

## I. Dynasty 53

### Chapter 53: Business Model

Wang Shijie had been in Chang'an for seven or eight days, bringing soap with him.

Initially, this novel product did not attract much attention from the noble ladies. However, today, everything changed. Overnight, a long line had formed outside the Wang family's shop in Chang'an.

The people waiting at the entrance were housekeepers, maids, and attendants from various prestigious households, all with one purpose—purchasing soap.

At the same time, word spread throughout Chang'an that the imperial concubines in the palace were all using soap. This revelation caused a stir among the noble ladies who seldom left their residences. Anything used by the Empress herself became a must-have, driving them out in droves to buy soap.

After the first batch of soap was brought home and used, demand skyrocketed the next day. Even wealthy young men had joined the frenzy.

"Oh? Isn't this Brother Li?"

"Brother Zhao! It's been a long time. You're here for...?"

“Brother Li, you too?”

“Ah, since we are all like-minded, there’s no need to be coy. My sister bought a bar of soap yesterday, and after trying it, she was completely enthralled—she spent an entire night just staring at it! Out of curiosity, I borrowed it this morning to try for myself, and I was amazed. Today, I’m here to buy some as a gift for Miss Liu from Yanzhi Pavilion.”

“Brother Li, you borrowed it?” Zhao Gongzi asked in surprise. “I haven’t even tried it yet—what a shame!”

“Ahem, as scholars, let’s not use the word ‘borrow.’ I merely took it,” Li Gongzi corrected indignantly.

Just then, the shop’s doors swung open. With lightning speed, Li Gongzi grabbed Zhao Gongzi and dashed inside.

Standing at the entrance, Wang Shijie was dumbfounded. He had not expected soap to become this wildly popular, nor had he anticipated that aside from noble ladies, courtesans from brothels would also become a major customer base.

Meanwhile, in the South, Li Kaiyuan was reaping substantial profits. While most of Great Yu’s aristocracy resided in Chang’an, the wealthiest merchants were concentrated in the South, particularly in Jinling.

In fact, Jinling’s prosperity had long rivaled that of Chang’an.

Since Drunken Qingzhou and perfume had already gained widespread popularity, these two products were selling exceptionally well in Jinling. Moreover, neither the Wang family nor the Qin family had access to perfume—only Li Kaiyuan’s merchants carried it.

Soap didn't take long to gain traction either. Once news spread that the imperial concubines were using it, the entire stock sold out within days.

Now, discussions about these three miraculous products were happening everywhere in Jinling. Even while dining at an inn, Li Kaiyuan couldn't avoid overhearing excited conversations.

At a nearby table, a young noble stood up, holding a bottle of perfume. He strutted around the room, proudly displaying it.

"Do you know what this is?" he asked.

The other young men at the table, unfamiliar with Jinling's latest trends, shook their heads.

The noble smirked. He removed the stopper, waved the bottle in the air, and let the scent waft around the room.

"Ahh! That smells amazing!" everyone gasped.

"Exactly! This is called perfume. Do you know about Miss Shuang from Wanhua Pavilion?"

“You mean the stunning beauty... but also the one plagued by body odor?”

“That’s the one! Because of her condition, she lost the title of ‘Flower Queen’ at Wanhua Pavilion year after year. But ever since she started using this perfume, her odor disappeared completely! Now, countless rich young men are vying for her attention.”

“Is it really that effective? Can it mask any bad smell? I don’t believe it.”

“Absolutely.”

“Then let me try!” another noble eagerly said.

The proud perfume owner handed it over. The other young man dabbed some on himself and declared, “I also have body odor. For the sake of my brothers, I shall test it!”

Back in Qingzhou, the situation at Prince Qi’s residence was unprecedented. Unlike previous years, when the estate was quiet and unvisited, it was now bustling with endless traffic. The entrance was so crowded that it was nearly impossible to get through.

In just two months, soap, perfume, and Drunken Qingzhou had gained immense fame across both the northern and southern regions. Merchants, sensing an enormous business opportunity, swarmed Qingzhou like cats drawn to the scent of fish.

Naturally, their first order of business was to seek an audience with Xiao Ming.

These days, Ziyuan's hands were sore from receiving endless gifts, and Xiao Ming spent each morning meeting with eager merchants. Yet, despite days of discussions, the merchants remained relentless, refusing to leave until they secured a deal.

Unsurprisingly, the Wang and Qin families were growing increasingly anxious. So many competitors had suddenly arrived to challenge their monopoly. In response, they tried to ingratiate themselves with Xiao Ming through discounts and favors, while also using more underhanded methods—intimidation, threats, and even covert attacks on rival merchants. But these efforts had little effect.

The lure of profit was simply too strong. The merchants kept coming, fully embodying the saying, "A man will risk his life for wealth, just as a bird will for food."

"Your Highness, the estate's storerooms are overflowing with gifts!"

The entire residence was caught between joy and exhaustion.

The servants indulged in delicacies and treats from all corners of Great Yu while working tirelessly to accommodate the endless stream of merchants.

Xiao Ming chuckled. "If there's no more space, clear out some other rooms."

Lu Luo, her cheeks stuffed with malt candy, nodded vigorously. These days, she no longer had to worry about getting her favorite sweets—nearly every visiting merchant brought pastries and confections as tribute.

“Delicious! Delicious!” she mumbled through her full mouth.

“This is the royal estate of Prince Qi! Such disorder is unseemly!” Pang Yukun sighed, shaking his head. Xiao Ming had called him in to help deal with the merchants, but upon seeing the chaotic state of the residence, Pang Yukun couldn’t resist launching into a lecture.

Lu Luo shrank back, grabbed onto Ziyuan’s sleeve, and ran away, fearing Pang Yukun would scold her.

Xiao Ming reassured him, “Lord Pang, the household is merely in high spirits—there’s no need to be so strict.”

Pang Yukun remained stern. “Your Highness, forgive my bluntness, but after accepting so many gifts, what do you plan to do? If you agree to their requests, not only will the Wang and Qin families suffer losses, but even your own commercial ventures will take a hit.”

“You worry too much, Lord Pang. We must think long-term.”

Pang Yukun, a scholar raised on Confucian teachings, had always looked down on merchants. To him, they contributed nothing to production and merely profited from transactions—no different from parasites.

Over the past few days, Xiao Ming had engaged in several heated debates with him, using his vast knowledge of economics and industry to gradually convince him that merchants could be beneficial.

Xiao Ming had a clear plan.

At first glance, monopolizing all three industries—soap, liquor, and perfume—seemed like the best way to maximize profits. However, this was a short-sighted approach.

The combined strength of the Wang, Qin, and Xiao businesses was limited. They could never distribute soap nationwide in a short time. This would restrict sales to a few regions, capping profits.

Instead, Xiao Ming decided to open up soap-making technology to outside merchants, allowing them to set up workshops in Qingzhou. This would significantly boost production capacity.

By doing so, he could allocate his own resources to higher-value industries rather than low-tier products like liquor and perfume. After all, his ambitions extended far beyond mere wealth—he aimed to dominate the world.

However, the technology would only be partially open.

The alkali-making process would remain exclusive to him—he would supply alkali, while merchants would only handle soap production. Workshops could only be established in Qingzhou and other territories under his control.

These measures ensured that Xiao Ming would profit more from selling alkali than from making soap himself. Meanwhile, the concentration of merchants in Qingzhou would further accelerate its economic boom.

As for the Wang and Qin families' concerns? Once he explained the win-win nature of his plan, they would understand soon enough.