

I. Dynasty 296

Chapter 296: To Get Rich, First Build Roads

The long winter gradually receded, and the warmth of spring began to spread across every corner of Qingzhou.

As the temperature warmed and everything began to revive, Qingzhou seemed to come alive as well.

After delivering the military uniforms to the Qingzhou Army, Xiao Ming released an announcement through the government, which immediately stirred up a huge response.

“Qingzhou is going to build cement roads! They say that all the streets in the city will be paved with it, and the Eastern and Western Markets will be the main focus of the renovations. Looks like His Highness has big plans for this year!”

In a fine house in one of Qingzhou’s neighborhoods, the old steward was sharing today’s Qingzhou Daily with Guo Xinyuan.

“Cement roads? Are those the ones we saw in the industrial district?” Guo Xinyuan asked.

He was originally a merchant from Chang’an, but after investing all his savings into opening five soap factories in Qingzhou, he bought a house and applied for Qingzhou residency.

Qingzhou’s regulations allowed anyone who invested 100,000 taels of silver to apply for local residency, and Guo Xinyuan had taken advantage of this opportunity.

At first, he had some doubts, but after Qingzhou began producing glass and mirrors, he saw the advantage of living here. Every morning, he could queue at the merchant guild to buy the mirrors and glass being sold that day.

He would then resell these goods for a profit. After a winter, he had earned quite a bit, and he had become comfortable with his new identity as a Qingzhou resident.

“Yes, these roads will be solid! But if you fall on them, it might break your bones,” the steward said with a nervous laugh. He’d fallen last time while going to buy supplies, and the pain still lingered.

Guo Xinyuan’s eyes sparkled. Though cement roads were hard, once they dried, they would be perfect for carts and people to travel on. They would be ideal for transporting goods.

If the entire city of Qingzhou were paved with cement roads, the landscape would drastically change. There would be no more mud-filled streets whenever it rained.

That thought excited him.

“What else did it say?” he asked, eager for more details.

The steward continued, “It says that the government will recruit strong laborers for the road construction and will pay them wages.”

Guo Xinyuan's eyes lit up. "This is a great money-making opportunity! With the whole of Qingzhou under construction, they must need plenty of money. Since we've settled in Qingzhou, it's the right place to be—there's always a way to make money here. Let's go visit Pang Changshi and ask him about this."

At the Qingzhou Government

Xiao Ming and Pang Yukun were discussing the road construction. During the winter, it was impossible to work on the roads since the cement would freeze. As a result, the construction in Cangzhou had paused. Xiao Ming wasn't able to come up with a method to prevent the cement from freezing.

But now that the weather was warming, the municipal project was ready to proceed.

The appearance of a city is crucial for attracting wealthy merchants from other areas. Creating a comfortable living environment is the key to drawing the wealthy to settle, a principle that has never changed throughout history.

Therefore, Xiao Ming placed great importance on transforming Qingzhou City as part of his commercial development plan.

"Pang Changshi, a merchant named Guo Xinyuan wishes to meet with you," a servant came in to report.

"Guo Xinyuan?" Pang Yukun raised an eyebrow, "Your Highness, you speak of him, and here he is. Looks like a lot of sharp-minded merchants are showing up."

“You know him?” Xiao Ming asked.

“Yes, this Guo Xinyuan is a Chang’an merchant who applied for residency here last year. I personally issued his residency certificate,” Pang Yukun replied.

“Ah, good. This is a great start. I hope more merchants will apply for residency here in the future,” Xiao Ming smiled.

This policy was similar to investment immigration—a method many modern countries used to attract capital and boost their economies.

Xiao Ming nodded and said, “Let him in. Maybe he’s here for something other than the road project.”

A moment later, Guo Xinyuan entered the government office and immediately bowed to both Xiao Ming and Pang Yukun. “Greetings, Your Highness, and Pang Changshi.”

“Don’t stand on ceremony, Guo Xinyuan. I was just discussing the road project with Pang Changshi. I assume you’re here about that?” Xiao Ming asked directly.

Guo Xinyuan hesitated, then smiled. “Indeed, Your Highness. You truly have a keen mind. I came today to ask if we merchants can participate in the construction of the roads here in Qingzhou.”

Xiao Ming and Pang Yukun exchanged a glance before Xiao Ming replied, "You can, but there are conditions."

Guo Xinyuan's heart sank. Xiao Ming had built a reputation as a shrewd businessman, and he wasn't sure what the prince would require. Still, he said, "Please, Your Highness, tell me what the conditions are."

"There are two conditions," Xiao Ming said. "First, the laborers you hire must be from Qingzhou's local populace. Second, the materials needed for the construction must be sourced locally. If you agree to these terms, you may participate in the road and underground pipe construction."

"Buying materials locally will save on transportation costs, and hiring local labor is no problem, as I've already settled here in Qingzhou," Guo Xinyuan replied quickly.

Seeing his eagerness, Xiao Ming said, "Good. I'll be releasing the construction segments soon, and you can choose which ones you'd like to bid on."

Guo Xinyuan was delighted and thanked Xiao Ming profusely before leaving.

Pang Yukun watched him go and then said, "Your Highness, this is an excellent opportunity. We should cultivate more merchants like Guo Xinyuan. It will encourage others to settle here in Qingzhou."

"You're right. But we should also develop a pool of construction merchants from the local population," Xiao Ming replied.

“That could work, but the common folk don’t have the silver to buy materials or hire workers,” Pang Yukun said.

Xiao Ming smiled. “That’s not a big problem. If they don’t have money, we can lend it to them.”

Pang Yukun waved his hand, laughing. “Your Highness, this is a joke, right? Since when does the government lend money to the people?”

Xiao Ming answered with a grin, “I’m serious. Do you remember where the silver notes used by the merchants come from?”

“From the Cao family’s pawnshop,” Pang Yukun replied.

Xiao Ming nodded. “I’ve heard the Cao family is the richest merchant family in Jiangnan, and their pawnshops are everywhere in the Great Yu Empire. I envy them. Why don’t we establish a government-run pawnshop here in Qingzhou? We could lend money to the people and help them start their businesses.”

Pang Yukun fell silent, thinking deeply. After a moment, he said, “Your Highness, with all due respect, my limited understanding tells me that pawnshops are based on gold and silver. You issue as much silver as you have. Our treasury is far from full.”

“This isn’t a problem for the pawnshop’s foundation,” Xiao Ming replied confidently. “If we need more, we’ll just issue more. Let’s establish Qingzhou’s first bank while we’re at it.”

Pang Yukun was stunned. He had never heard such a bold proposal. Xiao Ming was determined to push forward with his ideas.