An envoy’s trip to the Jin Court
Travel diary by Lou Yue 樓鑰 (1137–1213)

As part of an ambassadorial mission to the Jin court, the Southern Song scholar-official Lou Yue kept a diary in which he detailed his and his colleagues’ daily activities and his keen observations of the political and cultural landscape.

The Song faced a political reality that the Han and Tang dynasties had not: it had northern neighbors that it had to treat as equals, above all Liao (907–1125), founded by the Khitans, and Jin (1115–1234), by the Jurchens. Negotiated treaties regulated the exchange of envoys on important occasions, including the birthdays, enthronements, and deaths of emperors and empresses. Envoys missions were highly structured, with protocols for gift-giving, formal audiences, receptions and farewell parties, government lodging, and official correspondence.

Hundreds of such missions were dispatched by the Song court to the Liao and Jin. Official policies required that Song envoys keep daily records of their missions. Upon their return, these accounts would be catalogued in official archives and sometimes consulted for intelligence purposes. Those that survive confirm the usefulness of the diary format in organizing and narrating a lengthy trip. The diarist provides detailed eyewitness reports of what he and
his companions saw and mused about on the road and their observations of natural and social conditions. When encountering places of historical and cultural significance under foreign occupation, the envoy refers to relevant incidents and personalities of the past and registers his nostalgic sentiments.

The three entries below are from Lou Yue’s “Diary of a Journey to the North.” In late 1169, Lou and his colleagues were dispatched to offer New Year greetings to the Jin emperor. The group left the Southern Song capital, Lin’an (Hangzhou, Zhejiang) in the tenth month of the fifth year, arrived in the Jin capital in modern Beijing more than two months later, stayed there just a few days, and got back to Lin’an after another three months’ journey. Lou Yue made an entry for each day of this long mission, detailing the logistic aspects of their journey, the administrative units they passed, the lives of ordinary people they observed, and the historical sites that they passed. The three entries selected here are especially rich in information about material culture in the twelfth century, especially the logistics of crossing the Yellow River.

Diary of a Journey to the North

Third day of the twelfth month (jiashen), sunny. We traveled by carriage for sixty li and had breakfast at the Jing’an Township. Another sixty li later, we stopped for the night at Suzhou [Anhui]. Ever since we left Sizhou [Anhui], we have been traveling along the Bian River. At Suzhou, the river is more silted up than before, the water almost level with the riverbanks, on which carriages and horses travel. Some people have even built houses on them. The prefecture’s city wall is newly built, and its outer parts are in good order. I heard that the court ordered the construction to begin in the late fifth month and be completed in forty days. All the expenses were shouldered by the local residents.

The town looks very prosperous. Wheat flour is 210 cash per catty; unhulled millet costs 120 cash per peck, hulled twice as much. Altogether, there are sixty blocks. There are several large Buddhist monasteries, all built during the peaceful times in the past. There are two magnificent restaurants. One of them, Qingping, stretches across both sides of the street. Its upstairs is protected with reed mats. People cannot be stopped from admiring its magnificence. Some old men simply treat it as a temple, touching their foreheads before prostrating to pray. I also see dead bodies lying on the street. Earlier envoys have reported that stores here smuggle and sell Song
government pharmacy medicine and the Cai Wujing brand flat cake rheumatism medicine.

Two li from the prefectural seat is the Shrine for Erlang. The Pavilion for Dismounting One’s Horse in front of the shrine was where the commander Li Xianzhong [1109–1177] executed Li Fu and Li Bao [for cowardice during the Song-Jin War of 1163–1164]. The government lodging station is close to the prefectural office complex. Li Xianzhong’s troops were once stationed here. When they took Suzhou, each soldier was given only three hundred cash as a reward, which outraged them. When they were defeated by the Jin army and fled south, the wounded too weak to manage on their own were slaughtered by the enemy, who buried them in several large pits. At the center of the shrine is a well where many people committed suicide. The prefectural seat is located in Fuli County. It was also in this county that Xiang Yu [232–202 BCE] defeated Liu Bang’s Han troops east of Lingbi [in 204 BCE]. So many soldiers died in that campaign that their bodies stopped the flow of the Sui River.

Thirteenth day of the twelfth month (jiawu), sunny. We left by carriage early in the morning and arrived at the Yellow River after traveling forty-five li. Last year, a breach damaged the ferry crossing, so people have had to detour dozens of li to board a ferry. This year, they spread some firewood and grass on the ice where the river is shallow to make a one li-long path. When carriages and horses moved on this temporary road, I could hear the sound of ice cracking. At places where the river is deep and dangerous, barefoot guards direct travelers to cross quickly.

In the middle of the river there is a long sandbar, which must have resulted from repeated breaches. Our entire party, including horses and carriages, boarded boats here. The ferry boats have flat bottoms and no awnings. The boatmen steered the boat from the bow and used large rectangular wood blocks as oars. When they rowed, they synchronized their movements by shouting in unison. Everyone other than the chief and associate envoys of the mission sat in the open and crossed the river in several different boats. With no wind, it was not cold at all. I could see from the boat that the ice was only about two inches thick. Where the boats passed, the water was dozens of feet deep. This is called the Ligu Ferry Crossing. It was not the usual place to cross the river. The floating bridge, the normal crossing, was several li away.

After we rode by horse for about three li, we ate in Wucheng Township, also known as Shadian. After going by carriage another forty-five li, we spent the night at Huazhou [Henan]. On our route, we passed by a road sandwiched
between hills. There is so much dust in the air that people a few feet apart can’t see each other, so it is called Little Dusty Cave. There may well be a place ahead that is worse than this. West of the road is the White Dragon Pool, with a large stone stele next to it. Apparently, the pool was created by a previous breach of the Yellow River.

Huazhou was the territory of the Shiwei people in ancient times. It was under the jurisdiction of the Wei state during the Spring and Autumn period [770–476 BCE] and the Warring States period [475–221 BCE]. Its administrative seat was located in Baima County, originally Caoyi of the Wei. When the Di (northern barbarians) conquered Wei [in 660 BCE], they set up Daigong [the prince of Shen] as the king, who at the beginning had to live for some time in a hut in Cao. Yuan Shao [d. 202] sent Yan Liang [d. 200] to the Baima River, and Guan Yu [d. 220] killed Liang to pay back Cao Cao’s [155–220] kindness to him. Li Shiqi [268–203 BCE] suggested that Liu Bang [d. 195 BCE] occupy the Baima region. These events happened here. There is a Hua Tower, which was originally the state of Zheng’s Linyan.

The twenty-fourth day of the twelfth month (yisi), sunny. We departed by carriage early in the morning. After traveling forty-five li, we arrived at the south city of the Ansu Commandery [Hebei]. We crossed the city on horseback and entered the north city, where we had breakfast at the lodging station. The commandery originally had its headquarters in Suicheng County of Yizhou [Hebei]. When our court established the Jingrong Army, its headquarters was moved here. Both city walls are firm. The south city’s southern gate has three layers, the north gate one. This is also where the Ansu County seat is located, with its two Xiongwei battalions. The two gates of the north city each have two layers. Between the north and south cities are moats and ditches, mostly frozen. I see ice being taken into cellars [for use in warmer weather]. The town has a Xiangguang Tower and a Fushan Monastery.

After finishing breakfast, we left on horseback from the north gate. En route, we passed by a large temple. Someone said that it was a temporary imperial palace called Northern Marchmount. After going by carriage another twenty-five li, we crossed the Baigou River. We spent the night at Gucheng Township, another five li further. People here look and dress differently from Hebei. Most men shave their hair, and most women wear Jurchen-style double-bird hairpins. Our driver said, “Once you cross Baigou, all residents are northerners. It is easy to tell them apart.”

Further Reading


