

I. Dynasty 52

Chapter 52: The Butterfly Effect

“Your Highness, is this soap?”

Wang Shijie’s eyes lit up as he reached out to take one of the soap bars. He had seen yi zi (traditional soap), but those were dark and dull, completely unlike this clean, beautiful, and aesthetically pleasing soap.

“Wait, don’t touch it yet,” Xiao Ming reminded him. “The soap hasn’t fully solidified; it still needs a day or two.”

This time, Xiao Ming had used a soap-making method similar to traditional handmade soap rather than full-scale industrial production. Industrial soap-making required the use of salt precipitation to speed up the solidification process, but that method required precise control of salt content. Instead of dealing with that, it was simpler to let the soap cool naturally for two days. Besides, the Wang family still needed time to prepare their merchant caravans and ships, so the delay wouldn’t be an issue.

At that moment, Lu Luo also had a fascinated expression, holding her hands over her heart, her eyes sparkling like stars.

After instructing Chen Longwen to watch over the soap, Xiao Ming returned two days later to retrieve a portion of it.

This batch was meant for Chang'an—since this was a brand-new product, he naturally had to send some to Consort Zhen. At the same time, the imperial concubines could help spread word of it.

He knew very well that in this era, fashion trends among the common people were often set by the imperial concubines.

“Your Highness, how much do you plan to sell this soap for?”

Two days later, Wang Shijie arrived at Prince Qi's residence to discuss the pricing. Now that the soap was ready, it was time to set a price.

Traditional yi zi was so expensive that only the nobility and wealthy elites could afford it, and this soap was naturally targeted at the same clientele.

“What do you think, Brother Wang?” Xiao Ming wasn't foolish—whoever spoke first in a negotiation usually lost.

Wang Shijie pondered for a moment. “In Chang'an, yi zi is used exclusively by the imperial consorts and is considered a tribute item, with almost no sales among the common folk. To better estimate the price, I had someone investigate—the imperial palace purchases yi zi at 25 taels per piece. But our soap is far superior, larger in size, and lasts an entire month. Given that, I believe 50 taels per bar is not unreasonable.”

In modern terms, 50 taels for a bar of soap would be an astronomical price. But times were different, and the value of goods couldn't be compared directly. In Great Yu, this soap was equivalent to a luxury brand like Chanel—or even more exclusive. Given its elite target market, the price wasn't actually excessive.

After all, he was selling to the wealthiest and most powerful people in Great Yu.

“Brother Wang, you make a fair point. In that case, I’ll offer a discount—how about 5 taels off per bar?” Xiao Ming suggested.

“3 taels?” Wang Shijie looked pained. “Your Highness, for Qin’s Drunken Qingzhou wine, you gave a discount of 10 taels!”

“But does Qin’s Drunken Qingzhou ship 1,500 jars per batch?” Xiao Ming countered. This time, he had produced 1,500 bars of soap in a single batch—offering a discount greater than 3 taels would be foolish.

Wang Shijie had no retort. Drunken Qingzhou only produced a few hundred jars per batch, and due to grain shortages, Xiao Ming strictly controlled its output.

Unlike soap, which could be produced in unlimited quantities. Even with a 3-tael margin, the Wang family would still make enormous profits through volume sales—both Wang Chengchou and Wang Shijie were well aware of this.

“Very well, I will discuss this with my father and report back to Your Highness.” Wang Shijie wasn’t ready to commit without consulting his family.

After sending Wang Shijie off, Xiao Ming summoned Li Kaiyuan.

“We cannot let the Wang and Qin families monopolize the business. Over time, corruption and shady dealings are bound to arise. This time, I will allocate 50% of both Drunken Qingzhou and the soap to our own merchants. Take these goods south and sell them.”

“Your Highness, why not take full control of the business? That way, all the profits will belong to us,” Li Kaiyuan asked. Ever since becoming the head of the commercial division, he had quickly adopted a merchant’s mindset.

Xiao Ming replied, “The Four Great Clans of Qingzhou still hold significant power. Whether it’s enforcing policies or implementing the Tuntian Decree (military farming system), we need their cooperation. If they decide to obstruct us, it will make territorial development incredibly difficult. By sharing some of the profits, they will be more inclined to work in my favor.”

Li Kaiyuan nodded. “Understood. I will prepare the merchant ships for the southern trade.”

Xiao Ming nodded in approval and watched as Li Kaiyuan left. His goal in establishing the commercial division was to regain control over trade while preventing the Wang and Qin families from price manipulation.

Although he controlled the pricing of Drunken Qingzhou and soap, there was no guarantee that the Wang and Qin families wouldn’t secretly inflate prices for maximum profit.

By involving his own merchants, he ensured that both families would restrain themselves.

Not long after Wang Shijie left, he returned with an answer—just as Xiao Ming expected, the Wang family agreed. Only a fool would refuse such a lucrative business opportunity, especially since their profits would rival those of Qin Chuanyun’s ventures.

First Drunken Qingzhou, then perfume, now soap—Xiao Ming was determined to focus on these three products, particularly soap, which would be mass-produced for maximum profit.

Thus, he planned to dedicate the winter season to expanding the Workshop District, establishing dedicated factories for brewing wine, making soap, producing perfume, refining steel, and constructing water-powered lathes.

In the future, this area would become the heart of Qingzhou’s industrial development.

At the same time, Li Kaiyuan’s merchant caravans, along with the Wang and Qin family trade routes, spread across the empire. These products were carried to distant regions, bringing back vast amounts of silver.

And so, in Xiao Ming’s first winter in Qingzhou, a small butterfly flapped its wings—starting a ripple effect that would transform the entire Great Yu Empire.

Chang’an, the Imperial Palace

“Your Majesty, did you use the soap last night? Ah, you wouldn’t believe it—it felt incredible while bathing! It’s like all my past baths were wasted!” one of the concubines exclaimed.

“Exactly! My skin feels so much smoother and even smells wonderful!”

“And most importantly, it removes oil! My skin gets greasy so easily, but this soap takes care of it perfectly.”

“Compared to this, yi zi is utterly shameful! I told my maid to throw it away—I’ll never use it again!” another concubine chimed in.

Empress Zhao watched the concubines chatter excitedly about the soap, smiling.

This soap had just arrived from Qingzhou, sent by Prince Qi. After their previous experience with his perfume, the concubines had eagerly snatched up the soap, and now, just a day later, they were gathered to discuss it.

At this moment, Consort De remarked, “I heard that some merchants in Chang’an have started selling soap too. But honestly, how could commoners outside the palace appreciate its true value?”

“Exactly! Sister Zhen said that our palace soap is exclusively provided by Prince Qi. The ingredients are of the highest quality—far superior to anything outside the palace,” another concubine boasted.

Consort Zhen exchanged a glance with Empress Zhao, who immediately understood her intent.

“The soap sold outside is also from Prince Qi,” Empress Zhao said. “Since Prince Qi is so loyal, we should do our part to support him.”

“Her Majesty is right! I’ll summon my sister and tell her that all the imperial consorts are using this soap.”

Consort Zhen smiled approvingly—Xiao Ming had bribed the right people this time. Gaining the favor of these concubines meant that he now had powerful voices advocating for him in the imperial court.