

I. Dynasty 751

Chapter 752

Amidst scattered gunshots, the target in the middle of the shooting range gained more and more bullet holes.

“Six shots!”

“Four shots!”

After checking the number of bullet holes, the artisan told Song Changping the result.

“Not bad, two more shots than the flintlock gun.” Chen Qi stood with his hands on his hips, looking at the shooting results. Today, he and Song Changping were both testing new weapons.

Song Changping nodded in satisfaction. To compare the difference between the percussion cap gun and the flintlock gun, he specifically transferred two elite soldiers from the Qingzhou Army.

After testing, this batch of manufactured percussion cap guns had a faster firing rate, and after the drenching experiment, they could guarantee a higher firing rate than flintlock guns.

“These two extra shots are enough to change a war”.

Song Changping let out a light breath. He had worked tirelessly for more than two months on this percussion cap gun. Now, the first batch of 6,000 percussion cap rifled muskets had been produced and could officially be equipped to the army.

The reason for being able to complete the production of percussion cap guns so quickly was entirely thanks to the steam engine.

With the skilled use of steam engine lathes and the two newly built production lines, manufacturing gun barrels and rifling was now very simple.

Firearm production moved away from cumbersome traditional processes and directly into the assembly of parts, greatly increasing the speed of firearm production.

This was also why a batch of percussion cap guns could be produced so quickly after their development, and they could have manufactured more if not for the scarcity of materials.

However, in view of this, the Grand Council had now issued an order that the firearms equipped by the Great Yu Empire army would be returned to the military workshop in batches for modification, to reduce the production cost of firearms.

These firearms, besides flintlock guns without rifling, also included matchlock guns captured from each battle. Of course, unqualified gun barrels still needed to be returned to the steel workshop for remelting.

Chen Qi rubbed his temples. "I just don't think these two extra shots make much difference. On the contrary, continuously innovating weapons will add a considerable burden to the imperial treasury".

“Two extra shots are enough to change a war. We cannot stop innovating weapons just because it’s wasteful. We might be lazy, but the enemy’s firearms are constantly improving,” Song Changping said. “Currently, the Great Yu Empire is only fighting Goryeo and the Golden Tent Khanate. If we fight the Dutch, with the same number of troops, we might not gain much advantage, but with new weapons, it’s different.” Song Changping retorted.

Chen Qi said, “The battlefield primarily relies on artillery. Short-term battles mainly rely on artillery’s long range to disrupt enemy formations. The musket formation is just for a single shot in battle. Is that true?”

Song Changping’s face flushed. Chen Qi’s words left him unable to refute. He was right; during this period, the Great Yu Empire army mainly relied on artillery, and the musketeers had not fully utilized their role.

However, recalling the recent Battle of Haigucheng, he said, “But in this Battle of Haigucheng, Ye Qingyun used rifled muskets to suppress the barbarian artillery, which shows that the range of rifled muskets can already threaten artillery. If your artillery doesn’t increase its range, it will also be eliminated by firearms in the future”.

After a pause, Song Changping continued, “And now firearms have more powerful gunpowder. The range of rifled muskets can now reach 900 meters”.

Chen Qi’s mouth formed an “o” shape. “Song Changping, you must be bragging. How can a musket’s range reach 900 meters?”

With a light chuckle, Song Changping said, “Yesterday, we tested the percussion cap rifled musket with smokeless gunpowder, and the effect was astonishing. A 900-meter range, with guaranteed accuracy within 500 meters. I sent someone to look for you then, but you didn’t come”.

Chen Qi suddenly remembered. Indeed, Song Changping had looked for him yesterday. At that time, he was discussing rifled cannons with the artisans and didn't have time to pay attention.

"Are you planning to make artillery withdraw from the battlefield?" Chen Qi said with a wry smile. "But fortunately, rifled cannons are making progress now".

Song Changping fiddled with a paper cartridge. This cartridge contained smokeless gunpowder and a conical projectile. Relying on the rifled musket, the power of the firearm had increased significantly.

Chen Qi mentioned rifled cannons, and he suddenly became interested. He said, "Didn't your rifled cannons always have no progress?"

"Not before, but His Majesty personally sent me a blueprint, so this matter is no longer difficult".

"Why?"

Chen Qi shook his head. "Previously, rifled cannons always had artisans load from the front, and the rifling would quickly wear smooth from the shells. It wasn't until I saw the blueprint given by His Majesty that I understood that rifled cannons should be loaded from the breech. So I am now researching breech-loading artillery".

Song Changping couldn't help but laugh upon hearing this. "People eat with their mouths; who eats with their butt..."

At this point, he suddenly stopped laughing, his expression strange. He knew very well that cannons and firearms were actually similar in principle. Now, the Emperor's intention in giving Chen Qi this blueprint seemed not simple. Could this also be telling him that if it worked for cannons, it could also work for firearms?

Thinking of this, Song Changping stopped chatting with Chen Qi and took the new firearm directly to the temporary palace.

After being announced, he met Xiao Ming.

"Is this the percussion cap rifled musket?" Xiao Ming said with interest, taking the firearm from Song Changping's hand.

In fact, after Song Changping's experiment, he had obtained the data for this firearm: a 900-meter range, with guaranteed accuracy within 500 meters.

And this data finally reached the standard of contemporary Minié rifles. Reaching this point was truly difficult. For him, firearms had also opened a new chapter.

"Yes, Your Majesty." Song Changping looked triumphant. This new firearm comprehensively surpassed the previous rifled flintlock guns in both range and firing rate, and there was no worry about misfires due to rain.

Nodding excitedly, Xiao Ming smiled. He wasn't surprised that Song Changping produced this firearm, because Qingzhou Province's industrial standards were now capable of producing this type of firearm.

Such a small modification to a rifled flintlock gun was simple.

"Now that the Great Yu Empire is surrounded by foreign enemies, the emergence of this firearm is very timely." Xiao Ming fiddled with the firearm. He mused, "How about naming this model of firearm the Conqueror Musket?"

"Conqueror Musket?" Song Changping said, "Does Your Majesty intend to use this firearm to deal with the barbarians?"

"That's right. The Golden Tent Khanate is always a major threat in the north. Until now, the Great Yu Empire could only adopt a defensive stance. Now, with this long-range firearm, dealing with barbarian cavalry will be easier. For the next two or three years, the military machinery department will focus on modifying and manufacturing this type of firearm. When the Great Yu Empire's national strength recovers, I will lead the army on a northern expedition!" Xiao Ming clenched his fists.

Only by eliminating the border troubles in the north could he confidently participate in the Age of Discovery. Otherwise, the barbarians would constantly tie down most of his troops, which would make him very uncomfortable.

Chapter 753

The brand-new percussion cap gun gleamed with a metallic sheen.

Song Changping was excited. The barbarians, like a sharp sword, threatened the Great Yu Empire. Generations of blood debts were etched in everyone's hearts, wishing to destroy them overnight.

“Your Majesty’s ambition is grand. The name ‘Conqueror’ will surely be a prominent entry in the history books,” Song Changping said, bowing.

Xiao Ming gently stroked the body of the Conqueror Musket, feeling the cold metallic texture. He returned the musket to Song Changping and said, “Ever since I ascended the throne, you have all learned to flatter. There’s no need for excessive praise. Continuously providing the Great Yu Empire with new weapons is the real business.”

Song Changping awkwardly rubbed his hands. It was his first attempt at flattery, and he had misjudged the situation. So he said, “Your Majesty, I have something I wish to consult you about today.”

Ever since Xiao Ming changed his attitude of not bothering with these trivial matters, Song Changping would often return to Bowen Academy to discuss firearms with Xiao Ming.

Xiao Ming had somewhat guessed his intention. He said, “Just speak your mind.”

“Your Majesty sent Chen Qi blueprints for a breech-loading cannon. Does this mean firearms can also be breech-loading?” Song Changping asked.

Xiao Ming nodded, “You guessed correctly. This is exactly what I want your military machinery department to do next. Don’t forget what I once told you.”

Song Changping had not forgotten. Xiao Ming had once said that the Great Yu Empire’s weapons should be one generation in use, one generation in research, and one generation in design.

Now, the percussion cap gun belonged to the generation under research and was moving towards being equipped, so the next step should be to research new types of firearms.

“I understand. I will go back and gather the artisans to begin this task,” Song Changping said.

Western interference had drastically deteriorated the Great Yu Empire’s surrounding environment, forcing Xiao Ming to upgrade weapons to ensure his own security.

After all, strictly speaking, the Great Yu Empire was not yet truly unified. The southern half of the empire was still in the hands of the Prince of Chu, supported by the French.

And the northern barbarians, needless to say, were colluding with the Japanese and British. To the west, there was also an uncontrollable Tibet, which could stab them at any time. All of this truly troubled him.

He had originally wanted to settle down and recuperate, but he had thought too simply. It seemed his enemies would not give him this opportunity.

The two briefly discussed the breech-loading firearm, and Song Changping returned, full of excitement.

For Song Changping, he had been vexed about what to do next. Now, Xiao Ming had pointed out a clear path for him, and he could not have asked for more.

Song Changping departed. Not long after, a silvery laughter rang out, and Princess Pingyang's figure appeared outside the imperial study.

"Your Majesty, this Song Changping is quite handsome," Princess Pingyang said as she entered the imperial study.

Xiao Ming had always had a bit of a headache with this notoriously charming aunt. He directly bypassed the topic and instead asked, "Aunt rarely comes to the imperial study. This visit must be for something very important, I presume."

Princess Pingyang had long grown accustomed to Xiao Ming's business-like demeanor. She gave a bored expression, then said seriously, "Your Majesty, I came this time for the matter of the railways. Laying railways now requires a large amount of labor, but the Railway Department simply cannot recruit so many. Moreover, even if they could, the silver allocated by the imperial court to the Railway Department is insufficient to pay their wages. If Your Majesty does not make the common people perform *corvée labor, these railways won't be laid in ten or even half a decade."

Xiao Ming frowned. Princess Pingyang was speaking the truth, which was why he had Liang Dahai go to Haigucheng to conscript Goryeo people to build railways in the Great Yu Empire.

The reason was simple: the Great Yu Empire's common people had to be paid for building railways, and they were unwilling to work for less silver.

As for the corvée labor Princess Pingyang mentioned, he had considered it but then rejected the idea. Now, the common people in the north were struggling, and they should be focusing on restoring agriculture rather than participating in railway construction. Moreover, the burgeoning industry also required a large amount of labor.

Furthermore, the Great Yu Empire's population was sparse in the north due to continuous warfare, while dense in the south, and had suffered heavy massacres during the northern war.

Implementing corvée labor now was somewhat inappropriate. After all, generally, corvée labor was exempted after a period of war.

"Aunt need not worry. I have already sent Liang Dahai to Goryeo to conscript laborers. He should return soon," Xiao Ming reassured her.

He dared not neglect this matter. Railways were the arteries connecting resource supply areas and industrial centers. The sooner they were built, the sooner the Great Yu Empire would benefit.

Princess Pingyang then visibly relaxed. She said to Xiao Ming, "Your Majesty, currently, the Qingzhou railway has been laid for fifty li

, and the Qingzhou station has basically taken shape. Today, the Railway Department is about to test how well this steam locomotive runs on the railway. My main purpose for coming today is to invite Your Majesty to personally observe."

Xiao Ming was startled upon hearing this. Ever since this aunt settled in Qingzhou Province, she had become much more reliable. This fifty li of railway was quite a pleasant surprise for him.

After all, the steam locomotive hadn't been developed for very long.

Undoubtedly, this railway was an important project for him, one that could even determine the fate of the Great Yu Empire.

In Xiao Ming's plan, controlling the northeast of the Great Yu Empire relied on the railway network. This way, logistics would be guaranteed, and his army would be able to establish a firm foothold in the northeast.

Filled with excitement, Xiao Ming said, "How can I not attend, given Aunt's kind invitation?"

With that, Xiao Ming rose and walked out with Princess Pingyang. A carriage was already prepared at the entrance of the temporary palace.

Xiao Ming boarded Princess Pingyang's carriage and, under the protection of guards, headed to the North City area of Qingzhou Province. Qingzhou Station was the starting point, leading in all directions from here.

After a ten-li journey, the carriage stopped in front of Qingzhou Station. Stepping down from the carriage, Xiao Ming looked at the still-under-construction Qingzhou Station.

At this time, the buildings on both sides of Qingzhou Station were largely complete. A railway extended outward from Qingzhou Station, and there were also thirteen railway branches in the station platform, but these branches had not yet begun construction; the tracks had only been laid for a short section before stopping.

"It seems the secret of the Great Yu Empire's railways cannot be kept," Xiao Ming said, glancing at Qingzhou Station. His gaze was then drawn to a dozen or so fair-haired, blue-eyed Westerners.

After Dengzhou became a trade port, foreign merchants would occasionally appear in Qingzhou City. Their purpose in coming to Qingzhou Province was to purchase goods from the Great Yu Empire.

And the common people of Qingzhou Province had gradually become accustomed to this.

Princess Pingyang turned her head to look in the direction Xiao Ming was gazing, and calmly said, “Wouldn’t being seen by these barbarians precisely serve to demonstrate the might of our Great Yu Empire?”

Xiao Ming did not speak. In fact, his current industrial level was not very different from that of the West; what he could produce, the West could also produce.

The real gap was that the Westerners’ innovative thinking had not yet reached its peak. If they understood the technical principles, they would quickly be able to replicate them.

Therefore, he felt it was time to implement a technological blockade.

*Corvée labor is the practice of unpaid labor that is required of individuals, often as a form of taxation or obligation, typically for public works or services. It is a form of forced labor where individuals are obligated to work for a certain period without pay, often for the benefit of a lord, state, or community.

Chapter 754

“Woo woo...”

The whistle of the steam locomotive sounded at Qingzhou Station. People crowded on both sides of the railway, as the trial run of the steam locomotive today attracted many Qingzhou common people to watch the excitement.

Looking at such a grand scene, Xiao Ming was filled with joy. In his contemporary era, his country had missed the golden period of technological development. Now, he would not let the country he ruled be shamed.

For him, today's steam locomotive trial run was a historic event where the Great Yu Empire surpassed the West in technology. In the future, new technologies in the Great Yu Empire would only continue to emerge, and fully catching up with the West was just around the corner.

"Your Majesty."

Lin Wentao was leading his students in a final check of the steam locomotive. The steam locomotive was about to depart for outside the city.

Xiao Ming and Princess Pingyang had now arrived in front of the steam locomotive. Behind them were officials from the Railway Department.

Stepping on the railway tracks, Xiao Ming asked, "Are these railway tracks laid according to the established track standards?"

Lin Wentao was also somewhat excited today. He said, “I have issued Your Majesty’s track standards to the Railway Department, and now every official in the Railway Department knows them by heart.”

As if to confirm Lin Wentao’s words, Princess Pingyang said casually, “These tracks are divided into steel rails, sleepers, connecting parts, ballast, and turnouts.”

“Among them, the sleepers are made of both wood and concrete, laid alternately. The steel rails and components like bolts are made of steel. Coupled with the crushed stone ballast, it is basically a qualified railway.”

Xiao Ming nodded in satisfaction upon hearing this.

Princess Pingyang seemed to intentionally show off in front of Xiao Ming, so she said, “The gauge of these tracks also has its specific requirements. According to the standard, all tracks now belong to the standard gauge, with a width of 1435 millimeters.”

At this point, Xiao Ming praised, “Even Aunt is so familiar with these track standards; I am completely at ease.”

Possessing various technological standards beyond this era, Xiao Ming naturally would not let the Great Yu Empire’s railways grope for track standards themselves. He could directly apply mature railway standards.

After all, from the very beginning, Lin Wentao’s steam locomotive was manufactured according to this standard. However, in contemporary times, the track widths of each country were different, mainly to prevent other countries from directly using their railways during an invasion. For example, Russia used a wider gauge than European railways.

“Your Majesty entrusting such an important matter to a weak woman like me is a sign of your trust. How dare I fail to live up to Your Majesty’s expectations?” Princess Pingyang smiled beautifully.

An official from the Railway Department seized the opportunity to flatter, “Her Highness has indeed worked very hard for this railway matter. She inspects the railway every day. We, your humble servants, are truly humbled.”

Xiao Ming then noticed that Princess Pingyang had gotten a bit darker. He said, “On the day the railway is fully operational, I will personally host a banquet to celebrate for Aunt!”

Princess Pingyang was startled for a moment. In fact, ever since she came to Qingzhou Province, she had lived in constant trepidation. This nephew of hers, seemingly gentle, was also ruthless when it came to killing.

She vividly remembered the day Prince Zhao and his son Zhao Yuanliang were executed by slow slicing. She had once felt ashamed towards Xiao Ming, so she now dared not harbor any improper thoughts. She wholeheartedly worked for the imperial family, only wishing for a glorious second half of her life.

“Thank you, Your Majesty. I will be waiting for that day,” Princess Pingyang secretly rejoiced. Clearly, her actions in this matter had pleased Xiao Ming.

As time slowly passed, more and more common people gathered on both sides of the railway. As far as the eye could see, there was no end to the crowd. At this moment, Lin Wentao said, “Your Majesty, the steam locomotive is almost ready. Shall we officially begin its operation now?”

Xiao Ming then looked in the direction he came from. At this point, Fei Ji, Pang Yukun, and other officials had also arrived, presumably having been informed by Princess Pingyang.

Nodding, Xiao Ming said, "Begin. Let the common people of Qingzhou and all my beloved ministers witness the operation of the Great Yu Empire's first steam locomotive."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Lin Wentao replied, then gestured towards the platform.

On the platform, there was a station staff member holding a red flag. After receiving Lin Wentao's signal, he waved the small red flag in his hand.

As he moved, the steam locomotive once again emitted a loud whistle. Then, the train made "chugging, chugging" sounds and began to move on the tracks.

Fei Ji, Pang Yukun, and other officials arrived beside Xiao Ming. After bowing, each craned their necks to watch the steam locomotive.

After the locomotive began to move, pulling its long carriages, Pang Yukun exclaimed, "I never thought this steam locomotive could really pull such long carriages!"

Fei Ji also looked surprised. He said, "Indeed, but it's running a bit too slowly."

Xiao Ming smiled without speaking. In contemporary times, the first steam locomotive was also ridiculed when it began operation, but eventually, the steam locomotive phased out traditional ox-and-horse transportation.

Of course, the steam locomotive Lin Wentao manufactured now was in no way comparable to the first steam locomotive. According to Lin Wentao's tests, the reciprocating high-temperature, high-pressure steam engine he installed was enough to allow the locomotive to reach a speed of sixty-seven kilometers per hour. Although this was much slower than contemporary trains, it was already very remarkable.

Moreover, Lin Wentao was already developing the compound steam engine. This type of steam engine could utilize steam two or even three times, greatly improving the locomotive's thermal efficiency.

Once this type of steam engine was successfully developed, both steam locomotives and steamships would see a significant increase in speed.

"Chug, chug."

The steam locomotive's speed increased after leaving the station. The common people on both sides of the railway let out gasps of surprise.

Before this, many common people had been puzzled about what this strange thing was for. Now, they finally understood.

However, having never seen a steam locomotive before, they were quite startled by the sight. Meanwhile, the students of Bowen Academy mixed in the crowd continuously cheered. This event was

also of great significance to them, as it proved the correctness of their abandonment of the Four Books and Five Classics.

Even more shocked than the common people of Qingzhou Province were the Western merchants.

“My God, what is this? What have I seen in the Great Yu Empire?” a young Western merchant exclaimed, while beside him was an older Westerner, the young man’s father.

“This is science.” The young merchant’s father’s eyes gleamed with a wild light.

The young merchant looked at his father. In his memory, his father was very knowledgeable. He continued to ask, “Father, what exactly is this?”

“I don’t know either, but this must be something incredible. Perhaps we should stay here and figure out what they are.” The older merchant’s tone was grave.

Chapter 755

The locomotive, emitting white smoke, steadily moved away, accelerating after leaving Qingzhou Station.

The common people, seeing this, rushed to follow the steam locomotive. In their mundane lives lacking entertainment, they didn’t want to miss this wondrous event. At least now, they had more to talk about after meals.

After the locomotive's speed increased, Fei Ji's old face flushed. He said, "I really should slap myself. At this rate, the steam locomotive's speed can at least keep up with horses."

"Not only that, it can outrun horses and doesn't need rest like horses. The only thing needed is to set up water and coal supply stations along the way," Princess Pingyang said with a smile.

This trial run was perfect. Everyone witnessed the steam locomotive accelerating, and during acceleration, the steam locomotive also pulled eight carriages. These carriages would be able to carry a lot of goods in the future.

Pang Yukun was also so happy he couldn't close his mouth. However, amidst his joy, he also felt a pang for the national treasury's silver. He said, "Your Majesty, this railway is truly a colossal project that burdens the people and wastes wealth. Just building this section of railway in Qingzhou Province cost the imperial treasury over three hundred thousand taels of silver. If all six prefectures were connected, it would require at least ten million taels of silver. I fear the imperial treasury is incapable."

Fei Ji and Pang Yukun jointly managed the national treasury and were naturally well aware of this. The national treasury's silver, besides being used for building railways, also had to be used in many other places: military expenses, education, official salaries, road construction in various prefectures and counties, and workshops to be established for the reforms. All of this made the national treasury stretched thin.

Princess Pingyang frowned. She said, "Your Majesty is happy now. Why do you two bring up such disheartening matters? As for silver, there's always a way to find it. Now, the merchants in Qingzhou Province are all making a lot of money from their trade. It's time they contributed something."

After a pause, Princess Pingyang said to Xiao Ming, “Your Majesty, you are too polite to these merchants. In the past, which merchant didn’t pay annual tributes to the imperial court? But now, they pocket all the silver they earn and even contend with the imperial court for profit. This is unacceptable.”

In fact, like Princess Pingyang, many officials now had some opinions about merchants. After all, Qingzhou Province’s current policies were overly biased towards merchants.

With a light chuckle, Xiao Ming said, “Aunt, those words are incorrect. When the common people are rich, the nation is rich. When merchants are rich, the national treasury is sufficient. The silver in the national treasury now is all from selling steam engines, and that’s all the merchants’ money. Moreover, I have already instructed Li Kaiyuan to regularize commercial taxes and establish a specialized tax office, the Tax Bureau. From now on, they will be responsible for overseeing the collection of taxes from merchants and common people.”

Pang Yukun and Fei Ji immediately smiled upon hearing this. They were just about to bring up this matter, but Xiao Ming had already thought of it ahead of them.

Princess Pingyang nodded in satisfaction. She said, “Your Majesty is wise. Taxation is of paramount importance to the nation. Only with sufficient taxes can the imperial court afford officials, build cement roads and railways, and equip the army with firearms, thereby enabling the Great Yu Empire to defeat the surrounding barbarians and maintain a peaceful and prosperous era.”

“Aunt is absolutely right. I am preparing to reorganize the tax system next,” Xiao Ming mused. The collapse of the Ming Dynasty in contemporary times was largely due to its inability to collect taxes. Eventually, the state couldn’t even afford to support its army, leading to a situation where powerful families were rich, but the nation was poor.

Having learned this lesson, Xiao Ming naturally dared not emulate the Ming Dynasty’s over-indulgence of powerful families and merchants. Once the Tax Bureau was established, merchants would only be able to obtain travel permits for trade after paying their taxes and presenting their tax certificates.

Merchants who evaded or avoided taxes would not only lose their right to do business but also face punishment.

While the group was discussing finding silver to build railways, a sudden cry of surprise rang out not far away.

Xiao Ming and the others looked over and saw two Westerners, one old and one young, walking through the crowd towards them, but they were stopped by guards.

However, the older Westerner seemed very unwilling, continuously speaking to the guard.

“Zhao Long, go ask what’s happening,” Xiao Ming said.

Zhao Long responded and left. A short while later, he returned and reported, “Your Majesty, these two people say they are merchants from the West, and they want to enter Bowen Academy to study.”

“Nonsense! Bowen Academy is not a place they can enter!” Fei Ji was the first to speak. “These people from the surrounding areas always learn our Great Yu Empire’s crafts and then bite us back. They truly fear power but lack virtue. Your Majesty, you absolutely must not let them enter Bowen Academy.”

“I think it would be better to simply expel them from the Great Yu Empire. They are truly bold, daring to disturb the imperial carriage. Are they tired of living?” Princess Pingyang had always disliked people from these foreign lands.

When she was in Chang'an, sometimes Persians would come to Chang'an to trade, and Princess Pingyang would show her hostility towards these people even then.

Xiao Ming looked at the two. Bowen Academy naturally could not be open to them; otherwise, the academy's knowledge would be learned by them, and the technological blockade would become empty talk.

Moreover, the behavior of these two further solidified his thoughts, because at this time, Europe's pursuit of science and technology had reached a fever pitch; science had even become a belief for many.

Their reckless act of forcing their way in further confirmed this.

After a moment of contemplation, he said, "Expel these two from the Great Yu Empire. This is not Europe. In the Great Yu Empire, you must abide by the Great Yu Empire's rules. This is also a warning to all Western merchants in Qingzhou Province."

As he spoke, Xiao Ming considered whether he should also implement a visa system. Before these people entered the Great Yu Empire, he would ask about their purpose for coming. If he discovered impure motives, he would directly block them from entering the country.

After all, these Western vagrants entering the Great Yu Empire could cause considerable harm, whether by acting as spies or stealing technology.

Upon receiving Xiao Ming's order, Zhao Long immediately had the guards expel the two from the Great Yu Empire. From this day forward, the technological blockade would be implemented step by step.

This interlude passed, and the train had already vanished from their sight, continuing northward.

Xiao Ming had intended to ride after it to see, but ultimately abandoned the idea. The locomotive's success was proven the moment it left the station.

Now, he faced the problem of continuously extending this railway, which would require a huge amount of silver.

Thinking of this, Xiao Ming felt somewhat fortunate that he had established the Qingzhou Chamber of Commerce. In the current situation, besides taxing merchants, he also needed to strengthen state-led trade.

This Goryeo business, the Qingzhou Chamber of Commerce would certainly take the lion's share, and the remaining profit could be distributed among the other merchants.

Developing private trade was important, but silver was also crucial for the imperial court. While commerce was still in its infancy, he could only rely on state-led trade to bring ample silver to the national treasury.

Only with ample silver could he solidify the foundation of the Great Yu Empire.

Chapter 756

"The Great Yu Empire's first steam locomotive successfully operated!"

The next day, the Qingzhou Daily used a large headline to report the detailed process of the steam locomotive's trial, and at the same time, it explained to the common people what a steam locomotive was and why it could run without using horses.

The content of the report was personally vetted by Xiao Ming. Yesterday, the steam locomotive caused a huge sensation throughout Qingzhou Province.

For the students who understood some technical principles, this matter was just worth celebrating, but for many still ignorant common people, this steam locomotive was nothing short of ghostly power, terrifying them greatly.

And after the steam locomotive disappeared that day, rumors spread through the streets. Things like sorcery and supernatural powers became popular in the city.

In view of this, he finally ordered the newspaper to explain the matter.

However, for technological secrecy, he only allowed the newspaper to publish some superficial information, without involving the core details.

Now was the critical period for him to begin widening the technological gap with the West, and he could not let Westerners learn all his advancements.

For this purpose, after returning yesterday, he specifically organized the control measures for technological blockade, preparing to thoroughly control the export of technology from now on.

In contemporary times, the West has long imposed a technological blockade on China, only selling relatively backward technological products to China, but never relaxing high-tech export controls to China.

For example, in contemporary America, a committee was specifically formed to review goods for export, completely stopping the export of supercomputers, high-tech telecommunications equipment, semiconductor equipment, and advanced mechanical tools.

Some high-tech fields, such as aviation, communication, automotive, and computer sectors, are still restricted by others. Many large system machines and equipment, down to small components, need to be imported from abroad.

And this was not the worst of it. When Xiao Ming was still in the laboratory, many times the West sold second-rate equipment to laboratories at the price of first-rate equipment, and those first-rate equipment were simply not sold to laboratories by the West.

Sometimes, when imported equipment in the laboratory broke down, Western manufacturers would be invited to repair it. At this time, Western engineers would simply adjust a few parameters on the computer and easily modify it, and the machine would be fixed.

At that time, Xiao Ming, ordered by the laboratory, came to inquire about the method of modifying these parameters. After all, they were not fools; the machine's malfunction was a system error, not hardware damage. However, the other party not only evaded the question but also told him to leave with a very contemptuous tone.

Xiao Ming vividly remembered this humiliating scene. At that time, he and his colleagues in the laboratory were so helpless, yet they still had to pay exorbitant repair fees.

So, although they had the equipment and were engaged in high-tech research, they were essentially working for Westerners; the ones truly making money were them.

Waking from a midnight dream, every time Xiao Ming thought of this, a surge of anger welled up inside him. It was precisely because China missed the Age of Discovery and practiced isolationism that it fell so far behind in technology.

The consequence of this was the inability to master advanced technology, leading to being constrained everywhere from then on. High patent fees, management fees, and maintenance fees were a heavy burden on any industry.

Having suffered enough from technological hardship in contemporary times, he naturally did not want to return to such an era.

At this time, in the study, besides him, there were also Lin Wentao, Chen Qi, Song Changping, and Lu Tong, officials in charge of technology.

After examining his written technological blockade plan, he handed it to Lin Wentao.

“Listen, technology is the most important wealth for the Great Yu Empire, and it is the foundation for the Great Yu Empire to surpass surrounding countries. Therefore, there must be no leakage of important technology to other countries. From today onwards, you will jointly establish the Great Yu Empire Technology Review Department. You will register all existing machinery in the Great Yu Empire, verify its quantity among the common people, and at the same time, create a list of goods strictly forbidden from being sold to Western merchants.”

Lin Wentao and the others looked solemn, as Xiao Ming's expression was even more serious than theirs.

"Your Majesty, I believe secrecy is important, but some backward technologies can be sold to Western merchants to earn silver for researching higher technologies," Lin Wentao said, having roughly glanced at the content.

Xiao Ming did not negate Lin Wentao's idea. He said, "You are right, but before selling, you must ensure a two-generation technological gap."

"Yes, Your Majesty." Lin Wentao nodded.

After instructing these technical backbone personnel to establish a review department, Xiao Ming dismissed them and then summoned Pang Yukun to the study.

The technological blockade involved many aspects, and Lin Wentao and the others could only cover one aspect.

In addition, the most difficult to control was the leakage of secrets by students. If these mature knowledge systems were leaked to the West, it would be far more serious than losing a steam engine.

Therefore, he planned to have Pang Yukun promulgate another law, the "Great Yu Empire Secrecy Act." This act would clearly stipulate that leaking state secrets was illegal.

The promulgation of this law was to sound the alarm for the students, making them safeguard secrets.

Of course, Xiao Ming was well aware that even with this, it would be impossible to completely prevent technological leaks. In contemporary times, with surveillance everywhere, espionage cases still occurred, let alone in the 18th century, where information was scarce and management was difficult.

Although his secret guards were a monitoring department, they could only keep an eye on important figures. He could not have the secret guards watch everyone, nor could it be done, as the number of secret guards was limited and there weren't enough for one per person.

"After this law is promulgated, it is crucial to inform the students, and also publish it in the newspaper so that merchants and common people can understand some aspects of the secrecy law."

Handing the complete secrecy act to Pang Yukun, Xiao Ming said thoughtfully.

Pang Yukun nodded upon hearing this. This secrecy law was very beneficial for the security of the Great Yu Empire. Besides technological secrecy, it also contained regulations concerning official secrets.

Receiving the act, he sighed in admiration. In the past two years, Xiao Ming had written many laws, and these laws were very detailed and comprehensive; some aspects were even beyond what he had imagined.

It was precisely because of this that he had always held Xiao Ming in great respect.

“Your old servant will go back and disseminate this law to all the provinces,” Pang Yukun said.

After a pause, he added, “Your Majesty, this year’s spring plowing is about to begin. I had officials from Bashu send a batch of phosphate rock to Qingzhou Province, hoping the common people can try the effects of this fertilizer.”

“Oh? Is that so? You are quite impatient.” Xiao Ming chuckled. Pang Yukun had always attached great importance to farming. He had mentioned chemical fertilizer last time, and now this fellow couldn’t wait.

So he said, “Then I will personally teach you how to produce chemical fertilizer tomorrow.”

Pang Yukun’s face immediately lit up with joy upon hearing this.

Chapter 757

A gentle breeze rustled, and green waves rippled.

Another season of warm spring and blooming flowers made the outskirts of Qingzhou City as beautiful as a painting.

The next morning, Xiao Ming, along with Pang Yukun and three to five Qingzhou officials, headed north along the cement road extending from Qingzhou Province.

Along the way, Xiao Ming enjoyed the beautiful scenery on both banks, feeling joyful. At this moment, the spring light was brilliant, there wasn't a single cloud in the sky, and the sky was as blue as a gemstone.

And under the clear sky, the visibility was excellent, allowing him to see very far.

Both sides of the cement road were mostly wildflowers and dense bushes. Many plants rarely seen in modern times were abundant here.

"Your Majesty, this cement road has now been built from Qingzhou City to the county towns below, and a part of it has even reached the villages. The other five prefectures outside Qingzhou have also begun laying cement roads and constructing urban road pipelines. Because of this, quite a few cement workshops have sprung up in the six prefectures, making some merchants rich again," Pang Yukun said to Xiao Ming as they walked.

This time, Xiao Ming did not ride in a carriage but walked with Pang Yukun and the others. He came from modern times and was not so delicate; sometimes he liked to act on impulse.

"However, this extensive construction has indeed cost a lot of silver," Zhan Xingchang sighed. "Now, besides roads, various prefectures and counties also need to build water conservancy projects. Every task to be done requires silver."

Xiao Ming smiled wryly, "Now, the people I fear seeing most are you. Every time you open your mouth, it's about silver."

"Your Majesty, we are also helpless. Now, military expenses account for the majority of the national treasury's expenditure, so naturally, there is less silver for other areas. This will slow down the pace of reform implementation," Zhan Xingchang shook his head.

Pang Yukun said nothing. He and Xiao Ming had already spoken enough, but this was the situation the Great Yu Empire was facing now.

“Therefore, I am also trying to find a solution. This situation will severely delay the implementation of reforms, which is absolutely unacceptable. However, military expenses cannot be reduced. Now, we are surrounded by powerful enemies, and one small mistake could lead to eternal damnation,” Xiao Ming said slowly.

Pang Yukun nodded, “You don’t need to trouble Your Majesty with this anymore. Your Majesty is already worried about this matter.”

Xiao Ming then suddenly chuckled. He said to the officials, “You all needn’t worry. I already have a way to generate wealth. The imperial treasury will be overflowing in just a few years.”

Zhan Xingchang and the others immediately showed relieved expressions. They now blindly trusted this Emperor, because Xiao Ming had already created many miracles.

The group chatted and laughed as they walked north. Gradually, a faint stench wafted over, growing heavier and heavier.

Pang Yukun’s face showed discomfort. “Your Majesty, this place is truly filthy. Your Majesty should wait here; we will go.”

“There’s no need for that. If you can go, so can I.” With that, Xiao Ming walked directly off the cement road and towards the septic tank not far away.

Zhan Xingchang and Pang Yukun exchanged glances, their expressions filled with admiration. This place was rarely set foot in even by officials, yet Xiao Ming, disregarding his dignity, personally went.

The fertilizer Xiao Ming wanted Pang Yukun to manufacture this time was not chemical fertilizer in the modern sense. It was actually a kind of indigenous compound fertilizer made by traditional methods, and its production required phosphate rock.

When Xiao Ming paved the cement roads in Qingzhou Province last time, he also took the opportunity to reorganize the city’s sewage pipes, channeling all the city’s wastewater into the septic tank outside the city.

His purpose at the time was to one day produce indigenous chemical fertilizer, because modern chemical fertilizer could not be produced without electricity and corresponding equipment.

Upon reaching the destination, the production team leaders from seventeen nearby villages in Qingzhou Province were already waiting for him.

Seeing Xiao Ming personally arrive, they were greatly astonished and bowed to Xiao Ming one after another.

This time, Fan Zeng also came along. Pang Yukun said to him, “You must record this event today. Publish it in the newspaper tomorrow, so the common people will know how diligently Your Majesty governs and loves his people.”

“That is natural,” Fan Zeng said with a smile.

Everyone had arrived. Xiao Ming no longer wasted time. The spring plowing was about to begin, and they needed to seize this opportunity to promote indigenous chemical fertilizer.

In the villages of the Great Yu Empire, almost every household had its own latrine. As long as they mastered this method, they would no longer have to worry about fertilizer.

Facing the crowd, Xiao Ming then had the seventeen team leaders personally follow his method.

First, Xiao Ming had them crush the phosphate rock, then sift it.

Afterward, he had them collect an equal amount of fermented manure from the fertilizer pond, mix it evenly with the crushed phosphate rock in a one-to-one ratio, and pile it into a conical shape.

Then, he had them tightly seal the fertilizer with a three-centimeter thick layer of thin mud, and let it sit for seven days. After seven days, they could remove the fertilizer from it for use.

The fertilizer at this time was a compound fertilizer among indigenous fertilizers. This fertilizer was complete in elements and could be used at every stage of crop growth.

Although this fertilizer could not reach the standard of modern chemical fertilizer, it was enough to give a piece of land lasting fertility.

After all, in ancient times, many lands were obtained by burning forests. These farmlands would experience reduced yields once their fertility was exhausted.

“These fertilizers must first be used on high-yield crops like potatoes and sweet potatoes,” Xiao Ming said to Pang Yukun after teaching the method of producing indigenous chemical fertilizer.

After a pause, he continued, “Qingzhou Province experiences many droughts, and corn is very drought-resistant, suitable for planting in Qingzhou. For the past few years, Kui Wu has been breeding, and now he has accumulated quite a few corn seeds. This year, choose a few villages to plant them.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Pang Yukun responded. He then said, “Your Majesty, I believe it is now time to abolish the village chiefs. The village production teams have basically replaced the position of village chiefs, and allowing these village chiefs to continue existing is rather a burden. Moreover, the village chiefs are inherently the foundation of powerful families. Only by thoroughly eliminating governance by local gentry can we prevent the resurgence of powerful families.”

Xiao Ming deeply agreed. The taxation of prefectures and counties outside Qingzhou Province and Youzhou Province still relied on these so-called local gentry.

And the source of these local gentry were the local powerful families. Because they were numerous and influential, the local gentry chosen had authority.

These local gentry filled the void of imperial court authority at the grassroots level, becoming the actual managers of the villages. When they encountered virtuous individuals, they could be called local gentry, but when they encountered evildoers, they became village tyrants.

The foundation of feudal dynasties was sometimes destroyed by these self-serving individuals. Therefore, to prevent this situation from happening again, Xiao Ming established institutions like production teams, precisely to eliminate the growth of clan power.

“Since it’s a reform, it will inevitably infringe upon the interests of some people, and sometimes bloodshed is inevitable. You may act boldly in this matter; I will support you,” Xiao Ming said calmly.

Pang Yukun’s expression was moved. Xiao Ming’s words were enough.

Chapter 758

Haigucheng.

Liang Dahai had posted notices for recruiting artisans throughout the city, and at the same time, he hired Goryeo people to spread this news everywhere within Goryeo territory.

A month had passed since the signing of the “Haigucheng Treaty,” and in this month, he had been thriving in Goryeo. Now, Goryeo officials also treated him with utmost respect.

However, it was also because of this treaty that the number of merchants in Haigucheng suddenly increased. Now, the streets of Haigucheng were filled with Great Yu Empire merchants.

And some merchants even began to buy street-facing shops in Haigucheng for their own use and started to make contact with Goryeo merchants.

These unusual circumstances made him realize that the contents of the Haigucheng Treaty must have already spread in Qingzhou Province, otherwise these merchants wouldn't have come sniffing around.

As he was watching these merchants with hostility, Ye Qingyun arrived beside him, protected by two soldiers.

"Liang Dahai, why are you wandering alone on the street? Don't you know that Great Yu Empire merchants in Haigucheng are being attacked by Goryeo people?" Ye Qingyun frowned.

After the "Haigucheng Treaty" was signed, Haigucheng appeared calm, but in the shadows, some Goryeo people hostile to the Great Yu Empire were seeking opportunities for revenge.

During this period, some merchants had their property stolen, and some were even directly assassinated.

This situation naturally gave him, the de facto ruler of Haigucheng, a headache. Now he realized that occupying a foreign city was not easy.

"Who dares!" Liang Dahai grinned, the scar on his face exceptionally terrifying. "These Goryeo only dare to bully unarmed merchants. When they meet me, they'll just piss their pants in fear."

Ye Qingyun shook his head. "You're right. If every merchant were like you, I wouldn't have such a headache every day, alas."

“Shouldn’t Li Cheng-jae be handling this matter?” Liang Dahai looked puzzled, seeing Ye Qingyun’s furrowed brow.

“That’s true, but Li Cheng-jae has no soldiers at his disposal, so I had to come. After all, I’m free anyway. Oh, by the way, how is your artisan recruitment going?” Ye Qingyun asked.

At the mention of this, Liang Dahai looked troubled. “Six thousand people have already been sent off. We still need to recruit twenty-four thousand more to finish.”

Ye Qingyun, hearing this, suddenly felt that his task was much easier than Liang Dahai’s.

As the two were speaking, a soldier walked towards them and said to Ye Qingyun, “General, the Qingzhou merchants have arrived.”

“They’ve finally come. If they didn’t, this place would be filled by other merchants,” Ye Qingyun said.

Liang Dahai then said, “I wonder who has arrived. Now I have a companion in Haigucheng.”

With that, the two went to the Haigucheng Official Residence, which was the temporary institution they had established in Haigucheng.

Upon arriving at the official residence, a slightly portly figure appeared beside the two. Ye Qingyun and Liang Dahai immediately smiled and said, "Chairman Li personally coming to Haigucheng shows how highly His Majesty values Goryeo."

The newcomer was none other than Li Kaiyuan. With Goryeo officially opening trade ports and its market opening to the Great Yu Empire, there was no reason for the Chamber of Commerce not to participate.

"That's natural. Merchants coming to Goryeo this time must have a travel permit from the Chamber of Commerce. So, General Ye, I hope you can expel any merchants without a permit from Haigucheng, lest it cause dissatisfaction among other merchants," Li Kaiyuan said.

Merchants sought profit. Some merchants were already impatient even before the Goryeo situation was settled, and that was unacceptable to him.

The Emperor had personally told him before his departure that the actions of merchants must be restrained by the imperial court.

"Do you have an imperial edict?" Ye Qingyun would not mobilize troops based on Li Kaiyuan's mere words. The army had its own rules.

"Of course I do. And this time, I've also brought you two a surprise." With that, Li Kaiyuan handed a newspaper to Ye Qingyun.

Ye Qingyun and Liang Dahai exchanged glances. Their eyes immediately widened as they looked at the newspaper's front page, exclaiming, "The steam locomotive is running!"

“That’s right. His Majesty specifically had me bring you this news,” Li Kaiyuan said. Currently, the hottest topic in Qingzhou Province was the steam locomotive, so much so that Xiao Ming’s promotion of chemical fertilizer among the common people had not caused any ripple.

Liang Dahai’s purpose in coming this time to conscript laborers was to build railways. He naturally understood steam locomotives. Holding the newspaper, he read it repeatedly, smiling broadly.

Then he slapped his thigh, “I must complete this labor recruitment as soon as possible, otherwise, it would be my fault if the railway laying is delayed.”

Ye Qingyun, on the other hand, read with great interest. As a military man, he naturally thought of war. “This thing runs faster than horses, and it can run day and night. This means it will only take a day or two from Qingzhou Province to Youzhou Province. More importantly, this thing can also transport grain and fodder, which will greatly reduce the number of commoners we need to conscript for logistics every time we fight a war.”

Li Kaiyuan nodded repeatedly. As discussed with Qingzhou officials and merchants, this steam locomotive was an omnipotent tool for the Great Yu Empire. Ordinary common people, merchants, and the army could all use it.

After excitedly talking about the steam locomotive for a while, Li Kaiyuan showed a mischievous smile. This time, His Majesty also had him bring a good money-making toy to Goryeo.

“What is it?” The two asked simultaneously. Their days in Haigucheng were truly boring, so they wanted to know everything.

Li Kaiyuan slowly said, "His Majesty wants me to open a large casino in Haigucheng and introduce some novel games there. I've brought all the necessary items this time. Once we find a location, we can open it to Goryeo's merchants and nobles."

Liang Dahai was a slave trafficker and naturally indulged in eating, drinking, and gambling. He had also looked for casinos when he arrived in Haigucheng. So he said, "What a coincidence! There's a large gambling house in the middle of Haigucheng. Its owner fled during the Battle of Haigucheng. Now, this gambling house is empty; it's perfect for a casino."

Ye Qingyun also remembered. He said, "Indeed. This gambling house was formerly the private property of an official in Haigucheng. Now, it's ours."

Li Kaiyuan's expression was excited. His purpose for coming this time was to plunder as much wealth as possible from Goryeo. Selling goods was one way, and lucrative industries like gambling naturally could not be neglected.

So he said, "If that's the case, the Chamber of Commerce will requisition this gambling house. I've brought all the people needed to run the gambling house this time. We must make this gambling house the number one gambling house in Goryeo, bringing a continuous flow of silver to the Great Yu Empire. His Majesty said, 'There's no harm in trapping Goryeo's silver.'"

Having settled this matter, Li Kaiyuan began to prepare for the large casino. In just four or five days, the games he had learned from Xiao Ming astonished Goryeo's gamblers.

Hwang Byung-ahn, the son of Hwang Ja-man, the Left State Councilor of Ryukyo City, was a well-known fop in Ryukyo City.

Like the Great Yu Empire, the fops living in Ryukyo City usually had a fondness for gambling. Hwang Byung-ahn was a master gambler in Ryukyo City, a prime minister among cricket fighting enthusiasts.

Two days ago, a merchant from Haigucheng spoke of many new and curious gambling games in Haigucheng. He was like a bear smelling honey, his heart itching with unbearable desire to try them.

Although he didn't know much about Haigucheng, Hwang Byung-ahn understood a few things. Now that Goryeo and the Great Yu Empire had signed a treaty, and the two countries were officially at truce, he wasn't afraid to gamble in Haigucheng.

After all, many Goryeo merchants had traveled to Haigucheng during this period and returned safely.

So this time, he simply changed into merchant attire and came to this gambling house to see for himself, and he specifically brought a lot of silver by carriage.

Upon arriving in Haigucheng, Hwang Byung-ahn had a meal at a restaurant. After eating and drinking his fill, he descended the stairs with his round belly. Surrounded by his guards, he turned a few corners and entered the gambling house in the center of Haigucheng.

"Esteemed guest, please come in! Please come in!" A waiter stood at the entrance of the large gambling house. Seeing Hwang Byung-ahn's luxurious attire and accompanying guards, he thought this was a wealthy family and quickly greeted him.

Ever since this large gambling house began operating, its business had been booming day by day. Now, every merchant and traveler coming to Haigucheng knew that a novel Great Yu Empire gambling house had opened in Haigucheng. Whenever they earned some spare money, some merchants would come here to squander a bit.

Most importantly, the gambling methods used here were unprecedented, which quickly attracted those addicted to gambling, because it was not just about money; it also offered complete entertainment and relaxation.

Sticking his head inside, Hwang Byung-ahn saw it was packed with people. Shouts and cheers continuously emanated from within. Every table was completely surrounded.

Seeing Hwang Byung-ahn's appearance, the waiter immediately understood. He said, "Esteemed guest, this must be your first time here, right? Then I'll give you a suggestion: first watch a few rounds inside to learn, then place your bets, otherwise, it's very easy to lose money."

Hwang Byung-ahn was a very prideful person. In Ryukyo City, there was nothing he couldn't play, but here, he was treated like a bumpkin. He said, "I... I'm just waiting for my servant to bring the money."

The waiter used to be a servant in a gambling house in the Great Yu Empire; he had seen all kinds of people, and there were many prideful ones.

Soon, the servant who had arranged the horses rushed over and found Hwang Byung-ahn waiting at the entrance of the large gambling house, handing him a bag of one hundred taels of broken silver.

Hwang Byung-ahn, feeling he had lost face, deliberately flaunted the silver in front of the waiter, then entered the large gambling house haughtily, leaving the waiter quite bewildered.

Striding grandly into the large gambling house, Hwang Byung-ahn's arrival merely caused the gamblers surrounding the tables to glance back at him. Then he was completely ignored, unable to find any of the prestige he held in Ryukyo City.

Snorting, Hwang Byung-ahn decided not to bother with these merchants. Besides, this was Haigucheng, not Ryukyo City, and no one recognized him anyway.

After lingering in front of several gambling tables for a while, Hwang Byung-ahn was attracted by a game called Texas Hold'em poker. He stood fixedly by the table, staring intently at the dealer dealing cards, finding it fascinating. At this moment, he completely forgot he was a noble and mingled with these gamblers.

"This Texas Hold'em is essentially about whose hand is bigger. Everyone has to put in a small ante before the cards are dealt..."

A Great Yu Empire merchant was beside Hwang Byung-ahn. After the large gambling house opened, he came here almost every day to play a few rounds of Texas Hold'em.

He didn't bet big. At his unluckiest, he lost a thousand taels of silver in a day, and when lucky, he could win a few hundred taels. He saw Hwang Byung-ahn standing beside him, continuously watching him deal and discard cards, so he began to explain in detail how to play Texas Hold'em.

In the past few days, more and more newcomers like Hwang Byung-ahn had arrived, and experienced players like him were happy to teach, as the more people came, the livelier it became.

Hwang Byung-ahn nodded repeatedly as he listened to the explanation. After basically understanding the gameplay of Texas Hold'em, he had his servants buy chips and began to try playing. But he was a novice after all and didn't understand the essence of Texas Hold'em.

This game was about who was better at bluffing and who had higher psychological resilience. Hwang Byung-ahn, however, only bet according to the size of his cards: if he had good cards, he bet big; if small, he simply folded.

After a few rounds, the gamblers at this table understood his pattern: whenever he bet big, others wouldn't bet, and in the end, he didn't win any money; he actually lost his ante.

Seeing Hwang Byung-ahn becoming more and more engrossed in the game, the Great Yu Empire merchant beside him instigated, "To play this, you need to be bolder. You're not going to be a sore loser, are you?"

Hwang Byung-ahn was accustomed to acting arrogant in Ryukyo City. Whatever he played, he played to the fullest. How could he tolerate such words? He angrily said, "My family's silver is enough to buy half of Haigucheng."

The Great Yu Empire merchant's eyes lit up. He was actually a gambler and also an accomplice planted by Li Kaiyuan, specifically to make these Goryeo merchants and nobles lose more money.

He said, "I was truly impolite. Come, I'll teach you how to play."

Hwang Byung-ahn's spirits became increasingly high, and he gradually became completely engrossed, unable to move until dusk, when the gambling house closed due to curfew. Only then did he reluctantly leave.

The next day, he hastily ate breakfast and rushed to the large gambling house to continue playing cards. This time, his carriage carried thousands of taels of silver; he was determined to gamble to his heart's content.

However, the Great Yu Empire merchant saw that Hwang Byung-ahn had to retrieve silver from his carriage every time, which sparked an idea. So he said, "Young Master Hwang, it's so troublesome to retrieve silver every time. Why not send your silver directly to the Qingzhou Bank in Haigucheng? That way, you can exchange your silver for banknotes; how convenient!"

Hwang Byung-ahn had good luck today, winning several hundred taels of silver. He thought about it carefully, and indeed, it was true. Every time he lost money, he always had to wait for his servants to fetch silver, which was very inconvenient.

Moreover, in the past two days of gambling, he had seen banknotes occasionally appear on the table, proving that these banknotes could be used in the casino. So he said, "Alright, I'll send someone to exchange it now."

While the Great Yu Empire merchant was coaxing Hwang Byung-ahn, Li Kaiyuan stood on the second floor, observing everything.

The gambling house was small, and the business was small, but controlling Goryeo's finance was a major matter. The Great Yu Empire's finance was hidden behind the gambling house and trade this time.

While establishing the gambling house, he also brought the Qingzhou Bank to Goryeo. In his and Xiao Ming's plan, all of Goryeo's silver would eventually flow through their bank.

Chapter 760

In the bustling casino, Goryeo merchants and nobles shuttled back and forth, curses, laughter, and exclamations interwoven, creating an extraordinary clamor.

Li Cheng-jae appeared beside Li Kaiyuan at this moment. He looked at Hwang Byung-ahn and said, "Chairman Li, this person is Hwang Byung-ahn, the eldest son of the Goryeo State Councilor Hwang Jaman. His father holds a high and influential position in Goryeo, and is one of the King of Goryeo's most trusted high-ranking officials."

"Is that so? That's a big fish indeed," Li Kaiyuan narrowed his eyes. Although Goryeo was defeated, the Great Yu Empire currently only controlled Haigucheng and Bisa Castle.

The true controller of this land was still the King of Goryeo. There were some matters where they still needed the King of Goryeo's assistance.

For instance, the matter of trade. The merchants in Haigucheng seemed busy now, but in reality, they had not touched the core of true trade.

Like the Great Yu Empire, Goryeo was also a feudal dynasty. Many trades required the approval of the imperial court.

Precisely because of this, he was in no rush. In his opinion, it would be simpler to participate in Goryeo's trade in his capacity as an official.

Li Cheng-jae had basically figured out the Great Yu Empire's objective during this period, which was commerce. Now, Li Kaiyuan being so interested in this Hwang Byung-ahn must also be for business.

So he said, "All Goryeo maritime trade requires the approval of this person's father. As long as Chairman Li can bribe him, Chairman Li can conduct Goryeo's trade however he wishes."

Li Kaiyuan had only brought Li Cheng-jae over to confirm Hwang Byung-ahn's identity. In fact, when Hwang Byung-ahn entered Haigucheng, he had already been targeted by the secret guards.

While the two were speaking, Wang Xuan rose from a gambling table and walked towards them.

Li Kaiyuan, seeing this, dismissed Li Cheng-jae and then smiled at Wang Xuan. "The intelligence your secret guards provided this time is good. This Hwang Byung-ahn is indeed the son of the Goryeo State Councilor."

After Haigucheng was captured, Wang Xuan arrived here. His purpose was to establish a pro-Great Yu Empire faction of officials in the Goryeo court.

Before the Golden Tent Khanate fell, Goryeo was not yet a vassal state of the Great Yu Empire, and the Great Yu Empire could not directly command the King of Goryeo.

However, having worked so hard to conquer Goryeo, business could not be delayed. So Xiao Ming ordered him and Li Kaiyuan to take the lead, with Ye Qingyun assisting in bribing the Goryeo court, to maximize the Great Yu Empire's commercial interests.

Wang Xuan smiled, "My subordinates are always meticulous; they rarely make mistakes. Now, how do you plan to deal with this Hwang Byung-ahn?"

"Our true objective is to control Hwang Ja-man, Hwang Byung-ahn's father. However, this Hwang Ja-man is neither addicted to women nor greedy for money, making him very difficult to deal with. His only weakness is this son," Li Kaiyuan said.

Wang Xuan nodded. All this information was provided by him to Li Kaiyuan, and even the merchant who lured Hwang Byung-ahn was arranged by him.

Sometimes, it must be said that under the lure of generous profits, there were always merchants willing to take risks. During this period, the secret guards bribed quite a few Goryeo merchants.

The price was a promise to support these merchants to become the foremost magnates in Goryeo, and also to provide them with security protection.

Now, these merchants, whose heads were turned by silver, had moved to live in Haigucheng. They were only waiting for the arrival of the Great Yu Empire's trade ships, so they could sell these goods throughout Goryeo.

"If that's the case, then let him play here for a few days, and then let him lose all his family's wealth," Wang Xuan said with a slightly malicious smile.

The secret guards were an organization operating in the shadows. Sometimes, they had to use unscrupulous means to bribe officials.

Then he showed a playful expression and said, "This casino's games are certainly novel enough, but I always feel something is missing. To make Goryeo's powerful elite and merchants addicted to this, it's probably not enough."

Li Kaiyuan showed a displeased expression. "You, the secret guard commander, are even prying into my affairs now. You're right, there won't be a shortage of novelties in this gambling house, and all of these were given to me by the Emperor."

Wang Xuan, now addicted to gossip due to being a secret guard, asked excitedly, "What is it?"

Li Kaiyuan recalled for a moment. He couldn't help but admire the Emperor's whimsical ideas. So he said, "The Emperor said he wants me to select some beautiful women in Goryeo, have these women wear alluring clothes to accompany these gamblers, and also build a kitchen in the casino to bring over the Great Yu Empire's stir-fried dishes. Besides that, there's the most important thing: tobacco and opium."

"I've heard of tobacco, but what is this opium?" Wang Xuan heard of it for the first time.

"I had never heard of it before either. It was His Majesty who told me about it when he came. He said that on Ryukyu Island, there are Dutchmen who brought tobacco leaves from North America, and also something about Indian pipes..."

While the two were discussing these casino anecdotes, Xiao Ming was in the study of the Qingzhou temporary palace, playing with a tobacco pipe and a packet of tobacco leaves.

These two items were among the gifts sent by the Dutch delegation last time.

At that time, after Qian Dafu put these things away, he didn't inquire further until a few days ago when he suddenly remembered the matter and unexpectedly discovered these items, which shocked him considerably.

It was then that he recalled the origin of tobacco and opium.

Tobacco, like potatoes and sweet potatoes, was never indigenous to Asia.

In the Ming Dynasty era, the Dutch first introduced North American Indian pipes along with tobacco leaves to the Great Ming through Ryukyu.

From then on, the Great Ming Dynasty had its first batch of smokers. At that time, the speed and widespread nature of tobacco's spread terrified Emperor Chongzhen of the Great Ming Dynasty, who then issued a ban on tobacco.

Because at that time, there was no distinction between tobacco and opium, opium was mixed with tobacco for smoking, causing symptoms of addiction.

However, Emperor Chongzhen did not expect that the prohibition of tobacco would instead lead to the spread of opium in the Great Ming Dynasty, causing its widespread dissemination.

Officials at the time had pointed out the harm of opium, stating that unless the users were killed, they could not be cured.

The “Daming Huidian” (Compendium of the Great Ming) also recorded the tribute of opium from Asian vassal states to the Ming imperial family at that time.

At that time, the kings of Siam, Java, and Bengal regularly dispatched tribute missions to the Great Ming Dynasty, and opium was among the tribute items, though it was then called “black incense.”

Siam would offer two hundred jin to the Great Ming Emperor and one hundred jin to the Empress each time. However, this amount could not satisfy the imperial family’s needs, and the Emperor even had to send eunuchs to seek out and purchase opium everywhere.

And the price of opium at that time was basically equivalent to gold: one tael of gold for one tael of opium.

This suggests that the Ming imperial family at the time was already suspected of using opium. The famous Wanli Emperor of the Great Ming Dynasty was reportedly said to have opium as an ingredient in his alchemical concoctions.

However, at this time, due to the high cost of opium, it was primarily consumed by the powerful elite and wealthy merchants. The spread of opium among the common people was negligible until the late Qing Dynasty, when opium became cheap, leading to its widespread consumption.