

I. Dynasty 861

Chapter 861

“Your Majesty, this bicycle is truly interesting! With one pedal, a person goes dozens of meters, and even riding for several li doesn’t make one tired. I, your old servant, have lived for so long and this is the first time I’ve seen such a miraculous thing.”

In the imperial study, Pang Yukun and Fei Ji stood before Xiao Ming. After reporting some government affairs, they continuously praised the wonders of the bicycle.

Fei Ji, meanwhile, was even more direct. “I, your old servant, am old now. Every time I go to and from court, I still walk. If I had a bicycle to commute, it would be truly wonderful.”

Xiao Ming reviewed the memorials they submitted. Today, they were all minor matters. He picked up his fountain pen, casually sketched a few marks, and returned the memorials to the two.

At this point, he looked at the two, feeling somewhat amused. Niu Ben had left the imperial study just twenty minutes ago, and the two had arrived before he returned to the imperial harem. They were truly punctual.

“Elder Fei, didn’t you often say that walking can exercise the body? How come today you find it tiring?” Xiao Ming teased. He already understood the two’s meaning.

Fei Ji sighed deeply, “Your Majesty, I, your old servant, am indeed growing older by the day, and my body is following suit. This body-strengthening by walking is more suitable for Senior Grand Secretary Pang.”

Pang Yukun's eyes widened upon hearing this. He thought, 'You can't use me as a shield too!' So he said, "Your Majesty, I am also no longer young. Although I am younger than Elder Fei, my physical needs are incomparable. My body is not necessarily stronger than his."

Xiao Ming was already accustomed to the two's mutual teasing. So he said, "Alright, I understand what you mean. However, the number of these bicycles is limited. I cannot give one to every official. You go back and tell the officials not to be jealous. If they want a bicycle, they must work diligently for me. Only those who pass the annual performance review will have a chance to get one. Of course, there's another way: they can buy one with their own silver, but this bicycle's price is not cheap. I reckon it will cost at least a hundred Golden Dragons per bicycle."

"A hundred Golden Dragon Coins?" Pang Yukun and Fei Ji were surprised.

Ever since the currency reform, the Great Yu Empire, from top to bottom, began using a brand new currency. Because Dragon Coins were cast from real gold and silver, coupled with Confucianism's promotion among the common people, the Dragon Coins were well received. Now, the new currency was already circulating in the market.

And their salaries also began to be paid in Dragon Coins. According to previous standards, a first-rank official's annual salary was three hundred taels of silver, which converted to two thousand Silver Dragon Coins, or two hundred Golden Dragon Coins in the new currency.

One bicycle was basically half of their annual salary. How could they not be surprised? And for ordinary officials, whose annual salary was eighty Golden Dragon Coins, they would need over a year's salary to buy one.

"This price is already very low. Manufacturing bicycles is very troublesome. Just the parts alone require different machine tools to manufacture. However, this is just the initial stage. Once industrial capacity improves in the future, the price of bicycles will naturally decrease."

Xiao Ming still remembered that in the 1970s, a bicycle cost around one hundred and twenty yuan. At that time, factory workers' wages were only twenty yuan, so buying a bicycle would also cost half a year's wages.

So now, the Great Yu Empire's prices and wage levels were somewhat similar to that era. However, due to the relatively poor industrial foundation, prices would be higher.

"So that's how it is. This bicycle is indeed very precious," Pang Yukun said.

"Of course! Otherwise, why would I treat it as a reward?" Xiao Ming chuckled. He said, "However, as Grand Secretaries, you both will receive a bicycle. But with a bicycle, you must also learn from Niu Ben and promote the bicycle. If the common people's demand for bicycles is high, I can build more factories." Xiao Ming said with anticipation.

Now that the common people in the north were prosperous, Xiao Ming had to think about promoting consumption. This way, the Great Yu Empire could have sufficient tax revenue, and with tax revenue, he could do more things.

"Thank you, Your Majesty." Pang Yukun and Fei Ji immediately beamed with joy.

Just as the three were speaking, Niu Ben rode his bicycle all the way to his residence. His personal guards, panting, ran behind him.

The common people of Qingzhou Province along the road were astonished. One by one, they stopped and stared blankly at Niu Ben on his bicycle. If it weren't for the increasing number of various machines in Qingzhou Province now, they would surely have thought they saw a ghost in broad daylight.

Niu Ben's face showed a triumphant expression. He was in a good mood. This thing was truly amazing.

And just as Niu Ben rode past stylishly, the common people on the street then saw Fei Ji and Pang Yukun also riding this item, each heading towards their own residences.

"Amazing Great Yu Empire!"

Among the crowd, a pair of fair-haired, blue-eyed Dutch merchants gaped in astonishment. Among the merchants, Branden looked triumphant. He said to the merchants, "I told you, you definitely wouldn't regret coming here. This is a miraculous country."

"I hope this time we can achieve more trade with the Great Yu Empire. The opportunity for the Netherlands' revival is right before us," a merchant said. They were all prominent merchants from mainland Netherlands.

"Believe me, you will not be disappointed. Next, we should go and see Qingzhou Province's steam locomotive," Branden said, a little impatient.

Upon arriving in Qingzhou Province, the Dutch negotiation team, which was permanently stationed in Qingzhou Province, informed him of the changes in Qingzhou Province over the past two years, which excited him for a while.

Currently, the British and Portuguese were targeting Dutch merchant ships everywhere at sea. Their maritime trade was further squeezed. Now, they needed a powerful friend to face the enemy together, and this was one of his purposes for coming here. Of course, being able to purchase some precious goods to take back would be even more wonderful.

A group of thirty-six people walked along the street towards the station in the north of the city. Along the way, Branden was somewhat dumbfounded. Unlike the city layout two years ago, the civilian neighborhoods within Qingzhou Province had been almost completely demolished.

And replacing the civilian neighborhoods were exquisite brick and stone buildings. Some tall buildings even used reinforced concrete. However, these buildings retained the traditional architectural style of the Great Yu Empire, still featuring carved beams and painted pillars.

The former East and West markets of the Great Yu Empire were now agricultural product markets selling chickens, ducks, fish, and vegetables. Shops selling clothes, clocks, and the like were arranged in a specialized area, which merchants called the commercial street.

Besides shops, many trading companies of the Great Yu Empire had also established themselves here. All of this made Branden sigh in admiration. In his opinion, the Great Yu Empire's urban construction had finally made progress.

The group quickly arrived at the station. At this point, a steam locomotive emitted a loud whistle and began to move slowly forward.

And connected behind the steam locomotive were fifty carriages, each twelve meters long, grand like a long dragon.

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“Councilor Branden, this is the Great Yu Empire’s steam locomotive. It’s simply magnificent! How wonderful would it be if we Dutch could build a railway like this?”

Amidst the roar of the steam locomotive, a Dutch merchant said enviously.

Branden’s eyes gleamed. In the past two years, trade between the Netherlands and the Great Yu Empire had only increased. Both sides had gained some trust in each other.

Now, he was here on a mission from Parliament to the Great Yu Empire.

“It will happen in the future, but before that, we need to maintain good relations with the Great Yu Empire,” Branden said. The Netherlands’ foreign trade with the Great Yu Empire made European countries envious.

Besides them, other European countries also wanted to establish relations with the Great Yu Empire, but because these countries did not have strong navies, they could only sigh in despair.

However, this benefited them. Nobles from some countries were trying to purchase goods from the Great Yu Empire through the Netherlands.

“It’s late now. Tomorrow morning, we will seek an audience with the Emperor of the Great Yu Empire. Prepare the documents and strive to achieve more cooperation this time,” Branden’s gaze remained fixed on the steam locomotive.

The other merchants nodded. From the Great Yu Empire to the Netherlands, it took four to five months at the shortest, or half a year at the longest. It was not easy to make the trip, so they could only cherish every opportunity.

As the group marveled at the Great Yu Empire’s steam locomotive, Xiao Ming was receiving members of a research laboratory in the imperial study.

This research laboratory consisted of six people, with the head being named Gao Qian.

“Is this city’s water supply system designed by you?” Sitting in his chair, Xiao Ming turned to the somewhat nervous six individuals.

With Qingzhou Province’s emphasis on technology, various research laboratories, large and small, were now flourishing throughout Bowen Academy. The patent office received all sorts of patents daily.

After six or seven years of cultivation, the talents of the former Bowen Academy began to give back the knowledge they had learned to the Great Yu Empire.

Lin Wentao was indeed a genius, but successors were constantly emerging now. They researched different things from Lin Wentao and were also proving their worth.

“Yes, Your Majesty. In Qingzhou City, from the imperial family down to the common people, everyone uses well water and river water. This is very inconvenient and cannot meet the demands of restaurants. After I, your humble commoner, designed the running water system, many merchants were willing to

invest in its construction. However, I, your humble commoner, believe this water should not be handed over to merchants,” Gao Qian said.

Xiao Ming nodded. The Great Yu Empire had made great strides in military industry over the years, but there were still many shortcomings in daily life. Now, with the increase in industrial capacity, running water should also be put on the agenda.

“Hmm, you did well. In that case, I will give you an imperial edict, ordering you to establish the Great Yu Empire Water Supply Company. The six of you will be responsible for establishing a water supply system for Qingzhou Province.” Having been accustomed to running water in modern times, he was very much looking forward to the running water system.

Historically, after the 16th century, urban water supply in Europe saw considerable development. London was the first to use water pumps. In the 17th-18th centuries, cast iron pipes began to be used. In the early 19th century, Britain pioneered water treatment facilities—sedimentation tanks and sand filters. From the late 19th to early 20th centuries, disinfection measures for urban water supply gradually appeared in Europe.

In China, the first water supply company was established in the late Qing Dynasty, but its purpose was to provide water for extinguishing fires in the Old Summer Palace.

For Xiao Ming, he did not need to start from scratch to develop running water now. Instead, he planned to skip the earlier stages and have running water directly enter sedimentation tanks and sand filter beds.

The only thing was that he could not yet afford to use chlorine for disinfection, as the mass production of chlorine only became possible with the advent of electricity.

Gao Qian and the others were overjoyed upon hearing this. Thus, they, like Lin Wenyun and Lu Tong, smoothly transformed from ordinary students into members of official Great Yu Empire companies.

“Thank you, Your Majesty.” Gao Qian and the others said in unison.

Xiao Ming nodded. He looked at the reciprocating water pump diagram on the blueprint and said, “This water pump design is excellent. I will hand it over to the machinery factory to produce for you.”

The mechanism of this reciprocating water pump was similar to that of a steam engine, consisting of a cylindrical piston, a cylinder, and cast iron pipes. Power was provided by a steam engine.

Because the reciprocating motion of the steam engine perfectly matched the principle of this water pump, its back-and-forth movement caused the air inside the cylinder to approach a vacuum. This way, water was drawn in and then flowed out of the pipe.

So when Xiao Ming saw this design, he was very satisfied, because this reciprocating water pump could be used as a large machine for drawing river water.

“If that’s the case, we will first build the water tower. After all, as I, your humble commoner, understand, when Qingzhou City’s drainage system was first built, space for water pipes was already reserved. From this, it seems Your Majesty is truly far-sighted,” Gao Qian did not forget to flatter.

Xiao Ming chuckled. Qingzhou Province's construction not only reserved space for running water but also for electricity construction. Knowing the development trajectory of technology clearly, he naturally wouldn't do something as foolish as tearing down and rebuilding repeatedly.

"Good, let's do that. As for the construction costs, you can apply to the Grand Secretariat for approval," Xiao Ming said.

Gao Qian thanked him again, then left with the other members.

Qian Dafu then shouted outside, "Next!"

Soon after, three more people entered the imperial study. Like Gao Qian, they were all from research laboratories.

To accelerate the application of various technological items in the Great Yu Empire, Xiao Ming now treated various research laboratories as honored guests.

However, this was not his original creation. In this era, Europe was also like this. Both royalty and nobles were very happy to witness various technological inventions.

"Your Majesty, I, your humble commoner, have brought the plan for biogas streetlights. I hope Your Majesty will review it." The young man wearing the Bowen Academy uniform presented a drawing to Xiao Ming.

“Today, I have gained quite a lot. One is running water, and the other is these biogas streetlights. The biogas digesters outside Qingzhou City can provide biogas. It seems you all put some thought into this,” Xiao Ming said with emotion.

The leading young man said, “Originally, we were researching gas streetlights, but obtaining gas is far simpler than obtaining biogas. So we changed our design to biogas streetlights, though the principle is largely the same.”

“Good. Qingzhou Province is growing more prosperous day by day. It’s time to add some brightness to the nights as well.” He said to the young man, “I approve of this project. Once the silver is approved, you will be responsible for supervising its construction.”

The young man was both happy and disappointed upon hearing this. Clearly, his design was not as important as Gao Qian’s. However, even if he couldn’t join an imperial company like Gao Qian, he could still earn some silver to continue his research.

After collecting himself, he and the other two thanked Xiao Ming.

Noticing the young man’s expression, he said, “Don’t be discouraged. In my opinion, the direction of your research is correct. Both biogas and gas are very important energy sources. Perhaps you can delve deeper into your research. In the future, these things will be no less significant than running water or electricity.”

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Branden looked at the grand imperial palace before him, a look of awe on his face.

His trip to Qingzhou Province yesterday had left him with deep emotions. The Great Yu Empire's changes were simply astonishingly rapid. Qingzhou City now, to him, had completely transformed.

"Councilor Branden, please follow me." Qian Dafu appeared at the palace gate.

Branden had submitted his application to the imperial palace through the Dutch negotiation team stationed in the Great Yu Empire yesterday. This morning, he received a reply.

"Thank you very much." Branden bowed to Qian Dafu and, with reverence, walked into the palace.

Compared to his first visit, this time he had a mission, and it concerned the fate of the Dutch maritime trade routes.

Soon, the two arrived in front of the imperial study. At this point, he saw Xiao Ming, the Emperor of the Great Yu Empire. Compared to two years ago, this young Emperor looked even more like an emperor. Every gesture seemed to convey a will that could not be defied.

"Branden greets the Emperor of the Great Yu Empire."

Entering the imperial study, Branden removed his hat and bowed.

At this time, Xiao Ming was looking at a memorial sent by the Agricultural Department. He looked up and smiled. "Branden? I remember you. You came to Qingzhou Province once two years ago and even bought a steam engine to take back."

“Precisely.” Branden acted cautiously. He said, “If not for the great distance between our two countries, I would be very happy to visit the Great Yu Empire often.”

“That is indeed a pity.” Xiao Ming narrowed his eyes. He said teasingly, “So, what is your purpose for coming to the Great Yu Empire this time?”

Branden liked Xiao Ming’s straightforward nature. It saved him from wasting too many words. He said, “Esteemed Your Majesty, this time I have been sent by the Dutch Parliament once again. I hope to reach more cooperation with the Great Yu Empire at sea. I believe Your Majesty must be aware that British and Portuguese merchant ships have been continuously attacking our respective merchant ships. So, if we cannot provide protection for this shipping route, then our trade will suffer continuous impact.”

Hearing this, Xiao Ming let out a laugh. He said, “Envoy Branden, the British and Portuguese are attacking Dutch merchant ships, not Great Yu Empire merchant ships. You seem to have made a mistake about this.”

Branden choked for a moment. He had indeed been trying to be clever on this matter. In fact, trade between the Netherlands and the Great Yu Empire was basically a trade surplus for the Netherlands.

Every time, Dutch merchant ships purchased goods from the Great Yu Empire and transported them back to Europe. The Great Yu Empire never sent merchant ships to Europe to purchase anything. Even if there were, they were merchants from the south, not controlled by the northern imperial family.

So, along the route from Asia to Europe, they were the ones who continuously suffered losses.

“Your Majesty is right, but after all, we signed a treaty, didn’t we?” Branden reminded him.

“I certainly remember. However, the treaty clearly states that the Great Yu Empire only guarantees the safety of Dutch merchant ships on Asian shipping routes, does it not?”

“Indeed. Therefore, this is my reason for coming to the Great Yu Empire this time. I hope Your Highness can cooperate with our Netherlands.” Branden’s forehead began to sweat. This Emperor of the Great Yu Empire was truly a difficult character to deal with.

Xiao Ming frowned. Although Britain was constantly causing trouble for him behind the scenes, it had not yet explicitly started a war with the Great Yu Empire.

If he rashly took action with the Dutch against the British navy, he would add another battlefield after the three existing ones with the barbarians, Japan, and the State of Chu.

And this was something the Great Yu Empire could not afford. After all, the Great Yu Empire’s civil war could break out at any time.

Most importantly, among the European countries, he truly did not have high hopes for the Netherlands.

According to the news he received from other European merchants, the current Netherlands was Europe’s largest lending nation.

It could be said that the current Netherlands was a treasury guarded by its navy.

The problem, however, was that when the Netherlands lent money to every European country, it also meant it had to maintain good relations with those European countries.

If it went to war with Britain or France, it would mean these European countries would immediately stop paying most of the loan interest, thus causing great harm to its overall prosperity.

The worst problem was that no matter which European country the Netherlands got involved in a war with, it would mean fighting its own debtors.

For this reason, the Dutch avoided full-scale conflict with any single country. However, following the hard truth that “those who owe money are kings,” the lending countries were not at all polite to the Netherlands.

While lending, they continuously created disputes with the Netherlands, which led to the Dutch constantly being drawn into wars, supporting military expenses while also losing huge amounts of interest.

It was said that the Netherlands suffered significant income loss during the French Revolution due to this.

Furthermore, the Netherlands had a small land area, no resources, and insufficient development momentum. On land, it was easily dominated by countries like France, Tsarist Russia, and Prussia. Therefore, relying on the Dutch to be his loyal allies in Europe was completely unreliable.

However, although the Dutch were somewhat in decline during this period, centuries of accumulation still made them a major wealthy power in Europe.

Otherwise, the Netherlands would not be called the world's bank by contemporary Europe.

All these reasons made Xiao Ming only willing to develop economic trade with the Netherlands. Otherwise, he might very likely be betrayed by the Dutch.

However, besides this reason, his rejection of the matter also involved an exchange of interests, so he first tried to suppress Branden.

Like the European countries that urgently needed funds, Xiao Ming also wanted to borrow some money from this wealthy power.

"This is a very risky action. Beyond Malacca lies the dominion of the British Navy. I cannot risk this. Moreover, such a risk is not commensurate with the actual benefits gained," Xiao Ming continued to deny.

Branden was a bit anxious. The gradually declining Netherlands needed cooperation with this Eastern empire. He said, "Esteemed Your Majesty, I know this request is a bit excessive, but this is also for the long-term prosperity of trade between the Great Yu Empire and the Netherlands. To achieve cooperation, we can accept the reasonable demands put forth by the Great Yu Empire."

Xiao Ming's eyes flickered. It seemed the Dutch understood the rules between nations better than he thought. He said, "National interaction is all about interest. It seems you understand this principle. If that's the case, then I will speak. As I understand it, the Netherlands has provided huge loans to Britain, France, and even Tsarist Russia. These loans have greatly promoted the development of these countries. Now, the Great Yu Empire is in ruins, waiting to be rebuilt, and also needs huge funds to support it. Therefore, I wish to borrow ten million ducats from you."

"Borrow? Ten million ducats?" Branden felt a dizzy sensation. The ducat was the current gold coin circulating in the Netherlands. One ducat weighed three grams. Ten million ducats was basically equivalent to six hundred thousand taels of gold. For the Netherlands, this was also a huge loan.

"Esteemed Your Majesty, the amount of this loan is truly enormous. Most importantly, the Netherlands and the Great Yu Empire are so far apart. Guaranteeing repayment is a problem," Branden was a councilor and also a merchant; he was not foolish.

Without a guarantee, he was unwilling to sign such a large order.

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The atmosphere in the imperial study was somewhat awkward.

Branden took a deep breath and said, "Esteemed Your Majesty, ten million ducats is truly beyond the capacity of the Bank of Amsterdam in the Netherlands. After all, we have provided loans to many countries."

"Is that so? Then how much can you provide? It is said that you have many large silver mines in South America." Xiao Ming gazed at Branden.

“Indeed. It seems Your Majesty knows us very well,” Branden said, somewhat surprised. “Five million ducats. We can only provide this much now, after all, transporting this equivalent amount of gold and silver from mainland Netherlands is simply too dangerous.”

Xiao Ming remained silent for a while. This was half the amount, basically equivalent to three hundred thousand taels of gold, or three million taels of silver.

After a pause, he continued, “However, even so, we cannot provide so much real gold and silver. By my estimation, we can only provide one million taels of silver and thirty thousand taels of gold. The rest can only be substituted with goods such as saltpeter, iron ore, rubber, and sulfur.”

“Let’s do it that way!” Xiao Ming readily agreed. For him, the most important issue now was to acquire funds to accelerate domestic construction. If the Netherlands could continuously provide him with funds, the Great Yu Empire’s industrial and commercial development would be even faster.

Branden breathed a sigh of relief upon hearing this. He said, “So, Your Majesty is willing to provide escort for the Dutch merchant fleet?”

“Of course, but this route is not from Malacca to the Netherlands. It’s from here to here!” As he spoke, Xiao Ming walked to the world map and, on the map, drew a line from Ryukyu to Australia, and then from Europe to South America. This was one of the eight major maritime routes in contemporary times.

His choice of this route was not out of fear of the British fleet, but because he wanted to understand this route from Australia to South America through escort. This would prepare for future occupation of Australia and an advance into South America and North America, while also training the Great Yu Empire navy’s deep-sea combat capability.

Branden was dumbfounded. Only then did he notice the huge world map in the imperial study. What surprised him was that this map meticulously marked the world’s geographical locations.

“My God, this is the greatest map I have ever seen,” Branden said in a daze.

Xiao Ming waved his hand in front of Branden, bringing him back to his senses. He said, “This map has eight routes. The British control the first one, and their control over this route is relatively weak. If you agree, I will dispatch a fleet to escort you to a safe area. After all, you can only provide half the loan, so I can only choose the easier one.”

Branden spread his hands helplessly. He seemed to have no other choice, after all, this was indeed a route back. He said, “Alright, it seems this is the only way now.”

“You will also have to bear the escort fees. After all, I will still be paying you interest. Business is business, and no one should suffer a loss,” Xiao Ming added.

Branden had already thought of this. “That’s natural. However, besides escort, we also came this time hoping to deepen commercial ties with your esteemed country. We hope to purchase more goods from the Great Yu Empire, such as steam engines, bearings, white sugar, cotton cloth, silk, and even firearms.”

“I must say, you Dutch have keen insight. These are all the Great Yu Empire’s treasures for national prosperity,” Xiao Ming said, somewhat surprised. “And you also seem to understand the formidable nature of the Great Yu Empire’s firearms.”

Branden spoke truthfully. “Many people know about the Great Yu Empire’s war with the northern nomadic tribes, and they also know about some miraculous weapons on the battlefield. If Your Majesty is willing to sell, we would be very happy to purchase them.”

Nodding slightly, he said, "Of course. You can discuss this matter with Li Kaiyuan. He will tell you what can be sold and what cannot be sold. However, in any case, you must prepare sufficient funds if you wish to purchase these items."

"Yes, Your Majesty." Branden let out a sigh of relief. He was very happy. This time, the Great Yu Empire seemed more open than two years ago, and more willing to participate in overseas trade.

He was both happy and worried about this phenomenon. He was happy that the Netherlands had such a powerful partner in Asia, but worried that the Great Yu Empire's sphere of influence was beginning to expand overseas.

Having settled the loan matter, Branden discussed some more details of cooperation with Xiao Ming before bidding farewell and leaving.

Watching Branden depart, Qian Dafu sighed with emotion, "Your Majesty, this Netherlands is truly wealthy! They casually produced so much gold and silver."

"That's not even much. Branden is very cunning; he's worried that we might default, so he only provided this much in loans. Even if we don't repay, they won't lose too much," Xiao Ming analyzed. "But it doesn't matter. The real profit this time lies in trading with Dutch merchants. He brought quite a few major merchants this time."

"Is Your Majesty truly going to sell Conqueror Muskets, steam engines, and these industrial products to the Dutch?" Qian Dafu asked with some worry.

“If selling one Conqueror Musket allows the Great Yu Empire army to be equipped with a breech-loading rifle, why wouldn’t I? Moreover, Conqueror Muskets have probably already fallen into European hands. In a few more years, they might not be novel anymore. As for the first-generation reciprocating steam engine, of course, I’ll sell it. Only by selling it for money can I research more advanced steam engines.”

Xiao Ming’s expression was excited. Overall, he supported selling these products, because at this point in time, Europe’s industrial capacity was already capable of manufacturing these items. Waiting until they were obsolete would be meaningless.

Of course, he would absolutely not trade certain core technologies, such as industrial mother machines, breech-loading gun technology, and steam locomotives. Maintaining a generational gap had always been his principle.

Meanwhile, Branden breathed a heavy sigh of relief after leaving the imperial palace.

The merchants, who had been waiting outside for a long time, immediately surrounded him, eagerly asking about the results of his audience.

“Thank God! The Emperor of the Great Yu Empire showed astonishing benevolence this time. The shipping route and trade have both succeeded!” Branden laughed loudly.

The other merchants immediately became excited. Yesterday, after wandering around Qingzhou Province, they had roughly planned what they would purchase, but for them, this was not enough.

Because they believed the Great Yu Empire had other goods waiting for them to discover.

A merchant said, "Councilor Branden, we should stay in Qingzhou Province for a few more days to confirm what else we need to buy."

Branden nodded. He also wanted to try riding a steam locomotive. When he left before, he had mentioned this, and the Emperor of the Great Yu Empire had promised to let him ride it when the steam locomotive was test-operated.

For him, this was a significant temptation. He also planned to record this trip to the Great Yu Empire, to give the members of the Dutch Parliament a deeper understanding of the Great Yu Empire.

Chapter 865

In the early morning, with a loud whistle, the entire Qingzhou city was in an uproar.

After two years of construction, the Great Yu Empire's railway lines, extending south to Laiwu, north to Kaiping, and east to Dengzhou, officially opened.

The common people, upon hearing this news, were all overjoyed and flocked to the station to buy tickets, completely surrounding the station.

Xiao Ming and a group of officials also arrived at the scene. Branden also came along.

After staying in Qingzhou for a month, Branden had basically completed his procurement of goods. A total of seventy-five Dutch merchant ships were heading to the Great Yu Empire this time, all fully loaded with goods.

“This time, the Dutch delegation procured one hundred reciprocating steam engines, sixteen thousand Conqueror Muskets, seventy tons of white sugar, three thousand pieces of porcelain, nine thousand bolts of silk, twenty thousand bolts of cotton cloth...” Li Kaiyuan read the Dutch procurement list to Xiao Ming on the platform.

“Get to the point, how much silver in total?” Xiao Ming’s eyes remained fixed on the bustling, crowded station.

“A total of six million Golden Dragons in procurement.” Li Kaiyuan smiled so widely his teeth were visible. This was no small sum.

Xiao Ming nodded in satisfaction. Coupled with the loan obtained from the Netherlands, the Great Yu Empire’s finances were now finally prosperous. Especially the sale of Conqueror Muskets had basically reached a cost equivalent to that of breech-loading rifles.

This way, his army could successfully equip sixteen thousand breech-loading rifles from this transaction, and this did not include the transaction with Li Chuyuan.

“Military hardware and industrial goods are truly profitable!” Xiao Ming exclaimed. He finally understood why contemporary America was so keen on war profiteering; it was indeed addictive.

Branden, standing by, smiled. He could see that this visit greatly pleased the Emperor of the Great Yu Empire.

“Envoy Branden, I hope the friendship between the Great Yu Empire and the Netherlands will last forever,” Xiao Ming said.

Branden was somewhat flattered. "Of course, of course. This is what we also hope for."

As the three spoke, the steam locomotive once again let out a loud whistle. At this point, the common people, holding tickets and forming a long queue, began to board the train in an orderly fashion.

"Your Majesty, it's time to board," Princess Pingyang reminded him.

Xiao Ming nodded, then gestured to Branden. Branden's expression was excited. He straightened his attire and walked towards the locomotive.

"Imperial Father, hurry, hurry!"

Xiao Yi bounced along ahead, looking impatient. To witness this great event, Xiao Ming had brought many people this time: Lu Luo and Ziyuan, Cui Xue'er and Fei Yuer, and of course, the young Xiao Yi.

In addition, all the high-ranking imperial officials were also present: Fei Ji, Pang Yukun, Zhan Xingchang, and even the Kong family father and son, Ge Yiren, and others.

Not only that, the Prince of Yong, the Prince of Huainan and his son, and the Prince of Ruyang and others also came to observe.

For Xiao Ming, this was not just the opening of a railway; it was also an opportunity to display his strength to the outside world.

“Slowly, slowly.” Xiao Ming held Xiao Yi’s hand. As he walked, he said to Princess Pingyang, “The next key task for the Railway Department is to connect the railway lines to Youzhou, Jinzhou, Raozhou, and Liaozhou to the north. Although the barbarians have withdrawn from Guandong, their threat is still significant.”

For Xiao Ming, even without Guandong, the barbarians were still the largest nomadic people in the north. The threat was only relatively reduced, not absolutely.

And after the barbarians, an even more dangerous enemy had already taken root in the vast lands north of Jianzhou: Tsarist Russia.

Previously, due to the barbarians’ obstruction, he could not understand the situation north of Jianzhou. After occupying Jianzhou this time, he immediately ordered a reconnaissance team to search northward.

The news that came back greatly shocked him. Compared to contemporary times, Tsarist Russia’s penetration into Guandong in this era was even deeper. They discovered a Tsarist Russian city three hundred li north of Jianzhou.

This matter drew Xiao Ming’s high attention. He ordered the secret guards to investigate Tsarist Russia’s influence in Siberia and at the same time began to plan for reclaiming Siberian land. The railway was undoubtedly key to this plan.

“Yes, Your Majesty.” Princess Pingyang discerned from Xiao Ming’s serious expression that the matter seemed somewhat grave.

After reminding Princess Pingyang, Xiao Ming entered the steam locomotive. For today’s experience, they had reserved the first five carriages.

Entering the steam locomotive, Xiao Ming felt as if he had instantly returned to contemporary times. Although the steam locomotive was somewhat outdated, many of the carriage’s arrangements were no different from modern ones.

After all, operating a steam locomotive using modern experience would be much simpler.

“Your Majesty, these are the seats,” Princess Pingyang personally introduced to Xiao Ming.

Xiao Ming looked. The seats in the locomotive were metal frames, with new cotton cushions installed on them. Their appearance was similar to the seats of contemporary trains.

In the middle of the seats was a small table, for placing items. Above it were protruding luggage racks, also designed according to contemporary standards.

What pleased Xiao Ming most were the thickened glass windows of the locomotive. Sitting at the table, one could have an unobstructed view of the outside scenery.

“Very good.” Xiao Ming was very satisfied.

Princess Pingyang let out a slight breath of relief. After arranging Fei Yuer and the others to sit down, she said, “Your Majesty, this steam locomotive is equipped with an improved high-temperature, high-pressure steam engine. Its speed can reach ninety kilometers per hour, and its loaded speed can reach about sixty kilometers per hour. So, it only takes about six hours to get from Qingzhou to Dengzhou, after all, the railway takes quite a few detours, and it also needs to add coal and water along the way.”

“Six hours to Dengzhou!” Branden’s mouth hung open in surprise. It had taken him three days to disembark in Dengzhou and then travel to Qingzhou city.

Princess Pingyang said proudly, “I, your princess, never exaggerate. You’ll understand once we reach Dengzhou.”

“Hahaha...” Xiao Ming was in a good mood. He held Xiao Yi and said, “Yi’er, when we reach Dengzhou, Imperial Father will take you to eat the most delicious seafood.”

The officials in the carriage all laughed upon hearing this. At this moment, they were all incredibly excited, because it was simply too incredible.

While everyone was chatting, the locomotive’s departure time arrived. With a loud whistle, the locomotive slowly began to move forward.

“Moving, moving!” Xiao Yi clapped his small hands happily.

Outside the window, the station receded, and a huge cheer erupted from the densely packed platform.

Xiao Ming, sitting by the window, was recognized by the common people. They began to shout, “Long live, long live, long live our Emperor!”

Xiao Ming waved through the train window. Undoubtedly, for the common people of Qingzhou, today was also an inspiring day. The sleeping lion of the Great Yu Empire was finally beginning to awaken.

Amidst the cheers, the locomotive’s speed increased. At this point, the carriage suddenly fell silent. Everyone began to enjoy the scenery along the way, completely engrossed.

Three hours later, the locomotive slowly stopped at Laizhou station. After adding water and coal, it departed again for Dengzhou.

Chapter 866

Yang Chengye had been waiting at the Dengzhou railway station since noon.

With him were the officials, large and small, of Dengzhou prefecture. According to the predetermined plan, the train for the first railway trial operation would arrive at three o’clock in the afternoon.

And the Emperor and a group of high-ranking imperial officials would arrive in Dengzhou by train.

The season had already entered winter, and the officials shivered from the cold wind, but even so, all the officials maintained a good appearance.

Yang Chengye was very strict in managing his subordinates. The officials in Dengzhou's official circles held him in some awe. Especially since Yang Chengye was now at the threshold of entering the Grand Secretariat, officials dared not be careless.

"They're here! They're here!"

As everyone eagerly awaited, a white plume of smoke drifted from a distance, accompanied by the sound of a whistle.

Yang Chengye, in the cold wind, smiled, his eyes even a little moist. He had waited for this day for a long time. For him, once the locomotive officially started operating, Dengzhou's development potential would soar.

Because from now on, inland goods could reach Dengzhou via steam locomotives, and Dengzhou's goods could also reach areas where railways were laid via locomotives.

"Woo woo woo..."

The locomotive was about to enter the station, its whistle growing louder. Under the watchful eyes of the officials, the steam locomotive slowly entered Dengzhou Station.

"So long! How many people can such a long locomotive pull?" the officials exclaimed in astonishment.

“Fifty carriages! At least two thousand people! It’s too terrifying!”

“...”

Yang Chengye was also somewhat dumbfounded. Although he had seen locomotives before, it was his first time seeing a steam locomotive pulling fifty carriages. However, this confirmed the immense potential of the steam locomotive.

“Chuff, chuff...”

Just as everyone was captivated by the locomotive, it suddenly let out a sigh-like sound, and then the entire locomotive came to a halt.

The staff of Dengzhou Station immediately stepped forward, standing at each carriage door. Then the carriage doors opened, and merchants and common people, traveling from Qingzhou City to Dengzhou, emerged from the locomotive in a continuous stream.

“Dengzhou Station, we’ve arrived!”

A merchant, embracing his daughter, beamed with joy. He was from Dengzhou. This time, taking advantage of the locomotive’s operation, he bought tickets to return home. The result filled him with pleasant surprise: they successfully returned after a six-hour journey.

“So fast! One Golden Dragon for a ticket is truly worth it!” another merchant said with a smile.

“Indeed. Otherwise, it would take three days, and the fatigue of the journey also costs money,” someone else agreed.

Amidst the clamor, a broad smile appeared on Yang Chengye’s face. The praise from merchants and common people proved that the locomotive had a very promising future.

Over two thousand people disembarked from the steam locomotive. For a time, the station was overcrowded. After the crowd dispersed, the door of the first carriage finally opened, and Xiao Ming led everyone out of the locomotive.

“Your humble official Yang Chengye greets Your Majesty.”

Seeing Xiao Ming, Yang Chengye immediately walked a few quick steps and bowed.

Xiao Ming excused Yang Chengye from formalities. He looked at the pure blue sky of Dengzhou. All along the way, he had fully enjoyed the natural beauty of the Great Yu Empire.

“There’s no need for empty formalities. I and the ministers still want to taste seafood. We will stay today and tomorrow, and return to Qingzhou City the day after tomorrow,” Xiao Ming said with a smile.

“So soon?” Yang Chengye was somewhat disappointed. He had hoped for more opportunities to interact with Xiao Ming.

Currently, there were only two Grand Secretaries in the Grand Secretariat’s Nine Pillars. It was said that the other seven Grand Secretaries would be determined by assessment at the end of this year. It was also rumored that the former provincial governors of the six provinces all had hopes of entering the Grand Secretariat, which made him somewhat expectant.

“Traveling for too long only burdens the people and wastes resources. That is not my wish,” Xiao Ming said calmly.

Besides inspecting the functionality of the steam locomotive this time, Xiao Ming also wanted to visit the navy. In recent years, the navy’s shipbuilding work had not stopped. Moreover, since the advent of the triple-expansion steam engine, previous sailing warships were completely phased out in favor of building hybrid-powered warships. Zhang Liang’s memorial stated that he had already built thirty-six such warships, and he was eager to see them with his own eyes.

“Yes, Your Majesty.” Yang Chengye nodded. Seafood in Dengzhou was not a rare commodity; ordinary households could afford it.

It could be said that this imperial trip was extremely frugal.

Time had already reached three o’clock. Winter days grew dark early. The group did not linger long at the station and left for the city.

Like Qingzhou, Dengzhou's railway station was built within the city. Upon leaving the station platform, the group went directly to the center of Dengzhou City.

The ministers looked left and right. Many of them had never been to Dengzhou before. Now, the prosperity of Dengzhou, no less than that of Qingzhou City, surprised them.

Fei Yuer and the others, meanwhile, were in a tourist mindset. They were more interested in the goods sold on the streets of Dengzhou and were quite intrigued by some foreign trinkets.

Yang Chengye did not rush to take the group to the provincial office. Instead, he purposely toured Dengzhou City, continuously introducing its development over the years.

"So, the glass canning factory can already produce canned fish, and the metal canning factory can start production in April next year, correct?" Xiao Ming asked as Yang Chengye introduced.

"Yes, Your Majesty. To produce canned fish, I increased support for the fishing industry. Now, cod production is increasing day by day, and after the steam locomotive starts operating, the materials for metal cans will also not be a problem."

After a pause, he said, "Besides these, more and more merchants have built factories in Dengzhou over the past two years. Basically, whatever Qingzhou has, Dengzhou now also has."

Fei Ji chuckled, "Prefectural Governor Yang is indeed a talent. It is said that to attract merchants, Prefectural Governor Yang offered many preferential policies. This is indeed much better than those rigid officials."

Pang Yukun nodded slightly. "Indeed. Not only in various prefectures and counties, but even officials in the imperial court should learn from Prefectural Governor Yang."

Yang Chengye was praised by two Grand Secretaries and couldn't help but feel a bit embarrassed. He said, "You two Grand Secretaries flatter me too much. This is merely what I should do."

Xiao Ming smiled. Official circles needed exemplary figures to encourage officials to change. He had observed this Yang Chengye for a long time; he was a talented individual who understood flexibility and was practical. He said, "You deserve it. A small Dengzhou is somewhat demeaning to you. I plan to have you enter the Grand Secretariat to primarily manage the Great Yu Empire's industrial and commercial construction. What do you think?"

Yang Chengye opened his mouth. He hadn't expected such a pleasant surprise to come so quickly. For a moment, he didn't know what to say.

Pang Yukun chuckled, "Why don't you thank His Majesty? You were already on the list for Grand Secretary."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," Yang Chengye bowed deeply.

Xiao Ming patted Yang Chengye's shoulder. "With greater power comes greater responsibility. The Grand Secretariat's Nine Pillars each have their duties. I entrust you with such an important responsibility. I hope you can lead the development of the Great Yu Empire's urban construction."

The Grand Secretariat's significance for Xiao Ming was to share responsibilities in economics, integrity, law, public security, propaganda, agriculture, education, industry, and commerce.

He, meanwhile, was mainly responsible for the Great Yu Empire's future development strategy, foreign diplomacy, military affairs, and campaigns. This way, with everyone performing their respective duties, the Great Yu Empire could develop in an orderly fashion.

Chapter 867

The setting sun, red as blood, stained Dengzhou City. The faint twilight began to descend.

After Yang Chengye expressed his gratitude, he excitedly led everyone to the provincial office, where a banquet had already been set, waiting for them.

Having traveled six hours by train and spent a considerable amount of time touring the city, ministers and consorts alike were hungry by this time.

Everyone sat down. Faced with the fragrant seafood, they could hardly contain themselves. After Xiao Ming gave the word to begin the feast, the atmosphere immediately grew lively.

Xiao Yi, the little fellow, immediately picked up a king crab from the table and exclaimed, "Imperial Father, look! This crab is so big! I've never seen such a big crab before!"

Fei Yuer, seeing the king crab on her table, was also surprised. She said, "Your Majesty, we have eaten a lot of seafood in Dengzhou, but this is the first time I've seen such a large king crab."

Yang Chengye chuckled, “Empress, there are no such crabs in Dengzhou waters. The crab on the table was caught by fishermen who went to the waters north of Japan. If Your Majesty hadn’t already taught the local officials about edible seafood in the sea, they truly wouldn’t have dared to bring it back at the time.”

“North of Japan?” Xiao Ming showed an interested expression. This king crab was entirely red, a typical Hokkaido king crab of contemporary times.

“Yes, Your Majesty. Previously, fishermen dared not leave Dengzhou to fish in Japanese waters. But ever since the imperial family ordered war with Japan, General Yue has been constantly encircling and suppressing Japanese warships at sea. Now, the waters between Japan and Goryeo are very safe. Some bold fishermen have then gone out to sea to fish in Japanese waters. After all, dragging fishing technology now allows fishermen to fish in distant seas, thus allowing them to catch more.”

Xiao Ming had always supported marine fishing. In this era, few realized the importance of marine resources, but he knew.

Compared to the depletion of marine fishery resources in the 21st century, the fishery resources of this era were astonishingly abundant. A few years ago, when Xiao Ming traveled from Jinling Province to the Sanshan Kingdom, he often saw large schools of fish along the way.

Coupled with the nascent scale of the Great Yu Empire’s navy, he could completely squeeze out Goryeo’s and Japan’s fishery resources, turning this benefit over to the common people of the Great Yu Empire.

“Hmm, not bad. For Dengzhou, fishing is an important industry. You must not only develop large fishing boats but also encourage fishermen to fish in distant seas. Wherever the Great Yu Empire navy goes, that is the Great Yu Empire’s fishing ground. If they fail to do so, you will not give them canned fish to eat,” Xiao Ming said with a smile. He didn’t care about having more fishing boats, because the fishing capacity of this era was vastly different from modern times. The entire Dengzhou probably couldn’t even compare to a single modern fishing village.

“Hahaha...” The officials laughed at Xiao Ming’s joke.

Skipping that topic, everyone then formally began to eat.

While eating seafood and discussing the details of Dengzhou’s development, everyone dispersed at around seven in the evening.

The next day, Xiao Ming left Xiao Yi and Fei Yuer in Dengzhou City. He then went to the Dengzhou shipyard with Yang Chengye.

“Your Majesty, these are the latest warships.”

Zhang Liang pointed to twenty brand new warships in the military port. These warships were similar in size to third-rate warships, but had three towering chimneys rising from the middle of their masts.

“Are these warships all using the latest triple-expansion steam engines?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. That’s why these warships need three chimneys, because the warships require more boilers to burn coal. Relatively speaking, the power of these warships is much higher than that of single-chimney warships,” Zhang Liang explained.

Xiao Ming nodded. He naturally understood this principle. Having reached a deal with the Dutch this time, he would need to provide escort during Branden's return journey to the Netherlands.

So he had to dispatch ten warships to the Netherlands.

As for these ten warships, he did not plan to use steam warships. He would still use sailing warships. These twenty-odd steam warships would fill the void left by those ten warships and be responsible for blockading Japan.

The reason for blockading Japan rather than engaging in full-scale war was Xiao Ming's own consideration. Now that he controlled the seas, Japan was powerless to invade the Great Yu Empire.

This way, he could concentrate on achieving unification within the Great Yu Empire.

After observing the new warships, Xiao Ming made a plan in his mind. Then he and Zhang Liang went to the First Shipyard and the Second Shipyard.

Compared to the previous purely manual work, the shipyards now echoed with the roar of machinery everywhere. The presence of these machines greatly accelerated the speed of shipbuilding.

"Zhang Liang, I once spoke to you about ironclad warships. Do you think it's possible to add a layer of iron armor to the outer layer of the warships with the current capabilities of the shipyards?" Xiao Ming asked.

Zhang Liang said, "That is feasible, because steam engine power has given the shipyard the capability for hoisting. However, the production of this iron armor will still need to be handled by the steel mills."

Xiao Ming nodded. In the Battle of Busan, shells might have been lost. So, they had to be prepared for naval warfare entering the era of explosive shells. After all, European technology was constantly advancing, and industrial capacity was also increasing due to steam engines. This relatively primitive fuse could be replicated with a year or two of research.

Therefore, he now had to build defenses against these explosive shells and maintain an advantage in naval battles. For him, to easily defeat Europe and seize and occupy their colonies, he needed to raise his industrial level to at least that of World War I.

"I will personally oversee the matter of the iron armor. You only need to add a layer of iron armor to the warships." Xiao Ming said. Zhang Liang's son had been studying shipbuilding in Qingzhou and had now returned to Dengzhou. This technology should not be a problem for them.

"Yes, Your Majesty." Zhang Liang wiped the sweat from his forehead. The development of the Great Yu Empire's technology was simply too fast. Often, just as one technology was mastered, a new one would begin to be implemented.

Being responsible for the construction of the Great Yu Empire's warships was also not an easy task.

This time, Xiao Ming's main purpose in coming was to instruct Zhang Liang on this matter. After inspecting the shipyard for a day, he and Yang Chengye returned to Dengzhou.

The next day, he and a group of officials once again came to Dengzhou Station. They would return to Qingzhou City by locomotive.

“Imperial Father, Dengzhou is so much fun! Can I come again in the future?” Xiao Yi, by the window, looked somewhat reluctant to leave. While he was inspecting, the little fellow, led by Fei Yuer and others, had seen the sea and eaten many delicious things.

Rubbing Xiao Yi’s head, he said, “Of course you can, but you must study hard.”

Xiao Yi, hearing this, nodded obediently.

“Woo woo...”

The familiar whistle sounded again. The locomotive began to slowly accelerate. Six hours later, the locomotive arrived in Qingzhou City.

Disembarking from the locomotive, the officials were filled with emotion. They now truly experienced the terrifying transportation capacity of the steam locomotive. With railways, factories would flourish throughout the Great Yu Empire, unhindered by resource limitations.

At this moment, Xiao Ming, having disembarked from the locomotive, turned his gaze southward. The Great Yu Empire’s civil war was also about to begin.

Chapter 868

As the cold wind from Siberia swept southward, Qingzhou City suddenly grew much colder overnight. Then, heavy snow fell, turning the streets and alleys a shimmering white.

But even so, the soldiers in the Qingzhou Grand Camp continued their daily training. The difference now was that, in addition to practicing traditional formations, the soldiers were also practicing crawling.

“Your Majesty, the military machinery department has delivered five thousand ‘Falcon Rifles’ to us. According to Song Changping, equipping sixty thousand men will be completed before next autumn.”

Niu Ben and Xiao Ming inspected the military camp in the heavy snow. A month had passed since their return from Dengzhou. This was his routine year-end inspection of the army.

“This progress is satisfactory, but we owe much to Li Chuyuan and the Dutch. This arms trade has provided the military machinery department with ample funds,” Xiao Ming chuckled.

Although it couldn’t compare to the production efficiency of European countries during World War II, which often manufactured millions of rifles annually, Xiao Ming was already very satisfied with the current firearm production efficiency of the Great Yu Empire’s military machinery department. After all, this was the military machinery department’s first attempt at producing breech-loading rifles.

Niu Ben’s expression was excited. The breech-loading rifles produced this time were ultimately named “Falcon Rifles.” Their effectiveness in equipping the army surprised the generals.

In comparison, while traditional line firing was still necessary, equipping them with Falcon Rifles allowed them to adopt more flexible combat methods.

“This war between Li Chuyuan and the merchants’ council has truly benefited us,” Niu Ben laughed heartily. “But Your Majesty, although we have received a lot of silver from Li Chuyuan, if the war continues until next autumn, the damage suffered by the south will probably be even greater.”

“You needn’t worry about that. The south doesn’t have much industry; its prosperity is merely in agriculture. Besides, I have my own considerations,” Xiao Ming said, his gaze deep.

Niu Ben looked puzzled. He looked at Xiao Ming, awaiting an explanation.

After a moment of contemplation, he said, “Do you remember the imperial court’s decree last year about migrating people from densely populated areas to sparsely populated areas?”

“Of course I remember. After that decree was issued, the powerful families in the south deliberately obstructed it, causing minimal effect.” Niu Ben spoke indignantly at the mention of this. In his opinion, this was simply deceiving the Emperor and defying authority.

However, he also knew very well that the south had a weak concept of loyalty to the imperial family and had always feigned compliance with the imperial court’s orders.

“That’s it. If I don’t let them beat each other to a pulp, how can I seize the opportunity to migrate the common people to Guandong?” Xiao Ming said calmly.

Niu Ben suddenly understood. The current Guandong region was sparsely populated. Relying on the common people who remained in the six cities was simply not enough to completely control Guandong. Moreover, a new country called Tsarist Russia had now appeared in the north.

According to the imperial court's previous statistics, the majority of the Great Yu Empire's population was concentrated in the south. During the northern war, many common people also fled to the south for refuge, which further increased the population in the south.

"Your Majesty's foresight is profound. If that is the case, this is indeed necessary," Niu Ben said.

Xiao Ming nodded. Now, large numbers of secret guards had gone south, continuously monitoring the State of Chu's war. Overall, both sides were still in a state of preparing for battle, with occasional small skirmishes. He certainly didn't want to act now and deplete his own strength.

"Precisely. The fundamental reason why dynasties throughout history lost control of the north was that they did not allow Han people to flourish and multiply in these lands. For me, the most terrifying weapon is not firearms or cannons, but this weapon of flourishing and multiplying. To completely control Guandong, we must migrate the common people there and vigorously encourage childbirth. Only when every inch of Guandong is inhabited by Han people can the Great Yu Empire's power truly take root there."

Niu Ben listened, stunned. He sighed, "Your Majesty's words have made me suddenly enlightened. Thinking about it this way, it seems that in the past, it was always foreign tribes occupying our land and flourishing, leading to their increasing strength. Now, we should repay them in their own coin."

Xiao Ming looked at the training soldiers with a smile. Why were Europeans able to occupy most of the world's land during the Age of Sail? They relied on the migration of their own common people. Thus, after centuries of reproduction, the current global pattern was formed.

Therefore, in his heart, he already had a grand plan: to migrate Han people to any conquered territory to reproduce and flourish.

With the concept of common people bearing as many children as possible in this era, he believed that as long as living standards improved, the Great Yu Empire's population would explode. Coupled with the Great Yu Empire's population base, populating the entire world would not be a dream.

After discussing this matter with Niu Ben with a mischievous grin, Xiao Ming returned to the palace after his inspection.

At this time, he drafted a decree rewarding childbirth. Since the implementation of the decree, any commoner family in the Great Yu Empire that gave birth to three or more children would have one year's tax reduced.

If a fourth child was born, the provincial office would provide a subsidy of five Golden Dragons. For a fifth child, another five Golden Dragons, and so on.

Having settled this matter, Xiao Ming summoned Pang Yukun and Fei Ji. He first explained the necessity of the birth plan and then discussed this decree with the two.

"Starting with three is a bit low, Your Majesty. In fact, most commoner families in the Great Yu Empire will have more than three children. For them, children are labor, and also a fundamental way to avoid being bullied by families with more children. I believe that tax reductions should be adjusted to four children, and the Golden Dragon subsidy should start from the fifth child," Pang Yukun said.

Fei Ji nodded, "Senior Grand Secretary Pang is right, Your Majesty. This way, it can also lighten the burden on the national treasury. After all, there are simply too many places to spend money now."

Xiao Ming pondered for a moment, then finally nodded. "Proceed as you said. Additionally, after the New Year, you will begin preparing for the southern expedition. Once the assets of the merchants' council and the southern powerful families are confiscated, the imperial court's treasury will be abundant."

Pang Yukun and Fei Ji exchanged glances. Clearly, this plan for the southern expedition did not include winning over the powerful families.

Previously, the imperial court compromised with powerful families because its strength was insufficient. But now, they could fully cope. Moreover, and most importantly, the southern powerful families were more hostile towards the imperial family. This was evident in the previous matter of migrating from densely populated areas to sparsely populated areas.

The two were well aware of this issue. When Xiao Wenxuan was on the throne, a group of officials with backgrounds from southern powerful families strongly advocated for the exemption of taxes for southern powerful families.

When this proposal was rejected, these southern powerful families simply resisted taxes and evaded taxes, which also led to the emptiness of the Great Yu Empire's treasury.

In the eyes of the two, their Emperor surely hated these southern powerful families even more than they did. It was no surprise that he made this decision.

"Yes, Your Majesty, we will return and prepare for this matter," the two bowed.

Xiao Ming nodded. He looked at the continuous heavy snow, his heart filled with ambition.

Currently, the Great Yu Empire's industry was developing steadily, and railway construction also showed good momentum. The only thing lacking now was a market for dumping goods.

And to feed the increasing population of the Great Yu Empire, he could no longer wait. Unifying the country was the first step.

Chapter 869

"Having children exempts from taxes!"

"A subsidy of five Golden Dragons for each child!"

"..."

Amidst the festive New Year atmosphere, the policy encouraging childbirth spread throughout the Great Yu Empire via newspapers.

Now, for scholars of the Great Yu Empire, newspapers were the barometer of the Great Yu Empire's trends. Many scholars even collected newspapers to consult the policies enacted by the Great Yu Empire over time.

The newsboys' tender voices made many people chuckle. They took out copper coins one after another to buy newspapers and learn about this newly enacted decree.

Undoubtedly, for officials, merchants, or common people alike, this decree was a joyous occasion. For families who still wished to have children, they would receive a substantial income.

Such a beneficial decree naturally spread the fastest. After the New Year, this decree was transmitted from Qingzhou Province to other provinces, and various provincial offices also increased their propaganda efforts.

Within half a year, all the common people in the northern prefectures and counties learned of this childbirth encouragement policy.

And the effect brought by this policy was that many young and strong men in the Great Yu Empire grew thinner before spring began. The trend of competing to have children gradually expanded.

However, this decree also gave the ministers a reason to have Xiao Ming continuously produce heirs. He unwillingly fell into the trap he dug for himself. After Cui Xue'er conceived, Lu Luo and Ziyuan also successively conceived. The imperial family's descendants would increase to four.

While the north was executing childbirth as a war, the accumulated contradictions in the State of Chu erupted.

On June 13th, Jiang Ying, a general under Li Chuyuan, led eighty thousand soldiers to attack Suzhou. The two sides clashed in Wuxian, the southern gateway to Suzhou.

At the same time, two other major generals, Hua Cheng and Liu Xu, each led fifty thousand men to attack Jiaxing and Songjiang. For a time, the south was filled with gunsmoke.

“Your Majesty, I have already dispatched soldiers equipped with ‘Falcon Rifles’ to Jinling Province. The remaining twenty thousand men are estimated to complete equipping and training by September.”

In the General Staff Department of the Qingzhou Grand Camp, Niu Ben reported the army’s deployment to Xiao Ming.

After Niu Ben finished speaking, Luo Quan said, “On the naval side, we have already conveyed orders for them to be ready at any time. The cannery in Dengzhou is also working day and night to produce canned goods for wartime use.”

“Hmm, excellent. This time, logistics must absolutely not involve large-scale mobilization of hundreds of thousands of commoners as before. With canned goods, we must leverage their advantages and primarily use the army’s own logistics units,” Xiao Ming instructed.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Niu Ben and Luo Quan said in unison.

Xiao Ming nodded. He had received news of the State of Chu’s war breaking out before it officially began.

For Li Chuyuan, the soldiers trained for over half a year were sufficient for use. With this confidence, he formally declared war on the merchants’ council.

As for Cao Kun, he did not initially have enough confidence to defeat Li Chuyuan, as the merchants’ council’s power was still somewhat weak.

However, for the past six months, he had actively expanded his army. The number of troops controlled by the merchants' council doubled, and they gained confidence.

Having arranged his army, Xiao Ming returned to the palace. Immediately after, he summoned Pang Yukun. The Great Yu Empire's Grand Secretariat was officially fully staffed during the New Year.

Besides Pang Yukun and Fei Ji, there were now Zhan Xingchang, Ge Yiren, Yang Chengye, Chang Yuchun, Kong Yong'an, Chao Jun, and others.

Among these nine, Pang Yukun remained the Senior Grand Secretary, responsible for overall coordination. Therefore, Xiao Ming could sometimes just directly approach Pang Yukun.

According to the plan, he would march south this autumn. By then, Li Chuyuan and Cao Kun, who had been fighting for three or four months, would probably both be exhausted. At that time, he could easily sweep them aside. However, compared to the sparsely populated Guandong, the south was a densely populated area with many cities.

Once war broke out, it would inevitably cause displacement among the common people, and at that moment, it would be the perfect opportunity to guide the population flow.

He had summoned Pang Yukun this time precisely for this matter.

“According to Lin Wentao’s statistics, the number of steam engines sold to the common people in Qingzhou Province last year reached two thousand units. Even if a merchant’s factory uses four steam engines, the Great Yu Empire has now established five hundred steam-powered factories. And this number increased even more rapidly in the first half of this year, reaching the total quantity of last year in just half a year. This shows the merchants’ enthusiasm for building factories since the railway opened.”

After a pause, Xiao Ming continued, “And the imperial court’s official factories have developed even faster than private factories, using more steam engines. However, the result of this is a current shortage of workers in Qingzhou Province.”

Pang Yukun nodded. Last year, the Great Yu Empire issued a series of specialized terms. Workshops were officially renamed factories, and artisans were renamed workers.

So, he understood what Xiao Ming was saying.

“I understand Your Majesty’s meaning. Currently, the Great Yu Empire’s industry is mainly concentrated north of the Yangtze River. This is difficult to change in the short term. Therefore, the north of the Yangtze River needs more common people to enter factories as workers. And the current chaos in the south presents us with this opportunity. If handled properly, the Great Yu Empire’s industry will experience another surge.”

A faint smile appeared on Xiao Ming’s lips. Pang Yukun had keen insight. It was a clear fact that the resources brought by the railway, the profits from the northern expedition, and the Goryeo market provided funds. Now, the bottleneck in industrial development was the mobile workforce. The current chaos in the south filled this gap, and industry would naturally boom. Cities along the railway would surely see great development.

“That’s right. In addition, the Grand Secretariat must quickly draft preferential policies for migrating people to Guandong. I will give you a strict order: you must migrate at least three million people to settle in Guandong this time,” Xiao Ming said.

“Three million!” Pang Yukun immediately felt immense pressure. Although this number was not large relative to the Great Yu Empire’s total population, this was no small project. To achieve this, he would need to mobilize many officials.

Gritting his teeth, Pang Yukun hardened his resolve and said, “Yes, Your Majesty, I guarantee its completion.”

“Excellent,” Xiao Ming said. “Oh, by the way, how is production in Guandong recovering now?”

Pang Yukun said, “After the war ended last year, the household registration system for the Guandong people has been perfected, and land has been distributed to the Guandong common people. At the same time, because Guandong was a blank slate, I implemented a household contract responsibility system according to Your Majesty’s orders, with production managed by production teams. According to the feedback I have received, the Guandong common people welcome this land contract responsibility system and are very active in cultivating their own farmland. Coupled with the fertile land in Guandong, they had a great harvest before the New Year, and the second wheat harvest is about to begin.”

“If the effect is good, then Qingzhou Province and other provincial offices should gradually abolish collective labor in production teams. After all, collective production encourages laziness. However, production teams cannot be abolished. They must still be responsible for supervising and assisting the common people in production.”

Previously, Xiao Ming promoted collective production because production tools were scarce, but now it was different. The development of animal husbandry in recent years had greatly increased the number of draft cattle.

Moreover, the development of the steel industry also allowed sickles, steam threshers, drill seeders, and animal-powered harvesters to enter civilian use. For him, it was time to boost the common people's enthusiasm for production and elevate agriculture to a new level.

Chapter 870

Lin'an, Prince of Chu's Residence.

Li Chuyuan's face was ashen as he threw the returned battle report to the ground.

"It's been half a month! Six thousand men died, yet we haven't even taken a single Wuxian. This Jiang Ying is truly useless! At this rate, who knows when we'll capture Suzhou City."

Li Chuyuan sounded extremely irritable as he spoke.

He couldn't afford not to be anxious now. To purchase flintlock guns and ammunition, the State of Chu had spent twelve million taels of silver this year. Moreover, he was forced to exchange the silver for Great Yu Empire Dragon Coins, and the unequal exchange rate led to him being exploited a second time.

When he was still the Prince of Chu's heir, he didn't understand. Now that he was the Prince of Chu, he realized the cost of basic necessities was high.

Although Jiangnan was known as the wealthiest region under heaven, and the State of Chu was the wealthiest in Jiangnan, this much silver was still enough to make his heart ache. However, as long as he could defeat the merchants' council, this small price was insignificant.

But now, the war situation clearly left him dissatisfied.

Sima Hao sat below Li Chuyuan. After the Cao family fled to Suzhou, he immediately allied with the powerful families of the State of Chu to enthrone Li Chuyuan. A few days later, an imperial decree from the imperial court also arrived. At this point, Li Chuyuan was legitimate both in the imperial court and in the State of Chu.

Gently stroking his beard, Sima Hao looked calm. He said, "Your Highness need not worry. How can war be resolved overnight? This Jiang Ying comes from a family of renowned generals and is very outstanding compared to other generals. As far as I know, the council army is very cunning. They have dug many trenches and built many earthen walls in Wuxian. It is by relying on these trenches and earthen walls that they can stop Jiang Ying's attack. In my humble opinion, we must find a way to conquer the trenches."

"Alas, the current Emperor's Northern Expeditionary Army took only a few days to capture Pingzhou, and Jinzhou only a few more days. Why is our war here so difficult?" Li Kaiyuan sighed deeply.

Sima Hao gently shook his head, "This matter is actually very simple: the firearms His Majesty sells us are all those phased out by the imperial army."

"I am aware of that, Your Majesty. However, even so, these obsolete weapons are still more advanced than those of the merchants' council. After all, besides smoothbore flintlock guns, we also purchased rifled flintlock guns. No, the problem is not the firearms, but the artillery. The artillery we use was left by Father King, while the artillery used by the merchants' council was sold to them by the French." Li Chuyuan suddenly understood.

Sima Hao pondered for a moment. He said, "It seems that is the case. Jiang Ying's battle report states that our artillery's range is inferior to that of the merchants' council."

Li Chuyuan suddenly stood up. He said, "Previously, Father King purchased the earliest cannons from Qingzhou Province. These cannons could sweep across all the princes at the time, but now they are not very useful. Now, we must purchase cannons with longer range and greater power from Qingzhou Province."

"Your Highness, these eighty thousand firearms alone cost so much. If we also purchase cannons, the imperial treasury's silver will be largely depleted. This is equivalent to losing the State of Chu's century-long accumulation in a single day to the imperial family," Sima Hao said, his heart aching somewhat.

Although the State of Chu was wealthy, its treasury was not inexhaustible. Moreover, most of Jiangnan's wealth was in the hands of powerful families.

Li Chuyuan immediately grinned mischievously. He said, "Uncle, don't you want to purchase some cannons for the Sima family's private army?"

At these words, Sima Hao's pupils suddenly dilated.

Now that Jiangnan was in chaos, the greatest reliance for powerful families was not Li Chuyuan, but their private armies. Therefore, they had been coveting firearms and cannons for a long time.

"Is Your Highness planning to lift the ban on firearms?" Sima Hao said in shock. Previously, when the King of Chu was alive, he had ordered a strict prohibition on powerful families' private armies possessing firearms.

Li Chuyuan nodded firmly, “The merchants’ council, relying on wealthy merchants and prominent figures, is using civilian militias to oppose me. Why can’t I rely on powerful family private armies to deal with them?”

Sima Hao’s eyes darted around. Ever since the old Prince of Chu died, the Sima family had actually held no reverence for the Li family. Serving Li Chuyuan as the Prince of Chu was merely a temporary and unwilling measure.

After all, a portion of the powerful families in the State of Chu still supported Li Chuyuan. If not for that, the Sima family would have already taken his place. Why would they still suffer under someone else’s rule?

He coughed softly and said, “Your Highness possesses great talent and strategy. Such a plan truly makes me, your humble official, immensely admire you.”

“Uncle, you flatter me. This is merely my last resort,” Li Chuyuan’s smile was somewhat complex.

Sima Hao was somewhat excited. He said, “If that’s the case, I, your humble official, will return to prepare the silver.”

With that, Sima Hao bowed to Li Chuyuan and turned to leave.

Watching Sima Hao disappear into the main hall, Li Chuyuan slammed his fist heavily on the table before him.

“Bastards! Do you really think I’m a fool?!” Li Chuyuan’s eyes held a hint of despair.

He had merely been testing Sima Hao just now, but the result made him clearly see the reality. In the past year, almost everything he did was met with obstruction. He knew very well who was behind all this mischief.

After living in Qingzhou city for two years and returning, he had lost all his foundation. He finally understood why Xiao Ming had asked him that question in the imperial study.

It turned out that even if he returned, he was powerless to change anything; he could only become a puppet of the Sima family.

“You all forced me to do this,” Li Chuyuan muttered. Perhaps he had once harbored a glimmer of hope that he could restore the State of Chu, but now he only wanted to secure a wealthy second half of his life for himself, for he already had a wife and children.

This time, his lifting the ban on firearms was to test Sima Hao and also to show goodwill to Xiao Ming. Before the State of Chu was completely devastated, through arms trade, the State of Chu’s wealth would be transferred to Qingzhou. With his understanding of this Emperor, he would surely be very pleased.

However, he was not without conditions. After the larger arms trade began, he would have Xiao Ming reserve an escape route for him.

Thinking of this, he immediately drafted a memorial and had Xiao Ming dispatch officials to Lin'an for negotiations.

Four days later, the memorial arrived in Qingzou city.