!”

The Duke of Song, at this moment, had his back to Xiao Ming, wildly swinging and slashing with the ceremonial sword in his hand.

Incensed, Xiao Ming said to the imperial guards, “Arrest the Duke of Song!”

Upon hearing this, the imperial guards, carrying flintlock guns with fixed bayonets, rushed forward. One soldier skillfully used his bayonet to disarm the Duke of Song, sending his ceremonial sword flying, while another directly pressed the Duke of Song to the ground.

“Who are you? How dare you lay hands on me!” The Duke of Song struggled.

“It was I who ordered them to do so,” Xiao Ming’s stern voice rang out.

Hearing this voice, the Duke of Song shivered, and his drunkenness largely dissipated. He looked at Xiao Ming’s angry face, and a layer of cold sweat immediately broke out on his body.

“Your Majesty.” The Duke of Song’s body trembled uncontrollably.

Xiao Ming snorted, “Duke of Song, you are quite capable! You even dare to strike my Senior Grand Secretary!”

“Your Majesty, I dare not! I only hit him because he incited Your Majesty; he is a sycophant!” The Duke of Song cried out.

Xiao Ming already knew the Duke of Song’s purpose for causing trouble. He said, “The decision to abolish the imperial family’s stipend was my idea and has nothing to do with Senior Grand Secretary Pang. So, are you going to strike me now?”

Upon hearing this, the Duke of Song’s face turned ashen.

Xiao Ming had been watching this Duke of Song for a long time. It was precisely because of this that he became firm in his decision not to let this group of freeloaders continue to harm the Great Yu Empire.

And today, with the Duke of Song being so arrogant, he now had an excuse to “kill the chicken to scare the monkey.” Otherwise, these people would still think they were living in the era of Xiao Wenxuan.

He said loudly, “The Duke of Song has no regard for the law, and has assaulted an imperial official. His crime is unforgivable. Guards, drag the Duke of Song to the East Market and administer fifty heavy blows with a plank as a warning to others!”

Chapter 698

“Fifty heavy blows!”

Fei Ji and Pang Yukun exclaimed in unison.

Pang Yukun rubbed his still aching nose and said, “Your Majesty, the Duke of Song is old. Wouldn’t fifty blows take his life?”

The Duke of Song immediately realized the seriousness of the situation. His body trembled uncontrollably, and his eyes filled with fear.

“Your Majesty, I just drank wine; I was confused then. Your Majesty, spare my life, spare my life!” The Duke of Song kowtowed repeatedly. Even a strong young man would be bedridden for three months after fifty blows.

If it were on him, it would be no different from taking his life.

Xiao Ming’s gaze was cold. Five years ago, he might have been merciful, but now he gradually understood a principle: a monarch’s soft-heartedness towards individuals is unkindness to the whole world.

And his unkindness was sometimes a great kindness to the world. For example, in this matter, if he spared the Duke of Song, these imperial relatives would become even more reckless. Punishing the Duke of Song would not only benefit the imperial court but also the common people. The rampant arrogance of these privileged classes in Qingzhou Province was a serious impediment to development.

Therefore, he did not even look at the Duke of Song, and said to the surrounding officials and onlookers, "Since ascending the throne, I have issued edicts to govern the nation according to law. From the common people to the Emperor, lawbreakers are treated equally. Today, the Duke of Song, being drunk, caused trouble and assaulted a high-ranking imperial official. His crime is unforgivable. Guards, drag him to the East Market for a beating!"

The imperial guards, receiving the order, immediately seized the Duke of Song and headed towards the East Market. Along the way, the Duke of Song's pleas for mercy could be heard continuously.

Fei Ji and Pang Yukun exchanged glances. At this moment, Xiao Ming's image in their hearts became even more distinct. In their view, compared to the late Emperor, this new monarch possessed more decisiveness and a fierce aura.

After dealing with the Duke of Song, Xiao Ming said to Fei Ji and Pang Yukun, "How can you two, as Grand Secretaries, forget what I said? From now on, if any imperial relatives rely on their status to cause trouble, they will all be dealt with according to the law."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Fei Ji and Pang Yukun bowed. Previously, they dared not speak their anger, but now Xiao Ming had essentially bestowed upon them a Shang Fang sword (an imperial sword granting authority to execute without prior approval).

After a pause, Xiao Ming said to the two, "My entrusting the nation's affairs to you both is a sign of my trust. You only need to be responsible to me. If anyone else dares to obstruct you, deal with them according to the law."

"Your Majesty cares for the world and benefits all living beings, treating everyone equally. With Your Majesty as such a wise ruler, the Great Yu Empire will surely prosper," Fei Ji said, deeply moved, praising loudly.

Xiao Ming smiled and said, “Less flattery. You two must spare no effort in implementing this decree from the council hall. For this period, I may have to personally go to the academies to teach.”

“Your Majesty will go personally again?” Pang Yukun hesitated. Xiao Ming was formerly a feudal prince, but now he was the Emperor. Never before in history had an emperor personally gone to teach.

However, Xiao Ming used to frequently visit Bowen Academy, so he was not overly surprised.

Compared to Pang Yukun, Fei Ji could not remain calm. He advised, “Your Majesty’s state affairs are already busy enough. Adding these cumbersome matters, I fear it will tire Your Majesty. I hope Your Majesty prioritizes your imperial health.”

Xiao Ming had already made up his mind; he would not compromise with the two on this matter. Now that the north had finally entered a peaceful development period, this was the time for him to fully utilize the technology crystal.

Although he believed that firearms were now on par with or even slightly superior to those of the West, the Great Yu Empire’s overall societal level was still too far behind the West.

So, this time, he planned to personally take charge. In these five years, through learning and practice, he had cultivated a group of talented individuals with solid foundations.

Now, this group needed his guidance to move in a more advanced direction.

“You two Grand Secretaries need not worry. I have my own plans. These matters are merely verbal and will not tire me. However, the implementation of these reforms requires you two to inspect the common people in a timely manner.”

“Your Majesty labors tirelessly; what is a little hardship for us?” Pang Yukun said sincerely.

Xiao Ming nodded. Indeed, “when the upper beam is not straight, the lower beam is crooked.” Under an incompetent ruler, there are corrupt officials. No matter how many times Xiao Ming spoke, it was not as effective as leading by example.

The officials saw it, and naturally kept it in mind.

After a few more words with the two, Xiao Ming and Qian Dafu walked towards Bowen Academy. The Ministry of Education had already been officially established last time, and its head official had also been selected.

This person was named Chao Zhengwen, a native of Qingzhou Province, thirty-six years old, and a former private tutor.

Five years ago, after Bowen Academy was established, he entered the academy to study, remaining largely unknown because he specialized not in governance or technology, but in culture and education.

Later, when the “Qingzhou Daily” was founded, Chao Zhengwen would occasionally submit his writings to the newspaper, which gradually attracted Xiao Ming’s attention.

What he submitted was none other than the current imperial examination problems of the Great Yu Empire.

After reading the books written by Xiao Ming, and understanding the current world situation, he asserted that the imperial examination needed reform and proposed many specific reform measures.

At this time, Xiao Ming also had the idea of establishing a Ministry of Education, so he immediately selected Chao Zhengwen and appointed him as the Academic Commissioner of the Ministry of Education.

The two arrived at Bowen Academy, where Chao Zhengwen, already notified, was waiting at the academy's entrance.

At this moment, the plaque of Bowen Academy was being taken down, replaced by a plaque for Qingzhou University.

"Academic Commissioner Chao Zhengwen of the Ministry of Education greets Your Majesty."

"Dispense with the formalities!" Xiao Ming said to Chao Zhengwen. He then continued, "Do you know why I renamed Bowen Academy to Qingzhou University?"

Chao Zhengwen said, "The term 'university' comes from Zeng Zi's work, 'The Great Learning.' In this text, Zeng Zi put forth the Way of the Great Learning: 'to manifest the clear character, to love the people, and to rest in the highest good,' and also proposed the eight steps of 'investigation of things,

extension of knowledge, sincerity of the will, rectification of the mind, cultivation of the person, regulation of the family, governance of the state, and bringing peace to the world.’ If I am not mistaken, Your Majesty changing the academy to a university is to make the university’s students remember that what they learn is for the prosperity of the nation and the strengthening of the people.”

Xiao Ming nodded, “You are right, that is precisely what I mean. The way of the imperial examination is only for one day to enter the inner halls and reach the highest official position; its scope is too small. But Qingzhou University will be a place where a hundred flowers bloom, and the imperial examination must also adapt to the times.”

Chao Zhengwen said, “It is precisely because of this that I proposed the method of educational reform: abolishing the bad habit of the imperial examination only testing the Four Books and Five Classics. Instead, these Four Books and Five Classics will be listed as one subject, similar to physics, chemistry, mathematics, civil engineering, astronomy, etc., thoroughly eradicating the malpractice of Great Yu Empire officials only knowing the Four Books and Five Classics.”

Xiao Ming smiled. What Chao Zhengwen spoke of was precisely the malpractice in the selection of officials that had persisted for a thousand years. In the Great Yu Empire, a county magistrate often had limited abilities, yet bore responsibilities equivalent to a modern-day mayor, police chief, prosecutor, finance director, and construction director.

This educational reform would completely abolish this method of selecting officials.

Chapter 699

With a “bang,” the plaque of Bowen Academy fell to the ground, and the plaque of Qingzhou University was officially hung above the entrance.

The gleaming four characters symbolized Xiao Ming’s vision: the future of education in the Great Yu Empire would be bright.

Because for him, his advantage was education, and education was the foundation of national prosperity. With the technology crystal in hand, the Great Yu Empire's technological explosion would be more ferocious than that of the West.

In front of Qingzhou University, the two discussed the imperial examination reforms for a while. Ultimately, the name "imperial examination" would be retained, but the content of the examination would be completely changed.

From now on, titles such as "Xiucai," "Juren," and "Jinshi" would gradually become a thing of the past. Overall, the Great Yu Empire's education would move towards modernization.

"Your Majesty, now military, political and legal, and medical studies have been separated from Bowen Academy. Only subjects such as architecture, civil engineering, machinery, physics, chemistry, and commerce remain."

This splitting of Bowen Academy was an order given by Xiao Ming. His purpose was to standardize education. Qingzhou University, to him, would be the Great Yu Empire's first comprehensive university.

Military, medical, and political-legal studies were independent schools, more specialized, and produced more unique talents.

"Indeed, the university is one aspect, but you must also keep an eye on the schools in various prefectures and counties, especially the moral character of the teachers. As the saying goes, 'a teacher's virtue is exemplary.' If a teacher is a beast, how can I cultivate a group of upright talents?" Xiao Ming said as he walked into Qingzhou University.

“Your Majesty is absolutely right. I will strictly manage these teachers and prevent them from misleading their students,” Chao Zhengwen said. “However, Your Majesty, I once proposed establishing a Ministry of Education Academy to train teachers, and I hope Your Majesty can approve it. Otherwise, there simply aren’t enough teachers.”

Chao Zhengwen’s ideas were already modernized. The Ministry of Education Academy he spoke of was similar to a modern normal college, specifically for training teachers.

Xiao Ming naturally had no objection to this. Chao Zhengwen also knew this; his true purpose was merely to ask Xiao Ming for money.

Educational reform also required money.

“I will discuss this matter with Senior Grand Secretary Pang and try to squeeze out some silver for you to use,” Xiao Ming could only say this.

Currently, there were many places that needed money, and it had to be centrally allocated. He couldn’t just make empty promises.

After discussing this matter, the two continued to walk into the academy. Overall, he was very satisfied with Chao Zhengwen’s reforms.

Now that the subjects were divided more meticulously, it also meant that in terms of talent cultivation, the Great Yu Empire had truly begun to catch up with the West.

However, for this, he would have to personally participate in teaching and research.

Thinking about having to write book after book again, Xiao Ming found it daunting, and the slow writing tool that was the brush was no longer suitable for him.

As he inspected Qingzhou University, he also thought about manufacturing fountain pens. With Qingzhou's current level of craftsmanship, fountain pens could certainly be produced.

The only regret was the inability to produce ink-absorbing fountain pens. Currently, he could only produce fountain pens similar to quill pens, which needed to be dipped in ink to write a few characters, as Qingzhou did not have rubber yet.

However, thinking of rubber, Xiao Ming's mind stirred. Rubber in this era was a strategic material. In contemporary times, until the Republic of China period, rubber was a strategic resource for Western countries. Now, he could not let go of this scarce resource.

After inspecting Qingzhou University for a while and giving instructions for the upcoming educational reforms, Xiao Ming and Pang Yukun returned to the imperial residence.

At this time, the Duke of Song had also been dragged to the East Market. Under public scrutiny, the yamen runners vigorously gave the Duke of Song fifty heavy blows in front of the common people.

After these fifty blows, the Duke of Song's buttocks were lacerated, and with the last blow, he directly fainted.

The people from the Duke's mansion who rushed over upon hearing the news wailed and cried, but under the supervision of Fei Ji and Pang Yukun, the blows became heavier and heavier.

After the fifty blows were administered, Pang Yukun said, "The Emperor has ordered that lawbreakers, whether common people or imperial relatives and nobles, are treated equally before the law."

The common people, hearing this, nodded frequently.

Life in Qingzhou Province had been very peaceful, but it changed after a large number of these imperial relatives and officials poured in.

Some of them, relying on their power, began to oppress the common people. The common people dared not express their anger, so they were delighted to see the Duke of Song beaten.

After punishing the Duke of Song, Pang Yukun and Fei Ji turned and left. For them, the Duke of Song had brought this upon himself. Xiao Ming was just looking for an opportunity to deal with these imperial relatives, and the Duke of Song had walked right into it.

At the same time, the news of the Duke of Song being beaten quickly spread among the imperial relatives in Qingzhou Province.

The Duke of Song had always been their leader, and now that he was beaten, they were naturally terrified.

To outsiders, Xiao Ming beating the Duke of Song was to punish him for assaulting Pang Yukun, but to them, Xiao Ming was “killing the chicken to scare the monkey,” clearly telling them that anyone who dared to cause trouble in the future would suffer the same fate as the Duke of Song.

Many people had objections to the recent abolition of the imperial family’s stipend. They were just preparing to discuss this matter with the Duke of Song, and now this incident suddenly occurred, causing them all to tremble with fear.

For them, this Xiao Ming was different from any other imperial prince. Having been banished to Qingzhou Province since childhood, strictly speaking, he had no connection with the imperial relatives in Chang’an.

Moreover, he was a laughingstock in their eyes.

When Xiao Ming defeated the barbarians and the three princes, they did not help at all. In fact, they were merely refugees. One could say that Xiao Ming had no reason to pay them any mind.

Although this empire was inherited by Xiao Ming, its foundation was essentially built through conquest.

At this time, Xiao Ming and Qian Dafu had already returned to the temporary palace. In the study, Xiao Ming faced the map on the wall and looked towards Goryeo.

The most urgent matter after the reform was to find overseas markets, because after this industrial popularization, the goods from the six prefecture would experience explosive growth.

These goods, after satisfying domestic demand, would have to be exported, otherwise, unsold goods would be like poison, killing the industrial system he had established.

The essence of the problem was simple: if merchants could not profit from manufacturing goods, he could not maintain the existence of workshops. Even the imperial court's official workshops would incur losses if goods were unsold, eventually becoming a burden.

It could be said that if there were no overseas colonies to provide product markets for Britain, capital would simply not have driven the British Industrial Revolution.

Similarly, if Xiao Ming could not find an outlet for his goods, his industrial revolution would die in its infancy.

It was precisely because of this that he turned his gaze to Goryeo, the first place he intended to colonize. This was also a two-pronged strategy.

Once Goryeo was subdued, he would directly threaten the barbarians from the direction of Goryeo.

Chapter 700

The rushing river waves slapped against the warship's hull, making "thump-thump" sounds, and splashes constantly left water stains on the deck.

The Third Prince Xiao Zhen stood on the deck, letting the river wind billow his robes.

After Chang'an was captured, his journey to the State of Shu was put on the agenda. When Niu Ben led the main army back, he led twenty thousand men to the State of Shu.

Just as Xiao Ming had told him, if he couldn't persuade the King of Shu to surrender this time, these twenty thousand men would be the Yama of death. If the King of Shu handed over the power of the State of Shu, both of them could save their lives and become Xiao Ming's subjects.

"Xiao Zhen, ahead is Yizhou City. Don't forget the Emperor's decree. Even if you play tricks now, you will still face annihilation in the end. We were able to conquer Liang and Zhao territory; dealing with this State of Shu will be as easy as flipping a hand."

The general accompanying Xiao Zhen this time was Di Ying, an veteran general of the Qingzhou army, seasoned in countless battles, and a renowned general alongside Qi Guangyi and others, second only to Lu Fei.

"I, your humble subject, naturally dare not defy the Emperor's words. I only hope that the General can allow me to enter Yizhou City and discuss with the King of Shu. If the King of Shu refuses, it will not be too late for the General to attack." The Third Prince felt a bitter pang in his heart.

He had already been stripped of all his titles; his status was merely that of a common person. If he wanted to remain in officialdom, this would be his only chance.

Di Ying eyed Xiao Zhen warily. Before setting off, Niu Ben had reminded him that the Third Prince Xiao Zhen was cunning.

He warned, "Don't play any tricks, otherwise I will return with your head and the King of Shu's head."

The Third Prince quickly nodded.

This time, to reclaim the State of Shu, Xiao Ming had specially dispatched ten warships to accompany Di Ying into Shu. However, the fleet's journey had been very difficult.

Because they were going against the current, they had to use trackers to pull the warships forward in some turbulent areas.

Entering the South River from the main channel of the Yangtze River, the warships gradually reached Yizhou City.

The South River was the moats of Yizhou. It was because of the protection of this river that the King of Shu was able to resist Prince Zhao's attacks until Prince Zhao was eliminated.

Before the warships even arrived, Xiao Ming had already sent couriers by land to deliver the decree to Yizhou City. Now that the warships had reached the city, the defending general immediately went to inform the King of Shu.

"Elder Brother has arrived." In the main hall of the Shu King's residence, the King of Shu's face showed joy upon learning that the Third Prince had arrived.

Below the main hall, the powerful families of Yizhou, who were feasting, immediately began to whisper upon hearing the news.

The King of Shu then looked at the powerful families, speaking with excitement. He said, "This Third Brother of mine is resourceful. With his assistance, our State of Shu will surely become more stable."

A powerful family member said, "Your Highness, the imperial edict a few days ago stated that Your Highness should surrender. This Third Prince is probably here as a persuader. How could he possibly leave Yizhou?"

The King of Shu shook his head and said, "You have misunderstood this elder brother of mine. He must have deliberately done this to deceive Xiao Ming. He knows that I and Xiao Ming are irreconcilable; how could he possibly help Xiao Ming?"

Another powerful family member said, "Your Highness, now the Princes of Yan, Liang, and Zhao have all been defeated. The Princes of Chu, Huainan, and Yong have all pledged allegiance to Xiao Ming. Now only the State of Shu remains. Isolated and outnumbered, I fear we are no match for Xiao Ming. Instead of this, why not follow the example of the Prince of Chu and pledge allegiance to Xiao Ming, who is now the current Emperor."

"Nonsense!" The King of Shu suddenly flew into a rage. He said, "I would rather die than pledge allegiance to Xiao Ming!"

The powerful families below exchanged glances, their eyes flickering with strange lights.

Now, the general trend was clear. The world clearly belonged to Xiao Ming. Could a small State of Shu possibly withstand Xiao Ming's army?

Over the past five years, they had gradually grown tired of the King of Shu's arrogance and stubbornness. For them, this State of Shu belonged to these powerful families.

Feudal lords came and went, but their families had always lived here.

If they stubbornly followed the King of Shu this time, they might lose their own foundations.

The King of Shu wanted to die, but they certainly did not want to die with him. Now that the world was unified, who would still rebel?

However, although they thought this in their hearts, no one dared to say it to his face. The King of Shu still had his own army, and they didn't want to invite trouble at this time.

Seeing that the powerful families had stopped speaking, the King of Shu snorted softly, flung his sleeves, and walked out. He was going to meet the Third Prince.

Outside the city, the Third Prince, having received permission to enter, approached Yizhou City under the protection of two soldiers. Soon after entering Yizhou City, he saw the King of Shu coming to greet him.

"Elder Brother." Seeing the Third Prince, the King of Shu's face was filled with excitement.

The Third Prince was also slightly moved. He and the King of Shu were full brothers, truly close among the many imperial princes.

Their relationship had always been very harmonious on normal days. Now, seeing each other, it was naturally a moment of sadness.

"Fifth Brother," Xiao Zhen also called out.

The King of Shu approached and pulled the Third Prince's sleeve. "Your foolish younger brother has already prepared a banquet for Elder Brother. Elder Brother, please come with me now."

The King of Shu's enthusiasm moved the Third Prince, but thinking of the purpose of his visit, a wave of sadness washed over him again.

He said, "Fifth Brother, this time I have something I must tell you in person. For this banquet, only the two of us are needed."

"Elder Brother always likes peace and quiet; your foolish younger brother knows this. Naturally, it will just be the two of us at the banquet," the King of Shu said with a laugh.

Xiao Zhen nodded and followed the King of Shu to the imperial residence.

However, the King of Shu did not go to the main hall but instead led Xiao Zhen to a pavilion under a willow tree in the imperial residence. At this time, a table of dishes was already set on the stone table in the pavilion.

The two sat down, and the King of Shu spoke first, "This Shu territory only lacks a resourceful person like Elder Brother. With Elder Brother's arrival, our State of Shu will surely prosper."

Xiao Zhen showed a bitter smile. His younger brother's excited expression made him feel even more bitter, but some words had to be said, otherwise, Yizhou City would soon become a ruin.

After a moment of contemplation, Xiao Zhen said seriously, "To be frank, Fifth Brother, I have come this time by the Emperor's decree to persuade you to surrender."

The King of Shu's face instantly changed. He said, "Elder Brother, this is no laughing matter. I and Xiao Ming have always been irreconcilable. If I surrender, can he spare me?"

"Fifth Brother, the Emperor's army is right outside; they can attack at any time. Do you think you'll survive then? You've been fighting Prince Zhao for a year, your soldiers are exhausted, and the common people of your feudal state are destitute. Even the firearms the Emperor granted you now lack gunpowder and cannonballs. With what will you fight the army outside the city, which is full of firearms?" The Third Prince said sternly. "And even if you are willing to fight, how many of Yizhou's powerful families will follow you at this moment?"