

I. Dynasty 54

Chapter 54: Chamber of Commerce

The influx of merchants made Qingzhou more bustling than ever before. The streets and alleys were filled with traders who had traveled from afar.

After waiting in Qingzhou for three days, the merchants were greeted with an announcement that sent them into a frenzy.

A proclamation was posted throughout the city: "All merchants in Qingzhou may obtain the method for producing soap from the Patent Office. Further details can be discussed at the Patent Office."

As soon as the news spread, the merchants immediately inquired about the Patent Office—what it was, where it was located—and then rushed toward the building, which was situated across from the Governor's Office.

While most merchants were ecstatic, some were deeply unsettled. As Xiao Ming had expected, the Wang family was the first to seek him out after the proclamation was issued.

"Your family can also establish workshops to produce soap," Xiao Ming said, instantly rendering Wang Shijie speechless. "That way, you can manufacture as much soap as you want."

Wang Shijie pondered for a long moment before speaking. "But, Your Highness, with such a massive increase in soap production and merchants selling it everywhere, how will prices be controlled? And what about competition between merchants?"

“I have already thought this through,” Xiao Ming replied with a calm smile.

Wang Shijie had pointed out a fundamental problem of this era—merchant infighting. Many of the merchants who had arrived in Qingzhou were powerful figures, some backed by regional lords or high-ranking officials.

Now that they all had access to soap, they would undoubtedly try to monopolize the business within their own territories, barring outside merchants from entering.

This kind of regional protectionism was not unique to this time period—even in modern times, local businesses often suppressed competition from outsiders.

“May Your Highness enlighten me?” Wang Shijie asked.

Merchants were greedy by nature, and the Wang family was no exception. They understood that opening up soap production would benefit them, but they were reluctant to give up their control over direct sales.

“A trade guild,” Xiao Ming said simply.

The competition among merchants would inevitably lead to chaos, making a regulating body essential. Xiao Ming’s real goal, however, was to use this guild to transform Qingzhou into Great Yu’s commercial hub.

Wang Shijie didn't fully understand what a trade guild was, so Xiao Ming took on the role of a teacher once again.

The guild would regulate product pricing, divide trade territories, and—most importantly—extract profits from the merchants. Of course, some aspects of his plan were better left unsaid.

What Xiao Ming could tell Wang Shijie was that the guild would assign the Wang family an exclusive sales region—but they would have to pay a fee for it.

After sending Wang Shijie away, Xiao Ming began preparations for establishing the guild. All merchants involved in soap production would be required to join. Without guild membership, the Patent Office would not provide them with the necessary technology.

At the Patent Office, visiting merchants were introduced to the concept of the guild.

“Brother Chen, this Prince Qi is quite something. First, he surprises us with a Patent Office, and now he's forming a trade guild,” one merchant remarked, holding a set of technical documents from the Patent Office.

A rotund merchant beside him chuckled and said, “Indeed, we mustn't underestimate him. But no matter what, we have a personal letter from Prince Wei to Prince Qi. Surely, he will give us some special consideration—after all, they are neighbors.”

“That's true. Steward Qian mentioned that Prince Qi will summon all merchants tomorrow to discuss the guild. We'll just wait and see how things unfold. However, I hear that merchants under the command of

Prince Yan of the Cui family, Prince Chu of the Li family, and Prince Liang of the Zheng family have all come as well. The competition will be fierce.”

“Exactly. And it’s not just the regional lords—several imperial princes have sent their merchants too,” he said, glancing at the courtyard of the Patent Office. Groups of merchants, clad in silk robes and adorned with gold, stood in small clusters, each one a wealthy magnate.

The next day, as promised, Xiao Ming convened nearly a thousand merchants at the Governor’s Office in Qingzhou.

With the immense profits at stake, no one dared to miss the meeting.

Seated at the head of the hall, Xiao Ming surveyed the crowd with a smile.

Many of these merchants had brought letters personally written by high-ranking nobles—regional lords, ministers, and even a few imperial princes and princesses—hoping to secure favors.

Xiao Ming wasn’t surprised. However, he knew that these letters were meaningless. Given his past reputation for arrogance and defiance, those who sent them likely understood that as well. They merely wanted to show their subordinates that they had tried.

The merchants, seated below, wore a mix of expressions—some smug, some anxious, and some whispering among themselves. Despite their wealth, they were still mere merchants and dared not show disrespect to Xiao Ming.

"I'm sure you all know why I've gathered you here today," Xiao Ming began. "It's to discuss the establishment of a trade guild."

"May Your Highness enlighten us," the merchants responded in unison.

Xiao Ming continued, "You have all come to Qingzhou for one reason: soap, Drunken Qingzhou, and perfume. The purpose of this guild is to ensure that all members have fair access to these products."

At these words, the hall erupted with murmurs of excitement and unease.

One merchant quickly asked, "Your Highness, are you saying that not only soap production but also Drunken Qingzhou and perfume will be made available for merchants to produce?"

"No," Xiao Ming replied. "The production of perfume and Drunken Qingzhou will remain restricted, but those who join the guild will gain exclusive sales rights."

"That's still great news!"

"Excellent!"

"Well worth the trip!"

The merchants cheered.

Xiao Ming continued, “The guild will function as follows: all members will have access to the products Qingzhou offers, but in return, there will be regulations...”

Using the knowledge stored in his technological archive, Xiao Ming had already drafted a set of guild rules.

One of the key regulations was that sales territories would be fairly auctioned within the guild. Additionally, all product prices would be standardized by the guild, and a special arbitration office would be established to prevent malicious competition among merchants.

As these concepts were relayed, the merchants were astounded. These revolutionary ideas completely reshaped their understanding of commerce.

For them, it was like a revelation—an entirely new business structure unlike anything they had seen before.

Xiao Ming then unveiled a large map of Great Yu.

“This is the map of Great Yu,” he explained. “Each county and prefecture is marked. The sales rights for each region will be auctioned, with each prefecture serving as a trade zone.”

His tone grew firm. "Now, you have a choice. Join the guild and secure enormous profits, or leave Qingzhou. The decision is yours. I will not force anyone."

A heavy silence fell over the hall.

The merchants exchanged glances, weighing their options carefully.

For them, this was not an easy decision.