

I. Dynasty 55

Chapter 55: A Massive Transaction

“Brother Han, what do you think of this trade guild?”

After Xiao Ming’s summons, the merchants of Qingzhou gathered in groups at the Weijia Restaurant. The waiters were so busy they barely had time to catch their breath—business had boomed thanks to the influx of merchants.

“All I can say is that Prince Qi is a master strategist. With this move, even though he remains in Qingzhou, he has effectively put merchants across the entire empire under his control. Any merchant who joins the guild must follow his lead.” A merchant surnamed Han sighed.

“I was thinking the same. But the problem is, Prince Qi holds the keys to fine wine, perfume, and soap. If we don’t join, we get nothing. Yet if we do join, we’ll be at his mercy, forced to pay a hefty sum just to sell products in lands that should belong to Prince Yan. Why not pressure him by having Prince Yan issue a ban on these goods?”

“That won’t work!” Han shook his head. “Prince Qi wouldn’t care if Prince Yan banned sales in his territory. Other merchants would just smuggle the goods in anyway, and Prince Qi wouldn’t lose much. But you and I? We’d be the ones losing out on a fortune.”

“So we have no choice but to join the guild.”

“Exactly. It’s a brilliant move on Prince Qi’s part. We have no alternatives.”

As the two of them debated, similar discussions took place at other tables. In the end, all the merchants came to the same realization—they had no leverage over Prince Qi.

Thus, when the auction began the next day, the same merchants who had gathered at the Governor's Office returned once more.

They scoured the map of Great Yu, searching for their hometowns. Though they felt reluctant, they knew they had to buy the rights to sell in their home regions. And if they didn't bid high enough, they'd be stuck producing soap instead.

Just as he had the day before, Xiao Ming arrived at the Governor's Office, accompanied by Pang Yukun, Li Kaiyuan, and Qian Dafu. If today's event succeeded, the Qi Royal Estate would rake in an enormous sum of silver.

"Your Highness, this map of Great Yu is quite remarkable," Pang Yukun remarked, admiring the massive map hanging on the wall.

The map was highly detailed, clearly outlining the empire's boundaries, provinces, mountains, and rivers—something Pang Yukun had never seen before.

"Just a little something I put together," Xiao Ming replied with a grin. Today would be a turning point for Qingzhou. If he could gather enough silver, he would have the resources to implement his plans in the spring. after all, there was so much to do.

As they spoke, a wealthy merchant suddenly called out from below.

“Your Highness! I want to purchase all the counties within Prince Wei’s territory. Will 300,000 taels of silver suffice?”

Li Kaiyuan chuckled. “Everyone knows that Prince Wei’s lands are among the richest in the empire. Jinling, in particular, is a hub for merchants, scholars, and courtesans alike. Sixteen counties in total—don’t you think 300,000 taels is a bit low?”

The crowd erupted in whispers.

“Isn’t that Ding Wanquan from Jinling?”

“Yes, it’s him! They say his family’s wealth is worth at least ten million taels of silver. He alone contributes a million taels to Prince Wei every year!”

“I heard his dining bowls are made of gold!”

Xiao Ming nearly choked when he heard this. A personal fortune of ten million taels?!

Meanwhile, he had been ecstatic over mere tens of thousands of taels—how embarrassing.

Pang Yukun, seeing Xiao Ming's shock, remarked coolly, "Your Highness, why are you so surprised? Every feudal lord's territory has a few immensely wealthy merchants. Ding Wanquan is nothing special. The richest family in the empire is the Cao family from Jiangnan. They say their wealth rivals that of the entire Kingdom, amounting to over ten million taels of silver."

"Ten million taels?" Xiao Ming's jaw dropped. That was one hundred million in modern terms. The Cao family was essentially the Great Yu Empire's version of the legendary Ming dynasty merchant Shen Wansan.

(Shen Wansan had been so rich that when Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang built Nanjing's city walls, Shen had offered to fund the entire project. Even today, the bricks on Nanjing's walls still bear his mark—each one stamped with the character Wan.)

Pang Yukun smirked. "But in the end, they are nothing more than fish on the chopping block. If Prince Wei ever needs money, he could simply kill Ding Wanquan and seize his wealth."

A cold shiver ran down Xiao Ming's spine. This empire was truly one where officials ruled over wealth. To men like Pang Yukun, merchants were merely pigs raised for slaughter—the fatter, the better.

"Well said, Lord Pang," Xiao Ming replied, though he resisted the urge to argue. This was no time for a debate—he had a show to watch.

Another merchant sneered. "Brother Ding, since when did you become so stingy? The counties under Prince Wei are worth at least a million taels. If you're not interested, how about letting me take them instead?"

The speaker was a man named Han Kang, a leading merchant under Prince Yan. He turned to Xiao Ming. "Your Highness, I offer one million taels of silver for Prince Wei's territory."

Ding Wanquan's expression soured. He knew 300,000 was too low, but one million was far too high. Prince Wei and Prince Yan's lands were both in the wealthy Jiangnan region and had long-standing rivalries. Han Kang, a merchant just as wealthy as Ding, was clearly trying to provoke him.

Now that they were bound by guild regulations, whoever bought the rights would have exclusive control. If Han Kang won the bid, Ding would lose face in front of Prince Wei.

Gritting his teeth, Ding Wanquan countered, "I'll pay 1.3 million taels!"

A hush fell over the crowd. No one else dared to raise the bid further—after all, at such a price, it would take years to recover the cost.

Han Kang smirked, knowing he had accomplished his goal.

Xiao Ming, watching from his seat, merely smiled. These merchants came from all over Empire, representing various factions and power struggles. But in the end, when the snipe and clam fight, the fisherman profits.

With Ding Wanquan setting the precedent, the territories under Prince Yan, Prince Zhao, and other feudal lords were swiftly monopolized by their respective local magnates.

The fiercest bidding war, however, took place over the imperial territories—especially Chang'an, where ten merchants had formed a joint venture to secure the rights.

This was essentially a modern-day corporate partnership. The Wang and Qin families were both involved, proving that when it came to excluding outside competition, they were perfectly aligned.

By the end of the day, the entirety of Great Yu had been divided up among the guild's merchants.

And Xiao Ming? With zero upfront investment, he had just made seven million taels of silver.

Aside from the two largest transactions—both over a million taels—the other territories fetched far lower sums. Some regions, being less wealthy, saw little competition, and a few were outright ignored.

Yet, Xiao Ming's business model was not uncommon in modern times—he had essentially appointed local agents, while positioning himself as the master distributor.

Now that the regional sales rights were secured, the next step was for the merchants to purchase land in Qingzhou and build factories.

The true growth of Qingzhou's wealth was only just beginning.