

## I. Dynasty 701

### Chapter 701

A fresh breeze blew, and willow leaves rustled down.

The King of Shu looked at his elder brother in disbelief. It was then that he noticed the brother he once admired and respected was no longer the high-spirited, imposing prince he used to be.

Instead, he saw a sense of weariness and helplessness from having experienced much in the world.

For a moment, he didn't know what to say, and a brief silence fell between them.

Finally, the Third Prince broke the silence. He said, "Fifth Brother, this is our last chance to live. Pledging allegiance to the Emperor can still preserve your wealth and glory. If you continue to be stubborn, Yizhou City will change hands tomorrow."

The King of Shu's chest heaved violently. He said to the Third Prince, "Elder Brother, when Prince Zhao came to attack the State of Shu, I, your foolish younger brother, did not surrender. How could I choose to surrender now? If Xiao Ming wants to take the State of Shu, he will have to step over my corpse!"

"Fifth Brother!" Xiao Zhen became anxious. One of his reasons for agreeing to Xiao Ming's request this time was to save the King of Shu's life, but he had underestimated the King of Shu's prejudice against Xiao Ming.

Moreover, during these five years as a feudal lord, he had enjoyed the superiority of being paramount. How could he now be willing to hand over the power in his hands?

“Elder Brother, there’s no need to say more. I, your foolish younger brother, used to listen to you about everything. This time, just listen to me for once,” the King of Shu had made up his mind the moment he received the decree. “The cannons on Yizhou City walls were all sent by Xiao Ming. These twenty thousand men still can’t break Yizhou City, and Qingzhou Province is thousands of li away from Yizhou. After this failure, he won’t easily send troops here again.”

The Third Prince became more anxious. He said, “Fool! You don’t understand Xiao Ming at all, and you don’t understand firearms at all. The firearms Xiao Ming gave you cannot defeat the firearms his army is currently using.”

The King of Shu simply couldn’t listen to what the Third Prince was saying. He only remembered the grievances between himself and Xiao Ming, and firmly believed that Xiao Ming would kill him.

It was precisely because of this that he stubbornly refused to surrender, and after Xiao Ming ascended the throne, he lived in constant fear.

“Elder Brother, no need to persuade me further. This table of food is getting cold. Your foolish younger brother should share a few drinks with Elder Brother.” The King of Shu said.

The Third Prince angrily said, “Now is not the time for drinking! General Di Ying outside the city only gave me an hour. If there’s no result within an hour, his warships will bombard Yizhou City. By then, everything will be too late!”

Facing his brother’s reprimand, the King of Shu still shook his head. He could pledge allegiance to anyone, but only not to Xiao Ming.

The two in Chang'an had always been at odds, having fought fiercely several times. In his view, surrendering now also meant death, while fighting might still offer a glimmer of hope.

At this moment, he stood up and said to the royal guards, "Protect my elder brother well."

The guards immediately stood behind the Third Prince. The King of Shu continued, "Elder Brother, please sit. Your foolish younger brother will be right back."

The Third Prince stood up, wanting to stop him, but the royal guards blocked his path.

At this moment, he let out a long sigh. Xiao Ming had foreseen everything today, which was why he had sent twenty thousand men into Shu.

And there was another contingent of troops in Chang'an, ready to support them at any time.

Things had developed to this point and were clearly out of control. He sat down dejectedly.

On the warships outside the city, Di Ying had been waiting. As time passed, his patience gradually wore thin.

Just as he was hesitating whether to order the warships to bombard Yizhou City, he suddenly saw many soldiers appear on the city walls of Yizhou City. Each of these soldiers walked to the cannons on the city wall, their torches ready to ignite at any moment.

This scene completely shattered Di Ying's illusions. Clearly, the King of Shu was going to resist to the end.

After consulting with the captain of the warships, the warships in the South River immediately formed a battle array, preparing to bombard the city walls.

The State of Shu had always been known as the "Land of Abundance," and Yizhou in particular was covered in a dense network of rivers. The South River was very wide, which was very conducive to the movement of warships.

And on the bank of the South River was Yizhou City.

At this time, the warships were anchored on the north bank of the South River. The distance from the north bank to Yizhou City was a full thousand meters. Because the naval guns had a relatively long range, they could bombard Yizhou City from here.

After forming their array, Di Ying gestured to the captain, preparing to conduct a warning shot at Yizhou City. If the King of Shu remained stubborn, the real war would begin.

"Boom, boom, boom..."

With the simultaneous roar of cannons, the warship's shells directly struck the Yizhou city wall. Amidst the flying dust, several craters immediately appeared on the Yizhou city wall.

The thunderous roar of the cannons instantly echoed throughout Yizhou City. At this moment, the powerful families still feasting in the imperial residence became anxious.

"Oh no, the fighting must have started," a powerful family member said.

"The King of Shu is going his own way and completely ignores us now. What should we do?"

"We can't keep waiting like this. The army from Qingzhou Province is the imperial army, and the King of Shu is a rebel. If we follow him, we will also be considered rebels," one of them said.

"That's absolutely right! There's no time to lose. Let's each go back and gather our private armies to capture the King of Shu, otherwise, who knows what that army will do once it enters the city!"

While everyone was discussing animatedly, a servant from the imperial residence suddenly entered the main hall and whispered a few words to a powerful family member seated on the left.

"Brother Song, what's wrong?" the elder on the right side across from him asked.

The person referred to as Brother Song said, "The Third Prince Xiao Zhen is in the royal residence, being watched by the King of Shu's men. Now, the only one who can save Yizhou City is Xiao Zhen, after all, he came with the Emperor's decree and can stop the army outside the city." The servant just now was his informant in the King of Shu's residence.

"There's no time to lose. Let's go see the Third Prince now and have him take charge of Yizhou's affairs, lest the King of Shu acts recklessly."

Everyone reached an agreement and immediately left the main hall, heading towards the back courtyard of the royal residence.

The powerful families, full of imposing momentum, dared not be stopped by the royal guards for a moment. They soon met the Third Prince.

At this moment, the powerful family member named Song said, "Third Prince, Yizhou is in danger. For the sake of the people of Yizhou City, we hope the Third Prince can stop the King of Shu."

Xiao Zhen also heard the cannon fire. He knew in his heart that the King of Shu's deployment of troops must have enraged Di Ying.

He sighed. No matter what, he couldn't save the King of Shu. If that was the case, he could only save himself.

So he said, "If that's the case, I hope all of you can assist me."

With that, under the protection of the powerful families, he went directly to the North City, where the King of Shu was currently commanding soldiers to defend against the attack.

The Third Prince's sudden arrival caught the King of Shu somewhat off guard. He then looked at the powerful families, already having a plan in mind.

He smiled bleakly, "You all betrayed me."

"Fifth Brother, only those who know the times are heroes. Acting like this will only harm more innocent people. I advise you one more time: surrender," the Third Prince bitterly persuaded.

The King of Shu shook his head, his eyes suddenly becoming indifferent. He suddenly said to the soldiers behind him, "Kill them!"

At this moment, the Third Prince was completely disappointed. He suddenly drew a short-barreled flintlock pistol from his sleeve and fired a shot at the King of Shu.

Because the distance between them was only two meters, the King of Shu had no way to dodge. The bullet instantly pierced the King of Shu's chest.

Blood flowed down from the bullet hole, and the King of Shu slowly fell...

Chapter 702

“The King of Shu is dead.”

Xiao Ming closed the memorial sent by Di Ying.

He received this news a month after Xiao Zhen led two tens of thousands of troops into Shu.

Because of this matter, Fei Ji and Pang Yukun both came to the imperial study to discuss it.

“As I expected, the King of Shu indeed refused to surrender,” Pang Yukun said.

Fei Ji then said, “This Xiao Zhen, at the last moment, sacrificed his kin for righteousness, which was a brilliant move. It earned him praise from the Emperor and also gained the favor of the powerful families of Yizhou.”

“But this Third Prince is also quite ruthless; he is his own brother,” Pang Yukun said seemingly casually.

Xiao Ming glanced at him. Pang Yukun was merely reminding him that this Third Prince was a cruel person and to be wary.

“I understand what you mean. Therefore, I intend to issue a decree to abolish the feudal state title of Shu, and establish Shu as a province. The army of Shu will temporarily be commanded by Di Ying. This way, the Third Prince will be a tiger without teeth. If he acts out of line, I can deal with him at any time,” Xiao Ming said.



Pang Yukun nodded, "What feudal lords fear most is holding both military and political power. Now we only need to control the army to control the Shu territory."

"Additionally, we will send some loyal officials there. This way, the Shu territory will be no different from the Wei territory, and the Third Prince will be nothing more than exiled in Shu," Fei Ji said.

Xiao Ming nodded. He naturally had no pity for the Third Prince. To the victor go the spoils; there was no room for pity.

He didn't kill him simply because he took the Shu territory without bloodshed. This was a great merit, enough for him to continue enjoying wealth and glory, but it would be impossible for him to re-enter the Great Yu Empire's political center.

After discussing the Third Prince, Xiao Ming led the two to the map. Besides discussing the establishment of Yizhou Province (Shu Land), he also sought them out for the matter of the barbarians.

During this period, memorials from the border arrived one after another. The content of the memorials was largely similar, all reporting on unusual movements of the barbarians at the border.

However, both Shanhai Pass and Juyong Pass were heavily guarded, and the barbarians seemed to be having a headache, often merely driving slave soldiers to test the defenses before retreating.

But this situation still caused unease in the court and among the common people. There were even suggestions of "heqin" (marriage alliance for peace), which greatly angered Xiao Ming.

The two looked at the circles on the map. These were all places recently probed by barbarian attacks, all important passes along the Great Wall.

“Your Majesty, there have been some outrageous remarks in the council hall regarding the barbarians. Some officials’ knees have softened again. Some want to pledge allegiance, some want to offer tribute, and some even want to propose ‘heqin.’ It’s ridiculous!” Pang Yukun sneered.

Fei Ji then said, “When the late Emperor was alive, he constantly blamed himself for compromising with the barbarians. If they hadn’t allowed the barbarians to enter the pass back then, the Great Yu Empire wouldn’t have declined to this extent. Your Majesty is a ruler of great ambition, and naturally need not pay attention to these petty individuals in the council hall. I believe the barbarians are insatiably greedy; only by thoroughly defeating them will they retract their claws.”

“I am relieved to hear you say that. As the saying goes, ‘when the upper beam is not straight, the lower beam is crooked.’ If you also had the same thoughts as them, this council hall would be finished.”

After a pause, he said to the two, “You go back and tell them that my three principles will not change: no pledging allegiance, no offering tribute, and no Marriage. Anyone who wants to pledge allegiance should take off their official robes and go to the barbarians to do so; I will not stop them. Those who want to offer tribute should take their own silver and give it to the barbarians; I will not stop them. As for those who want to propose ‘heqin,’ let them send their own daughters. If anyone dares to send a fake, I will cut off his head.”

“Hahaha...” Pang Yukun laughed heartily. “Your Majesty, if that were the case, I’m afraid none of the ministers would dare to agree. It’s easy to be generous with the nation’s resources, but it’s not so easy to be generous with one’s own.”

Fei Ji nodded, "When I return, I will tell them Your Majesty's words."

Xiao Ming shook his head. Some people, once they get used to kneeling, can't stand up. If you make them stand up, they'll even curse you.

Currently, there was indeed such a group of people in the council hall. He had Qian Dafu note down their names, intending to investigate later whether these people were corrupt.

According to common practice, those who liked to bow down were often greedy and lustful.

However, Xiao Ming's purpose in having the two look at the map was not for the barbarians. For now, the barbarians had no way to enter the northern heartland, relying on the passes along the Yan-Yun line.

His purpose for them was Goryeo.

So he said, "Let's put the barbarian matter aside for now. Today, I want to talk to you about Goryeo. I think it's time to deal with Goryeo."

"Another war? Your Majesty, we truly have no more silver for war now. Besides, Goryeo is far from the Great Yu Empire, and this will surely require a large mobilization of forces again." Pang Yukun immediately pleaded poverty.

Fei Ji echoed, "Your Majesty, Senior Grand Secretary Pang speaks the truth. The imperial treasury only has so much silver. Your Majesty allocated six million for industrial support, and daily expenses include opening mines, building schools, and repairing roads. Continuing like this, our expenditures will simply outstrip our income."

Xiao Ming also understood the current situation. He said to the two, "That is precisely why I want to attack Goryeo. Fighting domestically naturally makes us poorer, but attacking Goryeo is a profitable business. Over the years, the Great Yu Empire has offered a lot of silver as tribute to the barbarians. Now, I also want Goryeo to offer some silver to the Great Yu Empire."

After a pause, he continued, "Moreover, attacking Goryeo is also for merchants to sell goods, and at the same time, it is to cut off the barbarians' arm."

Both were intelligent men and understood immediately.

Pang Yukun said, "Your Majesty, if that is the case, then let the merchants bear the cost of supplies and expenses for this attack on Goryeo."

Now, Fei Ji and Pang Yukun were remarkably in agreement. He said, "Since attacking Goryeo is for the sale of goods, this war is being fought for the merchants. It is simply unreasonable for them not to contribute silver. Why not sell the trade rights to Goryeo to these merchants in exchange for supplies and silver?"

Xiao Ming nodded slightly. This was his purpose in summoning the two. He said, "That is also my idea. So, you two go and talk to the merchants, let them pay for the trade rights to Goryeo. How does that sound?"

“Yes, Your Majesty,” the two bowed in response.

Solving the funding issue meant tackling the problem of attacking Goryeo. For Xiao Ming, the best way to fight a war was, of course, to keep the enemy outside the nation’s gates.

Destroying someone else’s home was always better than destroying one’s own. This time, his attack on Goryeo was to divert trouble eastward.

Moreover, it would be even better if it caused the barbarians to change their strategy, as this would greatly reduce the pressure on the passes along the Yan-Yun line.

Having settled this matter, Xiao Ming then sent a letter to Yue Yun, instructing him to make preparations. The main force for this attack on Goryeo would be the navy and the marines.

.....

The cold wind stirred the study windows, making a “thump-thump” sound.

Holding a writing brush, Xiao Ming’s hand felt a bit cold. The imperial decree was completed. He said to Pang Yukun, “You two must pay attention to the matter of raising funds, but you cannot neglect the matter of reform either.”

The two nodded. Fei Ji said, "Your Majesty, winter is almost here. Will we be unable to attack Goryeo this year?"

Xiao Ming nodded, "Winter is too cold, and Goryeo is also a harsh and barren land. This season is indeed unsuitable for warfare, otherwise, there would likely be more soldiers suffering from frostbite than those killed in battle."

Pang Yukun said, "Since Your Majesty has already planned this in your heart, I am at ease."

As the three were speaking, Xiaohuan suddenly ran in a fright to outside the study. She said breathlessly, "Your Majesty, Her Majesty the Empress is probably going into labor!"

"What!" Xiao Ming was startled, but he calculated and realized it was indeed time for Fei Yuer to give birth.

Fei Ji immediately grew nervous upon hearing this, as he was very anxious, not knowing whether Fei Yuer would give birth to a boy or a girl.

Pang Yukun, however, was much calmer. He said to Xiao Ming, "Congratulations, Your Majesty! Felicitations, Your Majesty!"

At this moment, Xiao Ming had no time to pay him any mind. He walked directly with Xiaohuan towards the bedchamber.

Fei Ji, as Fei Yuer's father, was also permitted to go with Xiao Ming at this time. He immediately followed Xiao Ming.

Although Pang Yukun also wanted to go, it was clearly inappropriate at this moment. He looked at Fei Ji with envy and then walked out.

At this time, many people had already gathered in the bedchamber. Lu Luo, Ziyuan, and the Empress Dowager had all arrived. Fei Yuer was in the inner room, and the midwife was attending to her inside.

When Xiao Ming arrived, Fei Yuer was crying out, evidently enduring immense pain.

Seeing Xiao Ming approach, the Empress Dowager grabbed Xiao Ming's hand. Evidently, she too was very nervous. Lu Luo and Ziyuan were the same. The two continuously rubbed their hands, pacing back and forth restlessly.

Fei Ji dared not enter the moment he reached the door. Standing there, he continuously prayed, "Heaven bless it's a boy, Heaven bless."

"Ah, ah..."

Fei Yuer's screams continuously rang out. Every time Xiao Ming heard one, his heart couldn't help but clench. This pain of childbirth was said to be level twelve. He could not blame Fei Yuer for acting this way.

At this moment, he was also nervous. He had neglected Fei Yuer during this busy period with state affairs, and he never expected that after ten months of pregnancy, she would be giving birth.

The palace maids in the inner room moved in and out. What they held were all bloody items. Xiao Ming grew increasingly nervous watching this scene.

This was ancient times. If Fei Yuer suffered a massive postpartum hemorrhage, it would be life-threatening.

Just as he was nervous, a loud cry from an infant suddenly rang out, followed by the midwife's joyous announcement.

"Congratulations, Your Majesty! Her Majesty the Empress and the imperial prince are safe."

When these words were heard, everyone immediately breathed a sigh of relief. Fei Ji, outside the door, also let out a heavy sigh of relief.

A faint smile appeared on Xiao Ming's lips. A strange emotion suddenly filled his heart—the emotion of becoming a father for the first time.

Soon, the midwife came out of the inner room holding an infant. Seeing Xiao Ming, she bowed and handed the infant to him.



Xiao Ming carefully held his son. At this time, the infant's eyes were closed, but his appearance still bore some resemblance to him.

"My son, you will witness your imperial father create a great empire. The era you live in will also be the best of times."

Looking at the tiny infant, Xiao Ming's heart suddenly swelled with grand ambition.

The Empress Dowager then walked over. Her eyes were filled with loving kindness as she looked at the infant in Xiao Ming's arms. She said to Xiao Ming, "You should give the child to the wet nurse and go see how the Empress is doing. You have neglected her lately."

Xiao Ming nodded, handed the infant to the wet nurse, and then entered the inner room.

Fei Yuer was now lying on the sickbed. Her face was pale, and she was completely exhausted.

Seeing Xiao Ming, she smiled, struggling to get up.

Xiao Ming told her to lie on the bed and not move. He sat down by the bed and said to Fei Yuer, "You have worked hard."

Fei Yuer leaned against Xiao Ming, her eyes filled with happiness. She said, "To have given birth to an imperial prince for Your Majesty, I have no regrets in this life."

Xiao Ming's heart stirred slightly. He could feel Fei Yuer's attachment to him. He said, "I have been busy with state affairs lately and have indeed neglected you. I promise you, after this busy period, I will spend good time with you."

Fei Yuer showed two dimples. She said, "Your Majesty remembering me is already enough for me. However, compared to me, Your Majesty has neglected someone else even more."

"Who?" Xiao Ming asked.

"Cui Xue'er," Fei Yuer said. "No matter how busy Your Majesty is, you always return to the bedchamber, but Your Majesty has never once been to Cui Xue'er's place."

Xiao Ming, hearing this, said, "I care for you, yet you want me to care for others. You are truly a generous Empress."

Fei Yuer was silent for a moment, then said, "I just feel that she is quite pitiful. She entered the palace at such a young age for a marriage alliance, and as a consort, she has never received Your Majesty's favor. If this gets out, the Prince of Huainan will not be pleased."

"I am aware of this matter. You should first focus on recovering your health," Xiao Ming said helplessly.

For him, Fei Yuer was definitely the type of virtuous wife and loving mother from ancient times. It was precisely for this reason that he was very much at ease with this Empress.

Fei Yuer nodded. She said, “Your Majesty’s state affairs are important. I am fine.”

“State affairs are important, but the Empress is also important.” Xiao Ming used his glib tongue.

The two chatted intimately for a while. Because Fei Yuer needed rest, he then came out of the inner room.

At this time, the Empress Dowager was still outside. The child had already been fed by the wet nurse and was asleep. Xiao Ming then looked at his child for a while, feeling completely satisfied.

The Empress Dowager said, “Now that the Empress has given birth to an imperial prince, I am relieved. The Great Yu Empire has an heir. However, it would be best to have more descendants, wouldn’t it?”

As she spoke, the Empress Dowager looked at Lu Luo and Ziyuan. The two girls immediately blushed, looking very shy.

Xiao Ming felt a pang of bitterness. This emperor life was truly not easy. Not only did he have to be a model worker, but he also had to be a stud. No wonder very few emperors in history lived long lives.

The Empress Dowager showed signs of continuing her chatter. Xiao Ming immediately found an excuse to slip away, otherwise, he would probably be pressed into making more babies.

Fei Ji was still waiting outside the door, craning his neck to look at the infant in the wet nurse's arms. Seeing Xiao Ming come out, he immediately said, "Congratulations, Your Majesty, on the birth of an imperial prince."

"And congratulations to you on having a grandson," Xiao Ming said. "Elder Fei, since you are the Empress's father and now the maternal grandfather of my son, you should even more wholeheartedly serve me in state affairs."

#### Chapter 703

"Your Majesty's grace to me, your old servant, is as vast as a mountain. I would repay it even if it cost me my life."

Fei Ji's eyes were red-rimmed. The cry of the infant in the bedchamber finally put his anxious heart at ease.

All this time, his greatest worry had been this daughter. When Fei Yuer had been in the palace for two years without conceiving, he worried day and night, unable to sleep.

And after Fei Yuer conceived, he began to worry whether it would be a boy or a girl. Now that Fei Yuer was the Empress, he saw a great difference.

After all, if Fei Yuer gave birth to a male infant, her status would henceforth be unshakeable. If it were a female infant, and other consorts gave birth to male infants first, it would be extremely disadvantageous for her.

It was for this reason that he, who had never been willing to form factions, made an exception and drew closer to some ministers, fearing that if Fei Yuer were bullied in the future, he, as her father, would still be there to support her.

But now this worry had vanished. Empress Fei Yuer had given birth to an imperial prince. According to the patriarchal system followed for thousands of years, this legitimate eldest son was the rightful heir.

Now, his daughter was not only honored because of her son, but her son was also honored because of his mother.

“I will temporarily believe your words. Previously, I didn’t make it clear to you to save you, the imperial father-in-law, a little face before the officials.”

As soon as Fei Ji entered Qingzhou Province, his demeanor was somewhat different from his time in Chang’an. Xiao Ming naturally noticed and kept it in mind.

After careful analysis, he roughly guessed Fei Ji’s intentions. He only had this one daughter, and he doted on Fei Yuer immensely. His elaborate schemes were precisely to protect Fei Yuer.

Fei Ji looked embarrassed. He said, “So Your Majesty had already seen through everything. I am ashamed.”

Xiao Ming then put on a benevolent expression. He said, “Do you truly take me for a blind man? What in Qingzhou Province can escape my discerning eyes? It’s just that sometimes I merely turn a blind eye. However, with the reforms imminent, I cannot ignore things anymore. Pang Yukun has already been reprimanded by me. You should also watch yourself, I truly do not wish for the Empress to be sad.”

As his words fell, a layer of cold sweat suddenly appeared in Fei Ji's palm, because in his opinion, his previous actions were about to exceed Xiao Ming's limit of tolerance.

He immediately said, "Your old servant will certainly correct my past mistakes."

"Since that is the case, I will wait and see." Xiao Ming's tone softened. "In the future, when you have nothing to do, you can come and visit the temporary palace. After all, we are a family."

A mix of stick and carrot, Fei Ji was somewhat dazed by Xiao Ming's warning. He nodded repeatedly, saying, "Thank Your Majesty for your immense kindness."

The two chatted briefly. At this moment, the wet nurse came out holding the infant. The Empress Dowager saw Fei Ji and said, "Dear in-law, you have done well this time, adding an imperial son to the Great Yu Empire."

With the Empress Dowager calling him "dear in-law," Fei Ji was even more moved. He said, "Thanks to the Emperor's and Empress Dowager's grace, it must be that Heaven was moved and bestowed an imperial son."

The Empress Dowager smiled and said, "So you, his maternal grandfather, must assist the Emperor diligently, and in the future, give him a prosperous empire."

Xiao Ming did not speak. Sometimes, the Empress Dowager and he seemed to have a telepathic understanding. The Empress Dowager's words just now, seemingly ordinary, were actually of extremely high caliber.

The phrase “dear in-law” was a common saying among the common people. This clearly showed Fei Ji that he and the imperial family shared weal and woe, and the words that followed were to encourage him to assist him well.

Fei Ji nodded repeatedly. What Xiao Ming said was one thing, and what the Empress Dowager said was another.

In the eyes of the old officials of Chang’an, Concubine Zhen’s status was very high, after all, Concubine Zhen carried some shadow of the late Emperor.

After these words, the Empress Dowager signaled the wet nurse to let Fei Ji hold the little imperial prince. Fei Ji was overwhelmed by the favor, and immediately carefully held the little imperial prince, his body stiff, afraid of hurting the infant.

The Empress Dowager then said, “Your Majesty, the little imperial prince does not yet have a name. While Elder Fei is here, how about we give the little imperial prince a name?”

“I was just thinking the same thing.” Xiao Ming smiled and said, “How about Xiao Yi?”

Fei Ji, hearing this, said, “The character ‘Yi’ refers to being extraordinary and outstanding. Naming the little imperial prince Xiao Yi, it seems Your Majesty places great hopes on the little imperial prince. This character is truly excellent.”

Xiao Ming nodded gently. He would personally teach his first son, at least ensuring his thoughts aligned with his own.

He did not want to conquer an empire only for his son to ruin it.

After settling on the imperial prince's name, the three chatted for a while longer. Only then did Fei Ji leave. From the spirited way he walked, it was evident how happy Fei Ji was this time.

Outside the temporary palace, Fei Ji finally couldn't help but burst into laughter. This time, he was in high spirits, but then, remembering Xiao Ming's words, he calmed down again.

He could no longer be wishy-washy in officialdom. He had to show Xiao Ming his attitude, and the best time to show his attitude was this reform.

No matter what, he could not be ambiguous on this matter, otherwise, he would become a burden to Fei Yuer and his grandson.

Thinking about this all the way, he returned to the Fei Mansion. Then he sent his butler to invite some important officials, and at the banquet, he would clearly state his attitude.

All that Fei Ji did naturally did not escape the eyes of the secret guards. Li San arrived at the temporary palace that evening and informed Xiao Ming about it. Xiao Ming was naturally very pleased, as the factors that could have obstructed the reform in the council hall were basically gone.



Wang Xuan came with Li San; the two met halfway and came together.

After Li San reported on Fei Ji's situation, Wang Xuan said, "Your Majesty, I received news that Beishan has ordered the King of Goryeo to dispatch his navy to impersonate Japanese pirates and harass Dengzhou."

"Dengzhou." Xiao Ming immediately looked at the map. He said, "I was just thinking of dealing with Goryeo, and he's delivered himself to my doorstep."

Wang Xuan asked doubtfully, "Is Your Majesty truly preparing to occupy Goryeo?"

"Occupy? I'm not that foolish. My purpose this time is merely to force Goryeo to open up its trade ports. Now that Japan has established a foothold in Goryeo, I don't want to be a shield for the barbarians. It seems the barbarians are truly desperate this time, sending the King of Goryeo to dispatch his navy to impersonate Japanese pirates. This is clearly an attempt to divert trouble to Dengzhou."

"That's right, because as far as I know, the Japanese pirates are very ambitious. This barbarian troop withdrawal has further encouraged Japan, and many Japanese daimyos and samurai are clamoring to occupy all of Goryeo."

Frowning, Xiao Ming said, "A strong Goryeo is very unfavorable to the Great Yu Empire, but a Goryeo completely occupied by Japan is even more unfavorable to the Great Yu Empire. Only a half-dead Goryeo serves the interests of the Great Yu Empire."

After a pause, he said, "On land, we cannot fight a protracted war with Japan. I cannot afford it, and the national treasury cannot sustain it. But at sea, we can restrict Japan. As long as we cut off Japan's

maritime supply lines, the Japanese soldiers in Goryeo will be finished. So, no matter what, we currently hold the advantage.”

#### Chapter 704

The sky gradually darkened. The lanterns in the temporary palace were lit one by one by the eunuchs, casting a dim yellow light.

Wang Xuan and Li San were excited by Xiao Ming’s analysis. Wang Xuan’s face was flushed, “Your Majesty is absolutely right. Most of Japan’s grain and fodder reach Goryeo by sea from mainland Japan. As long as we cut off Japan’s maritime grain supply, the Japanese army in Goryeo will be trapped and starved. If Your Majesty wants to establish a trade port in Goryeo, you can negotiate this with Goryeo and Japan, thus profiting from both sides.”

Xiao Ming smiled. For him, he only needed Goryeo’s market; he had no interest in occupying Goryeo.

Because once entangled in a land war, the consumption of war would be enormous. The industrialization of the Qinzhou Province had just begun, and he did not have sufficient resources and money to occupy a country.

In fact, in the colonial wars of the Age of Sail, no Western power completely occupied a colony.

They merely established a few ports in colonial countries, signed unequal treaties, used these ports as export hubs for goods, and then used military threats to force colonial nations to adopt policies that served their interests.

During their occupation, they generally did not interfere too much in the internal affairs of the colonized nations, only fostering local elites who represented their interests to rule the colony.

Of course, there were exceptions, such as India, which completely became a British colony. But even so, Britain did not participate in too many specific national affairs, only sucking the economic resources of the region back to Britain like a vampire, while being too lazy to bother with national management.

Therefore, the fundamental purpose of colonization was to extract economic benefits from the colonized countries, not to occupy land. Once the cause and effect were inverted, perhaps getting bogged down in a country's war would be enough to cripple a nation.

The longer Xiao Ming stayed in the position of Emperor, the more he could appreciate the limits of a nation's power. Projecting power globally was already a very difficult task, and complete occupation was even harder. So he decided to first adopt a British style of colonization to carry out primitive capital accumulation, as nothing could be achieved without money.

After a moment of contemplation, he said to Wang Xuan, "It's still early. Without a fight, neither Goryeo nor Japan will negotiate with the Great Yu Empire. You should have the secret guards in Goryeo keep an eye on Goryeo's movements and send back intelligence at any time."

"Yes, Your Majesty." Wang Xuan nodded.

After relaying the secret guard's news, Xiao Ming continued to ask, "How is your investigation into the Dreadnought being shelled progressing?"

"Reporting to Your Majesty, my informant in Nagasaki sent back intelligence. The day after the Dreadnought was shelled, a British warship, reportedly named the Duke, arrived in Nagasaki, Japan."

"It really went to Japan." Xiao Ming looked at Japan on the map. History always had astonishing similarities, and Xiao Ming deeply felt this now.

In this timeline, Japan, with the help of the Dutch, had already established a powerful firearms army. Now, the British were once again extending an olive branch to Japan, with only one goal: to use Japan to balance the power in East Asia.

“Did you find out about their specific cooperation?” Xiao Ming asked.

“No, the British went ashore directly to meet Yamada Nobunaga. We couldn’t get access,” Wang Xuan said with some regret. The informants in Japan were often sea merchants, and it was impossible for them to penetrate the higher echelons.

“Your secret guards must increase their investment in Japan, and even establish a professional spy network. You can even bribe some Japanese people to act as spies,” Xiao Ming reminded him.

In contemporary times, Japan was very adept at espionage. During every war, Japan would always send out large numbers of spies to gather intelligence.

It was said that during the Anti-Japanese War, the Japanese maps were even more detailed than the Nationalist army’s maps.

Coming from modern times, Xiao Ming naturally could not hand over this advantage to Japan, so he wanted to preemptively start a spy war to collect comprehensive intelligence on Japan.

Wang Xuan looked a bit awkward. He said, “Your Majesty, I would like to, but the silver...”

Xiao Ming immediately felt a bit awkward upon hearing this. Although he had many ideas, they couldn't be achieved without sufficient money.

Thinking of this, his ambition to develop industry and colonize the world became even firmer.

He coughed and said to Wang Xuan, "I will try my best to allocate some silver to you."

Wang Xuan then showed a delighted expression.

Having reassured Wang Xuan, Xiao Ming looked at Li San. He said, "Li San, the reform is about to be implemented. You keep a close eye on the several wealthy merchants in Qingzhou Province for me. If they try any tricks, you report to me immediately."

"Yes, Your Majesty." Li San nodded.

After reporting the intelligence, the two congratulated Xiao Ming before leaving. The news of the Empress giving birth to an imperial prince had already spread throughout Qingzhou Province.

At this moment, officials and merchants of all sizes from Qingzhou Province constantly sent people to offer congratulations, and gifts were continuously sent to the temporary palace.

After a day of busyness, Xiao Ming was also a bit tired. It was late, and he returned to the bedchamber. Fei Yuer was somewhat weak now, so he wanted to spend more time with her.

After a night's rest, Xiao Ming rose early the next day. The reforms were to be overseen by Fei Ji and Pang Yukun, while his task was to promote the establishment of the industrial system and the development of technology.

For him, both military and civilian technology in Qingzhou Province were currently developing abnormally. This was because everything for the past five years had been serving the military, causing industrial capacity to gradually fall behind technological development.

For example, smokeless gunpowder: although Lu Tong had mastered the production method, its production was still limited to laboratory methods; true industrialized production had not yet been achieved.

Besides smokeless gunpowder, many chemical substances in laboratories currently could not be mass-produced. This reform by Xiao Ming was precisely to establish corresponding workshops one by one to achieve industrialized production under steam power.

This included not only the production of chemical materials but also the industrialized production of firearms and machinery. For him, the Great Yu Empire's industrialization was already lagging, and now was the critical period to catch up.

After all, the West had also developed steam engines, and with the industrial foundation of Western countries, once steam engines were put into operation, the rate of their deployment would be very fast.

After a simple breakfast, Xiao Ming changed into casual clothes and went to the glass workshop. While implementing reforms, he had compiled a list of currently achievable technologies in the Great Yu Empire.

This list included technologies that Western countries possessed but the Great Yu Empire did not. Currently, Lin Wentao and others were extremely busy, so some matters had to be handled personally by him, the Emperor, and he was quite proficient in them.

The first place he went today was the glass workshop. A few days ago, he had instructed the glass workshop to produce a certain tool, and it should have been manufactured by now.

Although this item had nothing to do with war, it was very beneficial for the development of technology.

Chapter 705

“Your Majesty, this is what you asked for.”

In the glass workshop, the workshop supervisor handed a short glass rod to Xiao Ming. A clear white mark was visible in the middle of this glass rod.

This item was the reason Xiao Ming came here; it was a thermometer.

Historically, the earliest thermometer was invented in 1593 by the Italian scientist Galileo.

This thermometer had an open-ended glass tube at one end and a walnut-sized glass bulb at the other. When used, the glass bulb was first heated, then the glass tube was inserted into water.

At this point, as the temperature changed, the water level in the glass tube would move up and down. The change and level of the temperature could be determined by how much it moved.

It can be said that the thermometer at this stage contained water. Then, in the seventeenth century, France reduced the volume of the glass bulb and changed the temperature-measuring substance to mercury. This was the prototype of later thermometers.

Following this, the Dutchman Fahrenheit used alcohol in 1709 and then mercury in 1714 as the measuring substance, creating more precise thermometers. This was the development process of the thermometer.

And with the birth of the thermometer, the Celsius and Fahrenheit temperature standards also came into being.

Although the thermometer was only a small invention, this small invention was crucial, because only with a thermometer could specific temperature values be tested.

In fact, this glass mercury thermometer was not very precise or complex. The general steps were to first manufacture a hollow glass tube, which was not too difficult for the current glass workshop.

As for the mercury bulb and the small separating bubble in the thermometer, it was simply a matter of glass-blowing techniques.

After making the glass rod, mercury was injected, and then the glass tube was heated and sealed in a low-pressure environment, with only the seal needing heating.



At this time, the mercury part was at the other end, and glass did not conduct heat well, so it basically did not affect the mercury. After these steps were completed, the scale was marked. This work was also very simple because Xiao Ming had a ready-made standard reference; he only needed to follow the modern Celsius standard.

And he also planned to adopt Celsius as the Great Yu Empire's future temperature standard.

The thermometer he held now was for measuring human body temperature. His purpose was to use the human body thermometer to establish the Great Yu Empire's temperature standard, so that he could produce industrial thermometers and promote the temperature standard.

In his opinion, whether it was the steel industry or the smelting industry, the temperature control of the production process was very strict. Precise temperature control could improve the quality of industrial production.

Therefore, after the human body thermometer, what he wanted to produce was an industrial bimetallic thermometer. This bimetallic thermometer worked on the principle that two different metals expand to different degrees when the temperature changes, and could be used to detect the temperature during industrial production.

This type of thermometer usually had metal strips made into a spiral shape. When the temperature of the multi-layered metal strips changed, the layers of metal would expand or contract differently, causing the spiral to coil or uncoil.

Since one end of the spiral was fixed and the other end was connected to a freely rotating pointer, when the bimetallic strip sensed a temperature change, the pointer could indicate the temperature on a circular graduated scale.

For him, this type of thermometer could be produced by Qingzhou Province at its current stage. As for advanced resistance thermometers, they were still out of reach, but for him, this was sufficient. He only needed to give the structural diagram of the metal thermometer to a clockmaker. For a clockmaker who could manufacture pendulum clocks, this was not a difficult task.

“Oh, and besides that, what about the microscope?” Xiao Ming asked.

This time, he not only assigned the glass workshop the task of producing thermometers but also instructed them to manufacture microscopes.

Compared to telescopes, the microscope was the other extreme. He planned to have it manufactured and sent to the medical academy.

“Your Majesty, please wait. This microscope was made by another group of artisans, and it will be here immediately,” the workshop supervisor said. As his words fell, an artisan came towards him, carrying a microscope.

Like the monocular telescope, the microscope in the artisan’s hand had a rustic, 18th-century feel, with glass lenses and a metal body.

Having obtained these two items, Xiao Ming was very satisfied. He said to Qian Dafu, “Let’s go to the medical academy. It’s time to let this Huang Tingzhi understand my capabilities.”

Xiao Ming was happy, and Qian Dafu also became happy. Although he didn't know what these two items were for, judging from Xiao Ming's expression, they must be something formidable.

Leaving the glass workshop, the two went directly to the medical academy.

After splitting Bowen Academy, Xiao Ming found another location for the medical academy, not far from Bowen Academy, about the distance of two civilian neighborhoods.

The high mortality rate of injured soldiers in this northern war forced Xiao Ming to attach importance to the development of the medical academy. If medical technology could keep up, the reduction in soldiers would not have been so severe.

And in the future, the Great Yu Empire would face even more wars. At this time, cultivating a group of refined medical officers was very important.

Upon arriving at the medical academy, Xiao Ming went directly to the medical clinic established within the academy. On weekdays, Huang Tingzhi would teach students and also treat common people here.

"Your Majesty." Xiao Ming's arrival greatly surprised Huang Tingzhi. He immediately stood up and bowed.

Xiao Ming excused Huang Tingzhi from the formalities. He took out the thermometer and microscope and said to Huang Tingzhi, "Elder Huang, today I have come to give you two powerful tools."

Huang Tingzhi was somewhat stunned. He looked at the glass rod in Xiao Ming's hand, then at the microscope, and asked, confused, "Your Majesty, what are these?"

"A thermometer and a microscope," Xiao Ming said. He wasn't surprised that Huang Tingzhi didn't recognize them, because Huang Tingzhi was currently diligently studying the medical classics he had given him and had not yet come into contact with Western concepts.

"This..." Huang Tingzhi was still somewhat confused.

Xiao Ming said, "How does Elder Huang usually determine if someone has a cold?"

"Naturally, through inspection, listening, questioning, and pulse-taking."

Xiao Ming said seriously, "With this item, I do not need inspection, listening, questioning, or pulse-taking to know if this person is ill."

"Your Majesty jests! Without inspection, listening, questioning, or pulse-taking, how could Your Majesty possibly know?" Huang Tingzhi suddenly burst into laughter upon hearing this.

Xiao Ming knew that Huang Tingzhi was very confident, and had always worried that he would disdain Western medicine, which was why he came personally this time to let Huang Tingzhi experience a different kind of medical skill.

Upon hearing this, he said, "Elder Huang only needs to use this item to measure the body temperature of the patients in the medical clinic, and you will know."

Then Xiao Ming explained the principle of the thermometer and briefly mentioned knowledge about human body temperature.

Holding the thermometer, Huang Tingzhi's expression was greatly shocked. He half-believingly tested the body temperature of every patient in the medical clinic.

When he saw the temperature readings of each patient, he was completely stunned.

Chapter 706

"Why? Your Majesty, why is this?"

Huang Tingzhi murmured, as if spellbound. Following Xiao Ming's instructions, he had learned to use the thermometer and read the numbers on it.

A series of thirty-seven degrees, thirty-eight degrees, thirty-nine degrees corresponded to the varying severity of the patients' conditions.

"Elder Huang, please first attend to the patients in the medical clinic. After you're done, I will explain in detail," Xiao Ming said calmly.

He had achieved his goal. By using the thermometer, he had piqued Huang Tingzhi's curiosity, and the subsequent teaching of Western medical theory should proceed smoothly.

Huang Tingzhi was startled, then remembered that there were three patients waiting for him in the medical clinic. He immediately returned to his seat to attend to them.

After seeing off the three patients, Huang Tingzhi immediately seemed impatient.

Xiao Ming remained very composed. He said, "Elder Huang, let's go to the medical academy's lecture hall. I will discuss this medical art in detail with Elder Huang."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Huang Tingzhi now felt not only the respect of a subject for his monarch towards Xiao Ming, but also an indescribable admiration mixed in his heart.

In his opinion, Xiao Ming was not only the Emperor but also a great master of medicine.

The two went to an empty lecture hall. At this point, Xiao Ming used the technology crystal to thoroughly explain the function of the thermometer to Huang Tingzhi, and also detailed the relationship between human body temperature and illness.

"A normal human armpit temperature is thirty-six to thirty-seven degrees. Generally, fever is divided into low-grade fever, moderate fever, high fever, extremely high fever..."

Huang Tingzhi listened intently throughout Xiao Ming's explanation. Under the influence of the technology crystal, he easily remembered what Xiao Ming said.

"I never thought such a miraculous thing existed in the world. I've lived my entire life for nothing," Huang Tingzhi said with excitement, appearing somewhat fanatical.

He had thought that he had reached the pinnacle in the field of medicine, but now he realized that he had only touched upon the surface.

"This is just the simplest medical art. As I understand it, if one masters even more advanced medical arts, one can even perform blood transfusions to save lives, operate to remove foreign objects from the head, and even help pregnant women in difficult labor to deliver the fetus without harming their lives..." Xiao Ming continued to stimulate Huang Tingzhi.

If the thermometer only made Huang Tingzhi feel surprised, Xiao Ming's words now horrified him.

Because the things Xiao Ming mentioned seemed no different from murder in his eyes.

"I, your old servant, know myself to be of limited talent and narrow knowledge. I hope Your Majesty can give me some guidance," Huang Tingzhi's attitude now became extremely humble.

Xiao Ming wore a slight smile at the corner of his mouth. Previously, relying on his medical skills, Huang Tingzhi had been somewhat arrogant due to his talent. Now, after a few words of instruction from him, Huang Tingzhi finally realized that there was always someone greater.

“Elder Huang need not belittle yourself. The medical arts of the Great Yu Empire have their own strengths. If Elder Huang is interested in the medical arts I speak of, I will make more time to discuss them with Elder Huang.”

Xiao Ming was full of confidence. After all, the existence of the technology crystal made him a walking library.

“I can’t ask for anything more,” Huang Tingzhi immediately beamed with excitement.

After discussing the thermometer, Xiao Ming handed the microscope to Huang Tingzhi, telling him to put it in the laboratory and explaining its function.

Having initially piqued Huang Tingzhi’s interest in Western medicine, Xiao Ming did not linger. He planned to return and write down some Western medical theories, and then give the books to Huang Tingzhi in a few days while also explaining them.

Xiao Ming departed. Huang Tingzhi’s expression immediately became strange. He peeked around. After seeing Xiao Ming and his entourage walk away, he immediately scurried to the laboratory, not at all like a man over fifty.

Upon reaching the laboratory, he immediately picked up the thermometer to measure his own body temperature and also fiddled with the microscope according to Xiao Ming’s method.



Throughout the process, a childlike smile remained on his face.

Meanwhile, Xiao Ming and Qian Dafu, protected by imperial guards, headed towards the military workshop. He intended to inspect the production of firearms during this period.

Although the northern war had consumed a considerable amount of their ammunition and weapons, it was not without gains. The annihilation of the Princes of Yan, Liang, and Zhao provided him with a large number of armors, swords, matchlock guns, and cannons.

Among these, the armors and swords were sent to the steel workshop for smelting, while the matchlock guns and cannons were sent to the military workshop for remelting and remanufacturing. Therefore, the military workshop currently did not lack materials.

“Your Majesty.”

Xiao Ming’s arrival simultaneously startled Song Changping and Chen Qi. The two, along with the core personnel of the military workshop, came to greet him.

Ordinarily, Xiao Ming rarely visited the military workshop unless there was a specific reason, and this time was no exception.

Waving his hand, Xiao Ming excused the two from formalities. As he entered, he noticed that the sound of the steam engines was more intense than before. Needless to say, the military workshop must have acquired several more steam engines.

He said, "These steam engines should be prioritized for your use. You must not be careless in manufacturing firearms. This time, I have two purposes for coming. One is for rifled muskets. According to General Niu, in this Western expedition, the rifled muskets clearly showed an advantage over matchlock guns. They could gain a certain advantage in range, and even directly break the enemy's formations. Therefore, I have decided to equip the army with rifled muskets on a large scale. Can your military workshop do this?"

"Yes," Song Changping said firmly. "We have now manufactured sixteen thousand more rifled muskets. However, if we equip the army with rifled muskets, the workshop will have to invest more artisans into producing conical bullets."

Xiao Ming nodded. The difficult part about rifled muskets was the bullet problem. These were consumables, and their production was far from as fast as round bullets produced by freefall.

"Allocate a thousand artisans to be responsible for bullet production. Each artisan should be able to produce and polish an average of three conical bullets per day, right? That's three thousand bullets a day, and ninety thousand bullets a month. This should be enough," Xiao Ming said.

Song Changping nodded and said, "Previously, it would certainly have been impossible to allocate a thousand men, but now that steam engines have idled many artisans, it is possible to gather these thousand men."

"Hmm, expedite this matter. Although Prince Zhao and his son have already been beheaded in the East Market, and the domestic enemies have been eliminated, powerful enemies from outside the pass have arrived," Xiao Ming said thoughtfully. The barbarians had always been a thorn in the Great Yu Empire's side. Until this thorn was removed, the Great Yu Empire could not be said to have truly risen.

After a pause, he said, "This time, I have one more thing to instruct you. From now on, you must manufacture this weapon."

With that, Xiao Ming began to draw on the ground. This weapon looked like a flintlock gun, but it was much larger than a normal flintlock gun. Its length was almost comparable to a cannon. This was a heavy smoothbore gun intended for countering cavalry charges.

Chapter 707

"Heavy smoothbore gun?"

Song Changping was somewhat surprised upon hearing the name of this firearm.

Chen Qi stared at the drawing on the ground for a while and said, "Your Majesty, isn't this just a larger firearm? And this firearm looks very clumsy; it would be more practical to use artillery instead."

Hearing this, Xiao Ming explained, "This heavy flintlock gun has a long range and great power, and it can fire many projectiles at once. It can even penetrate cavalry armor directly from two or three hundred meters away. Artillery certainly has great range and power, but its disadvantages are that it's clumsy and expensive. This heavy smoothbore gun is easy to produce, and two people can operate it. It will be more effective when used in wagon formations."

The two nodded, now understanding that Xiao Ming's purpose in manufacturing this heavy smoothbore gun was for wagon formation defense.

After a pause, Xiao Ming continued, "To defeat the barbarians, we must go deep into the grasslands. Using heavy smoothbore guns in conjunction with wagon formations will produce unexpected results. At the same time, to complement this heavy smoothbore gun, you must modify the chariots."

“We await Your Majesty’s instructions.”

Xiao Ming then began to draw on the ground again. In modern times, the appearance of tanks and machine guns ended cavalry. Now, he obviously couldn’t build modern tanks with machine guns, but he could build heavy smoothbore guns with armored chariots.

This chariot modification primarily focused on two aspects: one was to add firing ports for heavy smoothbore guns on the chariots, and the other was to add bladed spikes to the outer armor. The main purpose was to prevent barbarian slave soldiers from climbing.

After defeating the barbarians using wagon formations in Jizhou, he believed that the barbarians must also be looking for ways to break the wagon formations.

And for the barbarians, the simplest and most brutal method was to fill it with the lives of barbarian slave soldiers.

Although the barbarian population was only four to five million, the barbarians had always loved enslaving others, and these slave soldiers were a force that could not be ignored.

It was precisely because he considered this point that he planned to focus on building armored chariot formations during the upcoming period. These chariots would be equivalent to mobile redoubts on the grasslands, and a heavy smoothbore gun could load dozens of normal firearm projectiles at once, effectively acting as a shotgun. The combination of the two, coupled with the cooperation of musketeers and cavalry within the wagon formation, would create a heavily guarded fortress.

After explaining his ideas to the two, they agreed to the task.

Song Changping sighed and said, "Your Majesty's ambition is great, and I am filled with admiration. However, the border troubles from the northern grasslands have never ceased throughout history. One barbarian tribe is driven away, and decades later, another tribe grows strong. It's a never-ending cycle."

During this time, Song Changping often went to Bowen Academy to read books. Besides the manufacturing of firearms, he also read some history books, and couldn't help but feel a bit emotional.

Chen Qi, on the other hand, understood nothing except artillery technology, but Song Changping's words made him a little worried. "Your Majesty, what Song Changping said makes some sense, but the northern lands are barren and cold. No one is willing to settle there, and only the barbarians are happy to go to that place."

Xiao Ming frowned upon hearing this. Chen Qi's words touched upon the very problem that was currently giving him a headache. The barbarians were different from feudal lords like Prince Zhao and Prince Yan.

The feudal lords relied on collecting taxes from their feudal states to build and strengthen their armies, so losing their feudal states meant losing everything.

But the barbarians were different. They were a semi-pastoral, semi-agricultural ethnic group, and their strategy was expansion and plunder. One could say that the barbarians were already on the path of colonization, but unlike Western overseas colonization, the barbarians had been engaging in bloody colonization on the Eurasian continent.

Such cunning barbarians with many hideouts meant that even if he destroyed the barbarian tribes near Changbai Mountain, the remaining barbarian tribes could still migrate deeper into the vast grasslands, waiting for a power vacuum to appear in that land again.

But this was intolerable to Xiao Ming, because his goal was to solve the northern problem once and for all.

Otherwise, he would be attacked from both sides and unable to concentrate on vying for colonies with Western powers overseas.

Standing up and pacing with his hands behind his back, Xiao Ming said, "I already have an idea. I will not give the barbarians any more breathing room."

Song Changping scratched his head. This was not within his purview, so he said, "Your Majesty, I merely spoke casually. For me, diligently producing firearms is equivalent to fighting the barbarians."

"That's a good point. It's enough for you to provide the army with quality and quantity of firearms." Xiao Ming smiled. At this moment, he suddenly remembered something and asked, "Oh, by the way, how are the percussion caps that I asked you and Lu Tong to research coming along?"

At the mention of this, the two's expressions became excited. Chen Qi said, "Lu Tong and I have experimented three times in the laboratory, and we have achieved some initial results. Simply put, we can now use percussion caps to replace flints."

"That's good. You must produce the percussion caps as soon as possible," Xiao Ming nodded. He and Lu Tong had researched the manufacturing of percussion caps many times, which was why the research progressed so smoothly.

Song Changping then said, “Your Majesty, the research on percussion caps is almost complete. I am preparing to begin production of percussion cap firearms. This type of firearm only uses percussion caps and paper cartridges. Each shot only requires installing a percussion cap, eliminating the step of flintlock guns where gunpowder had to be poured into the flash pan.”

Xiao Ming was not surprised by Song Changping’s words. For him, with Qingzhou Province’s current industrial capacity, firearms could only be developed to the level of percussion cap breechloaders.

As for metallic cartridges, they were a product of the post-electricity revolution, after another leap in production. The cost of producing them now would be too high.

The huge consumption of bullets at that time would be unbearable for him. After all, the bullets had copper casings. He estimated that a single metallic cartridge would cost around two taels of silver.

So, after weighing the options, before the electricity revolution arrived, he could only focus on percussion cap firearms.

After all, compared to flintlock guns, percussion cap guns improved firing reliability and rate, overcoming the problems of unreliable firing, high misfire rates, slow firing rates, and poor gas sealing of flintlock guns. Moreover, there would no longer be any concern about firearms failing in rainy weather. If they could be widely adopted by the army, it would mean his firearms were a generation ahead of the West.

However, although the percussion cap firearm was an improvement, it only offered some advantages in firing rate and stability. It could not change the mode of warfare, only providing some advantages on the battlefield.

"I had this idea when I asked you to research percussion caps. Since there's progress with percussion caps now, let's start. And from now on, the rule for the military workshop will be: one generation in use, one generation in research, one generation in design. This will ensure there are no gaps in weapon development," Xiao Ming set the rules for the military workshop.

"Yes, Your Majesty," Song Changping and Chen Qi bowed and said.

Chapter 708

The roar of steam engines and the smell of metal filled the military workshop.

After briefly stating his purpose for coming here, Xiao Ming routinely inspected the firearm workshop and the artillery workshop as usual.

In the firearm workshop, he specifically observed the production of conical bullets. One by one, conical bullets were cast in molds, then taken by artisans for grinding and calibration.

The advantage of rifled muskets was clear, but the demands on the bullets were also strict. Substandard conical bullets would cause disastrous consequences for the soldiers.

Therefore, after each batch of bullets was cast, the artisans would strictly calibrate them. After calibration, the artisans would insert wooden wads into the holes at the back of the conical bullets, which was to ensure airtightness during firing.



When Xiao Ming said each artisan produced three bullets a day, it was just a minimum estimate, as the current military workshop had already skillfully adopted assembly line production.

Different artisans were responsible for different processes: casting, grinding, manufacturing wooden wads, and assembly. These four sets of processes were carried out by these one thousand people through division of labor.

After inspecting the firearm workshop, he went to the artillery workshop. A long time ago, he had instructed Chen Qi to research rifled cannons.

After much exploration, the artillery workshop had successfully manufactured rifled cannons. According to Chen Qi, the production speed of rifled cannons was slow, but their range was much greater than before, now able to fire shells five li away.

“Five li.” Xiao Ming was slightly satisfied with this figure. Five li was two thousand five hundred meters, a range that should not lose to Western artillery.

“Prioritize providing these naval guns to warships,” Xiao Ming ordered. The news from both the French and the British had made Xiao Ming increasingly wary.

Domestic troubles had not yet been resolved when external threats arrived. Xiao Wenxuan had indeed left him an enormous mess. However, it was fortunate that this place was too far from the West, making it impossible for either France or Britain to deploy large-scale armies here.

Now, they were merely playing the role of troublemakers, stirring up unrest in East Asia. His primary enemies at the moment were still the barbarians, Japan, Goryeo, and the King of Chu.

And these were precisely the targets Britain and France wanted to use to counterbalance him, leading to the cooperation between France and the Prince of Chu, and Britain's journey to Japan.

Although Xiao Ming was angry at the petty actions of these two Western powers, he was currently helpless. However, this world would not always be dominated by them.

Once industry was popularized in the six provinces and the livelihoods of the people in the north were restored, that would be the time for him to reveal his sharp claws.

After inspecting the military workshop, Xiao Ming and Qian Dafu returned to Qingzhou City.

Meanwhile, under the supervision of Fei Ji and Pang Yukun, the six-prefecture reform movement was also gradually unfolding.

...

At the entrance of the Qingzhou Chamber of Commerce, Zhu Wuliu and other merchants were waiting for Li Kaiyuan to come out.

News about private workshops in the newspaper had spread throughout the six prefecture, and merchants eager to get a share immediately swarmed in.

In the past two years, Zhu Wuliu had earned a lot of silver from his white sugar workshop, and his family fortune had become substantial. He bought a large mansion in Qingzhou City.

Not only him, but Zhu Family Village also saw five wealthy households emerge. These households were the ones who lent Zhu Wuliu silver when he built the white sugar workshop.

At that time, Zhu Wuliu promised to share profits with them based on the amount of silver lent. Because of this, they also became wealthy, which made many people envious.

“Brother Wuliu, there are so many people here today!” Behind Zhu Wuliu was a slightly shorter, lean young man named Shangguan Yong, also from Zhu Family Village.

Zhu Wuliu looked at the long queue behind him. There were at least seven hundred, if not a thousand, merchants who came to the Chamber of Commerce this time. He said, “This is dangerous. These merchants are all wealthy, and I’m afraid we can’t compete with them. It’s said that the number of steam engines is limited; once they’re sold out, we’ll have to wait.”

Shangguan Yong was even more anxious than Zhu Wuliu. Many people in the village didn’t participate in the previous white sugar workshop venture. This time, hearing that Zhu Wuliu was starting another workshop, they all pooled their silver for Zhu Wuliu, aiming to get a share of the profits from this new workshop.

Touching his chest, Shangguan Yong confirmed that the bank draft he exchanged at the Qingzhou Bank was still there. The silver he carried was the entire village’s savings; if he lost it, he couldn’t even sell himself to replace it.

“Brother Wuliu, if it doesn’t work out, why don’t you go find Third Brother Si? I heard Third Brother Si has been transferred back from Ryukyu and promoted to captain. Ask him to pull some strings. Wouldn’t that make this batch of steam engines more secure?” Shangguan Yong said with a chuckle.

Zhu Wuliu’s face darkened upon hearing this. He said, “Second Brother is in the army and cannot engage in business. If it’s known, he’ll be kicked out of the army. Your asking me to find him is harming him. I can go without this business, but Second Brother cannot take off that uniform. It’s an honor for our old Zhu family.”

Shangguan Yong gave two awkward laughs. “I was just anxious, you know. Actually, if I hadn’t broken my leg when I was a child, I’d want to join the army too. Look how impressive the soldiers are now! Not only does the prefectural office deliver rice and flour at the end of each year, but it’s said that soldiers now get priority for many things. Even buying things at the Qingzhou Chamber of Commerce’s shops only costs half the silver.”

“Of course! It used to be that no one wanted to be a soldier, but now it’s great; everyone’s breaking their heads to join the army!” Zhu Wuliu found himself a little envious as he spoke.

It was said that the past two years of war had made many soldiers rich. After each battle, they would receive rewards, which made many troops eager to fight.

And the soldiers who returned to the village, giving dozens of taels of silver to their families at a time, confirmed these rumors.

Just as the two were momentarily lost in thought, Li Kaiyuan suddenly appeared at the entrance of the Chamber of Commerce. He frowned as he scanned the waiting merchants.

“There are a total of one hundred steam engines for sale this time. But it’s not just the steam engine; it’s actually a complete steam engine production line. That means there are one hundred production lines. For fairness, this sale of production lines will be conducted by auction, with the highest bidder winning. Gentlemen, you may now enter the venue to prepare.”

Li Kaiyuan finished speaking and made a “please” gesture. The merchants immediately surged into the Chamber of Commerce’s auction hall.

Merchants, one after another, rushed past him eagerly. Li Kaiyuan showed a hint of helplessness. He had argued with Lin Wentao quite a bit over these one hundred production lines in the past two days.

For him, the more steam engines, the better. But Lin Wentao had brushed him off, arguing that they needed to sell them for silver to have silver to continue manufacturing more.

He had only managed to get these one hundred sets of steam engines from the steam engine workshop. Now, indeed, there were too many monks and too little gruel (too many buyers, too few goods).

Soon, the auction hall was filled with excited merchants.

Before coming, the prefectural office had opened up official workshops, such as the imitation workshop and the white sugar workshop, for them to observe. The role of steam engines in these workshops had deeply impressed them.

Merchants, driven by profit, immediately recognized the value contained within, leading to today's scene.

## Chapter 709

The auction hall was packed with merchants, making a clamorous noise like a busy marketplace.

Li Kaiyuan stood on the auction stage and glanced down. Cao Zhengyang, Ding Wu, and other major Qingzhou merchants were all present. Then, his gaze briefly lingered on Zhu Wuliu.

After all the merchants were seated, Li Kaiyuan began to introduce the purpose of the steam engines this time. According to the plan formulated by the imperial court, the key industries to be supported were textiles, sugar, papermaking, and mining. Currently, steam engines could only play an important role in these four industries.

Therefore, the workshops to be established this time were textile workshops, white sugar workshops, papermaking workshops, and mines.

"...These are the four types of workshops currently prioritized for imperial court support. Depending on the type of workshop, the price of the steam engine and its attached machinery will also vary," Li Kaiyuan introduced them one by one.

Below the auction stage, Cao Zhengyang said to Ding Wu, "Brother Ding, which type are you planning to buy?"

"A mine, of course. Currently, various ores in Qingzhou Province are insufficient." Ding Wu said with a smile.

“That’s natural, but the price of mines isn’t low. The steam engine costs money, and the mine itself costs money, and the imperial court won’t give you a good mine either,” Cao Zhengyang said.

Ding Wu shook his head, “The Emperor is an extremely shrewd person. It’s enough for us to drink the soup while the imperial court eats the meat. If we want to eat the meat in the bowl, we’ll have to weigh our own strength.”

“Brother Ding is absolutely right. However, it would be different in Britain. It’s said that merchants there have a very high status and can even participate in government affairs. It’s truly enviable!” Cao Zhengyang lamented with a sigh.

Ding Wu’s eyes darted around. After Prince Wei died, Ding Wanqian brought his entire family to settle in Qingzhou Province. Now, he had staked his entire fortune and life on Xiao Ming, thus he was extremely loyal to Xiao Ming.

Therefore, Cao Zhengyang’s mentioning such a sensitive topic made him feel somewhat apprehensive. “Brother Cao, the status of Qingzhou Province merchants has greatly improved now. We should be content. The West is the West, but our Great Yu Empire has its own national conditions. It’s best to speak less of such matters.”

Cao Zhengyang was stunned for a moment, then suddenly chuckled awkwardly. He said to Ding Wu, “Brother Ding, what are you thinking about? I merely spoke casually, just casually.”

While the two were talking, Li Kaiyuan had already begun the auction. The first item, a complete set of mining steam engine pump, tracks, and mine carts, started at two hundred thousand taels of silver.

“Two hundred and fifty thousand taels.” Ding Wu immediately raised a high price. Compared to his time in Jinling city, the Ding family’s wealth had grown considerably in Qingzhou Province.

Not to mention overseas trade, the profits from these two wars alone had earned them a lot of silver. Now they were indeed financially strong.

“Two hundred and eighty thousand.” Cao Zhengyang said casually.

Ding Wu looked at Cao Zhengyang, displeased. “Brother Cao, you’re really not being honest. Just now you advised me not to get involved in the mining business, and now you’re slapping yourself in the face.”

“Brother Ding, I never said I wouldn’t participate,” Cao Zhengyang laughed.

Ding Wu was displeased. This Cao Zhengyang was becoming increasingly arrogant, especially after the rise in status of Qingzhou Province merchants. Cao Zhengyang even considered himself the head of the Great Yu Empire’s wealthiest family, and had gathered a large number of merchants around him, acting like the leader of Qingzhou Province’s merchants.

However, while the Cao family was wealthy, their Ding family was not inferior. Others might be respectful to him, but he saw no need to be.

An inexplicable tension spread between the two. At this point, Ding Wu bid again, and Cao Zhengyang followed suit.



Soon, the price was raised to three hundred and seventy thousand taels. At this point, Ding Wu stopped bidding, as the price was simply too high.

After the first set was sold, Li Kaiyuan auctioned the second set. To Ding Wu's surprise, Cao Zhengyang continued to participate in the auction.

Then came the third set, the fourth set. After acquiring six sets in one go, Cao Zhengyang finally stopped. Ding Wu could only secure the remaining two sets.

Compared to other industries, the number of machines for mining this time was small and the price was high. In Ding Wu's view, this Cao family had no small ambition.

The two competed for a while, and Ding Wu came out on the losing end. At this time, other steam engines also began to be auctioned. Cao Zhengyang then secured some steam engines in every industry.

He ultimately bid for a total of twenty steam engines, while Ding Wu, according to his plan, only managed to secure six.

The auction lasted for two hours. As the sun set, all the steam engines were sold, and the merchants, with mixed feelings of joy and sorrow, left the Chamber of Commerce one by one.

Zhu Wuliu and Shangguan Yong also prepared to return. This time, they did not come in vain, successfully acquiring the textile workshop steam engine and textile machines. However, their silver was also completely depleted as a result.

After seeing off the merchants, Li Kaiyuan immediately took the account books to Xiao Ming's temporary palace. He wanted to inform Xiao Ming about the auction results.

"The Cao family acquired twenty units!" Xiao Ming, who had been reviewing memorials since returning from the military workshop, was greatly surprised by Li Kaiyuan's words.

"Your Majesty, this Cao family's ambition is truly not small. I'm afraid that if this continues, the Cao family will monopolize all industries in Qingzhou Province," Li Kaiyuan said. Over five years, Li Kaiyuan had learned much of the modern commercial theory provided by Xiao Ming, and now he was well-versed in concepts like monopolies.

"You're right. This Cao family is immensely wealthy, more than enough to buy out our entire Qingzhou Province. Of course, supporting private workshops benefits them the most. But you needn't worry. This is the Great Yu Empire. No matter how capable the Cao family is, they still have to behave themselves."

After a pause, he said to Li Kaiyuan, "Since that's the case, you should organize the 'Commercial Law' and submit it to Pang Yukun. It will be passed in the morning court session in the next two days."

Li Kaiyuan's face lit up with a smile. He said, "How did I not think of that? The 'Commercial Law' is the best way to govern these merchants."

Xiao Ming glared at him. "You are still a merchant; have you forgotten that you are also an imperial official?"

This “Commercial Law” was a law tailored by Xiao Ming for the Great Yu Empire based on modern and contemporary corporate laws, aiming to combat monopolies, profiteering, taking advantage of national calamities, and other malicious behaviors.

As long as this law was implemented, he could use it to rectify behemoths like the Cao family. Otherwise, allowing capital to expand indefinitely could lead to problems. He certainly didn’t want his achievements to ultimately be stolen by these merchants.

Chapter 710

Unbeknownst to them, tiny snowflakes suddenly began to fall from the sky.

Standing by the window watching this scene, Xiao Ming felt a surge of emotion. Another year was about to pass, and in that time, he had finally completed the initial unification of the Great Yu Empire.

Li Kaiyuan noticed Xiao Ming’s expression. In his view, Xiao Ming seemed to have a special fondness for winter, though he didn’t know why.

“I will not disturb Your Majesty’s enjoyment of the snow. I will now return and prepare the ‘Commercial Law’,” Li Kaiyuan said. He still felt some pressure in Xiao Ming’s presence; after all, serving a monarch was like accompanying a tiger.

Nodding, Xiao Ming said to Li Kaiyuan, “I plan to officially designate the Chamber of Commerce as the Ministry of Commerce on a chosen day. From then on, you will formally become imperial officials. I have explained the functions of the Ministry of Commerce to you many times. You are to begin overseeing the commerce of the Great Yu Empire according to these functions, starting now.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Li Kaiyuan replied, tightening his cotton-padded coat and stepping into the snow. This winter was colder than the last.

Watching Li Kaiyuan leave, Xiao Ming looked north. This winter was colder than previous years; this time, the barbarians would likely suffer greatly.

He could foresee that livestock in the northern grasslands would freeze to death again this year, which would make the barbarians’ lives even more difficult.

And barbarians lacking food and clothing would only do one thing: plunder. Thus, it was foreseeable that a war between the barbarians and the Great Yu Empire was imminent. After all, the food production on this land was limited; for every extra bite the Great Yu Empire ate, several barbarians would starve to death.

In truth, human history was nothing more than a history of cannibalism, the difference being whether one ate others or one’s own kind.

During the Age of Exploration, the West chose to exploit people from other continents, leading to their current prosperity and strength. On the land of the Great Yu Empire, it had always been a matter of its own people exploiting each other.

After pausing to watch the snow for a while, Xiao Ming once again immersed himself in designing the industrial plan for the six provinces.

At this auction, there were only one hundred steam engines, but in reality, the steam engine workshop had manufactured a total of three hundred steam engines during this period.

Upon obtaining this number, he ordered that only one hundred be given to merchants, for after all, compared to private workshops, the official workshops were the most important.

After all, private workshops were meant to provide various goods for the common people; what could truly guide national development were the official workshops.

In his plan, he intended to establish two more large-scale steel workshops. These steel workshops would not be in Qingzhou Province, but rather in Laiwu and Kaiping Province, near Youzhou Province.

Laiwu, needless to say, was the largest coal and iron producing area in the Shandong region. Building the Laiwu Steel Workshop there would greatly reduce the cost of transporting ore.

And this Kaiping Province was the Kaiping Town of the late Qing Dynasty, also famous; it was essentially contemporary Tangshan. This place was rich in coal and iron, and he planned to build the Kaiping Steel Workshop there.

Accompanying these steel workshops would naturally be coal and iron mines. However, besides these two minerals, Xiao Ming also planned to simultaneously develop the gold and silver mines in Laizhou Prefecture.

Coal and iron were for industry, gold and silver were for finance. Seizing this rare period of peace, he wanted to rapidly develop industry.

Japan, during the Meiji Restoration, became a strong nation in just forty years, and that was Japan directly transitioning from a feudal society to a Western society during the Second Industrial Revolution.

So for Xiao Ming, he wouldn't need forty years; just giving him ten or eight years would be enough for the Great Yu Empire's industry to catch up with the West, and then completely surpass it.

However, to concentrate his efforts on major undertakings, he still had to solve one problem: the issue of population mobility in the Great Yu Empire.

In feudal dynasties, the population was almost immobile, primarily to prevent the emergence of unstable elements like vagrants.

But now, Xiao Ming wanted to develop industry and capital, which would inevitably require a large population.

The population in the six prefecture was limited, and most had their own land. These common people were not at all eager to enter workshops. Therefore, both he and the merchants of Qingzhou Province now needed a large population to develop industry.

At this time, he naturally turned his attention to the displaced people generated by this northern war. More than a year of chaotic warfare had not only resulted in significant population loss in the north but also created a large number of displaced people.

If according to old custom, these displaced people were to return to their hometowns to farm, but now there were two other paths: entering workshops.

Thinking of this, Xiao Ming put down his pen. He noted this issue down, intending to bring it up together during tomorrow's morning court session.

Besides this, he had prepared some other matters, and even given them a resounding name: the "Three-Year Plan."

The next day, Qingzhou City was covered in a night's worth of snow, turning it silver-white.

After playing with Fei Yuer and his son in the bedchamber for a while, he took his three-year plan to the council hall.

After a heavy snowfall, the ministers' clothes were visibly thicker. Xiao Ming smiled, "Are all your robes lined with cotton-padded jackets sewn by the textile workshops, my beloved ministers?"

Pang Yukun led the response, "Your Majesty, these cotton-padded jackets are thick and resistant to cold. This year, not only officials but most common people also wear these padded jackets."

"I, your old servant, have lived in Chang'an for decades, and always thought Chang'an was the wealthiest place under heaven. I never imagined that in just five or six years, the common people of Qingzhou Province would live even more comfortably than those in Chang'an. In the past, not everyone in Chang'an had cotton-padded jackets to wear during winter," Fei Ji said with a smile.

The officials echoed, and Chao Jun said, "From this, it can be seen that Your Majesty is far-sighted. The comfortable lives of the common people of Qingzhou Province are due to abundant resources, and abundant resources are inseparable from commerce and industry."

“Minister Chao is absolutely right. The resources of Qingzhou Province are indeed more abundant than Chang’an.”

“It seems commerce and industry also have their benefits.”

“...”

Actions spoke louder than words, and the officials echoed one after another.

Slightly satisfied with the performance of the officials in the great hall, Xiao Ming unveiled the most important national plan before the end of the year. He said, “All you beloved ministers are discerning people. Having lived in Qingzhou Province for a long time, you can clearly see right from wrong. This morning court session is not for other matters, but specifically for the development of industry and commerce. For this purpose, I have formulated a Three-Year Plan.”

With that, Xiao Ming had Qian Dafu distribute printed pamphlets.

Fei Ji and Pang Yukun immediately read them upon receiving them, and their expressions instantly turned to shock.

The pamphlet clearly documented the major undertakings the imperial court planned for the next three years, covering everything from agriculture to commerce, from governance to military affairs.



“Everything I need to say is in here. For the next three years, the six prefectural offices of Qingzhou province must strictly follow the plan outlined here. If it’s not completed after three years, whoever lags behind will be held accountable by me. So, take this opportunity to ask whatever you want.”

The officials looked up at this point. This was the first time they had seen such a method of governing.