Decades apart, Yuan Haowen and Wen Tianxiang both suffered capture by the Mongols. Both were strongly loyal to their former sovereigns, but they chose to express their loyalty in different ways.

China was torn apart by war many times over the centuries, but to men of the time, the destruction wreaked by the Mongols seemed unprecedented. From the Mongols’ first campaigns into northern China against the Jurchen Jin in the 1210s to the final destruction of the Southern Song in 1279, cities were razed and populations slaughtered or enslaved. Even after the first wave of violence had passed, life was difficult for many, especially in northern China. At the local level, in particular, people had to develop new ways to preserve their families and secure their livelihoods. For literati families, the diminished opportunities for government service remained an especially large concern.

Two important witnesses to these events were Yuan Haowen and Wen Tianxiang. From a scholar-official family and well educated in his youth, Yuan passed the jinsbi examination in 1221 on his seventh attempt but never rose high in the Jin government. Both when he held office and when he returned home to farm, he maintained active ties to a large network of scholars and
intellectuals. When the Jin capital, Kaifeng (Henan), fell, Yuan was among thousands of officials and imperial relatives who were captured by the Mongol troops. After enduring several years of imprisonment, Yuan spent the rest of his life in his native place in Shanxi, devoting some of his time to preserving a record of the Jin dynasty. The preface to his book, translated below, was written while he lived in captivity.

Wen Tianxiang, from Jiangxi in southern China, was born after the fall of the Jin to the Mongols. Even though he lived in the south under the Southern Song, the threat of the Mongols was a constant in the lives of his generation. At the young age of twenty-one, he earned the jinshi degree, taking the top place. When the Mongols intensified their attacks in 1275, Wen personally organized military resistance. The next year, he was appointed as an envoy to negotiate with the Mongols, who detained him. He managed to escape that time but was captured again by the Mongols in 1279. When pressured to surrender, he wrote a poem with the famous line, “Since ancient times, who has avoided death? Historical records [of my death] will prove my loyalty.” Wen spent three years imprisoned in Dadu (Beijing) before being executed in 1283. Wen Tianxiang’s iconic status as one of the greatest patriots of all time was further celebrated in modern times, when standing up to foreign invasion again became an issue.

In the postscript, translated below, to Wen Tianxiang’s report on the 1276 mission to the Mongol camp he muses over such weighty topics as life and death and duty to family and country.

Preface to Record of a Prisoner, by Yuan Haowen

Seven months after I was born, I was adopted by my paternal uncle, lord of Longcheng. When he died at his post in the gengwu year of the Da’an reign period [1210], I accompanied his coffin back to our hometown in Xinzhou [Shanxi]. I was then twenty-one, and most of the elders of the Yuan family, including my grandfather, were no longer living. When I asked about my ancestors, my uncles, being young, could provide only a few facts. Since the family’s genealogy and stele inscriptions were in good order, I thought it would be fine if I postponed further inquiries.

A few years later, the Mongols attacked the Central Plains. To escape the invaders, I moved about in Yangqu and Xiurong [both in Shanxi], never stay-
ing anyplace the whole year. In the bingzi year of the Zhenyou reign period [1216], I crossed the Yellow River into Henan. All our family belongings were lost in the chaos. I got hold of a copy of the old genealogy from the clan's Henan branch, which had details for the Song and post-Song period. Records of prior periods, however, were no longer available. My brother Yizhi once ordered me to compile "A Record of a Thousand Years of the Yuan Family." I made an outline but did not find the time to write down the many things that he wanted recorded.

In the jiawu year [1234, when the Mongols conquered the Jin], I was captured and detained in Liaocheng [Shandong]. My brother Yizhi was far away in Xiangyang [Hubei], meaning that we were in two different countries. My nephew Bo was captured and taken to Pingyang [Shanxi], and I had no idea whether he was alive or not. My uncle's son, Shuyi, and my grand-nephew, Boan, were too young to be entrusted with anything. I was forty-five and barely surviving; my life could end anytime. Should I drop dead on the road one day, would the world know there was once a Yuan family in Henan? Descendants of royals [Yuan Haowen was a descendant of the Northern Wei imperial clan], my grandfather's and father's generations were renowned for their excellent writing and conduct. Wouldn't it be a great misfortune if they were forgotten as nobody? To prevent that from happening, I wrote "A Record of a Thousand Years of the Yuan Family" and entrusted it to my daughter, Yan, lest my ancestors' deeds be forgotten. As a further precaution, I personally explained everything to her.

Alas! People who admire an accomplished person from earlier times regularly ask about his appearance, words, and actions, so historians routinely include this information. Since this is true of strangers, it is natural for descendants to want to know this sort of information. For this reason, I have included some miscellaneous stories about our ancestors.

I began to read at four and learned to write poetry at eight, forty years ago. When I was eighteen, my father taught me the principles of local administration, so during the ten years when I served the government, I dedicated my life to the welfare of the people. From an early age, I set myself the goal of becoming a lofty and principled person, not wanting to fall behind my peers.

All my life, I have been close to only a few people. While I have acquired a good reputation, I have also suffered from plenty of slander. In the whole world, my only true friend is my brother Yizhi. My lifetime accomplishments
are not known to the world and will be lost to my descendants if I don’t do anything about it, which would be an offense against all that is holy. I have therefore appended a chronology of my life.

My grandfather, lord of Tongshan, was granted the jinshi degree in the second year of the Zhenglong reign period [1157]. By the end of the Dazheng reign period [1224–1232], my family had served the court for over seventy years. When the capital was besieged, I was the office manager of the Eastern Section. When I learned that the emperor was going to be taken from the capital, I asked the prime minister to prepare a copy of The State History [of the Jin] (Guoshi) in small characters to be taken with him. Although the minister liked the idea, there was no time to make the copy.

When Cui Li surrendered to the Mongols in 1233, the conquerors took The Veritable Records (Shilu) for each emperor. Those books record a century’s worth of the deeds of the [Jin dynasty’s] sagacious kings and virtuous ministers, information that deserves to be preserved. Within a few decades, there won’t be anyone who remembers those things. I can’t help with what I don’t know, but how could I bear not to record what I do know! I have therefore made a compilation of my writings and entitled it Record of a Prisoner. All our family’s descendants, from Shuyi and Boan on, should keep a copy in their homes. If there is anything they do not understand, they should ask others to explain it. Anyone who disobeys this instruction is not a descendant of the Yuan clan.


Postscript to Record of Heading South, by Wen Tianxiang

On the nineteenth day of the second month in the second year of the Deyou reign period [1276], I was appointed prime minister of the right and military commissioner in charge of the armies of all routes. At the time, Mongol troops were approaching the capital. There was no time to make plans for offense, defense, or relocating the capital. The court officials all gathered at the office of the grand councillor of the left. Nobody knew what to do.

During one of the many exchanges of envoys, the Mongols requested someone in authority to meet with them. Many thought that if I went, I might be able to find a way to avoid disaster. Given the desperate state
of affairs, I could no longer place much value on my life. I also thought that there might still be room for negotiation with the Mongols. Up until then, envoys went back and forth, none of them detained by the Mongols. Moreover, I wanted to see for myself the situation in the north. That way, after I returned, I might be able to figure out some way to save the country. I therefore resigned the prime ministership and set out the next day in the capacity of an academician.

Upon reaching the Mongol camp, I argued so vehemently with the Mongols that I shocked their leaders high and low and made them realize that they could not treat the Song dismissively. Unfortunately, Lü Shimeng disparaged me at the court and Jia Yuqing denigrated me in his report to the throne from the Yuan camps. The Mongols incarcerated me, so I was unable to return. The situation looked bleak.

Once I realized that I would not be able to get away, I rebuked the Mongol commander-in-chief to his face for his breach of faith. I also called Lü Shimeng and his nephew traitors. All I wanted was a swift death, no longer thinking there was advantage to gain. The Mongols continued to act respectfully, but they were in fact infuriated. Two high-ranking Mongols stayed with me during the day, and at night soldiers surrounded my lodge, making it impossible for me to return south.

Not long after, Jia Yuqing and others arrived in the north as supplication envoys. Mongol troops took me to the envoys but did not consider me a part of the mission. I should have killed myself then but forced myself to endure the humiliation, keeping in mind the ancient saying, “This way I can later accomplish something with my life.” At Jingkou [Jiangsu], I found the opportunity to escape to Zhenzhou [Jiangsu]. There I informed the commanders of both the east and west wings of where things stood with the Mongols. I planned to gather troops for a large campaign against them, thinking it offered the only chance for reviving the Song.

Two days after my arrival, the commander-in-chief at Yangzhou [Jiangsu] ordered me to leave. I was forced to change my name, hide my tracks, and endure all sorts of hardships traveling cross country. Between the Yangzi and Huai Rivers, I had to deal with the Mongol cavalry every day. I was exhausted and hungry and had nowhere to rest, as the Mongol soldiers were intent on capturing me. Heaven was too high and the earth too vast for my cries to be heard. Later I got hold of a boat. Avoiding the small islands that the Mongol troops occupied, I reached the north bank of the Yangzi River. From there, I
entered the Eastern Sea [the ocean east of Suzhou]. Passing by Siming and Tiantai, I eventually arrived at Yongjia [all in Zhejiang].

Alas! How many times was I near death on this trip? I could have died for cursing the Mongol commander and for calling Lü Shimeng and his nephew traitors. Living with the Mongol commanders for twenty days, I could have died many times for standing up to them. On leaving Jingkou, I took a knife with me to be ready for the unexpected and almost killed myself. Passing by Mongol ships stretched out over ten li in their search for me, I almost became food for the fish. When I was chased out of Zhenzhou, not knowing what to do next almost cost me my life.

On my way to Yangzhou, if I had run into patrolling guards while passing through the Yangzi Bridge at Guazhou, there would have been no way I could have survived. Outside of Yangzhou’s city wall, I was in no position to decide whether I should go in or leave: either choice could lead to death. While I was sitting in the trenches at Guigong Embankment, several thousand Mongol cavalry troops passed its entrance, so I again almost fell into the enemy’s hands, which would have been fatal. In Jiajia Village, I was almost bullied to death by patrolling soldiers. On a night journey to Gaoyou [Jiangsu], I got lost and almost perished in a muddy swamp. When dawn broke, I was hiding in a bamboo forest when dozens of patrolling guards passed by. The chances of escaping death were slim. When I arrived at Gaoyou, there was a warrant out for me issued by the military commissioner there. I barely escaped being caught and executed. My boat was very close to the boats of the patrollers as I traveled through the city moats full of dead bodies, so I almost lost my life by accidentally bumping into them.

On my way from Hailing to Gaosha [both in Jiangsu], I was often afraid that I might die for no fault of my own. Between Hai’an and Rugao [both in Jiangsu], for three hundred li, Mongol troops and bandits were everywhere. Any day I could have died. When I arrived at Tongzhou [Jiangsu], I would have died had I not been admitted into the city. As for sailing through huge waves in a small boat, I put death out of my mind since there was nothing much I could do about the situation.

Alas! Life and death follow each other, just like day and night. Death is what happens. But in my case, the dangers and misfortunes I endured were more than one person can bear. Just thinking about it is painful!

During this time of adversity, I sometimes composed poems to record my
experiences. I wrote them down while on the road, not wanting to lose them. I compiled what I had written during my appointment as an envoy and my detention at the Mongol camps into one chapter. Work composed after I left the Mongol camps, as I passed by Wumen and Piling [Jiangsu], sailed by Guazhou, and returned to Jingkou filled another chapter. The poems recording what happened from Jingkou to Zhenzhou, Yangzhou, Gaoyou, Taizhou [Jiangsu], and Tongzhou make up another chapter. Compositions written when I was traveling from Yongjia to Sanshan [Zhejiang] by sea fill another chapter. My plan is to keep this book at home for later people to read so that they will see that I was doing everything I could.

Alas! That I have survived is fortunate, but is it for a purpose? What I wanted was to be an official. But if my lord is humiliated, even if I die defending him, I share the blame. I also wanted to be a filial son. But if I expose the body given by my parents to danger and consequently die, I am to blame. I asked for punishment from my lord and my mother, but neither approved. I admitted my crime at the graves of my ancestors, pledging that, if I could not save the country in my lifetime, I would turn into a ghost to attack the enemies after my death. That would be my duty.

Rely on Heaven’s power and the blessings of the ancestors; ready the weapons; join the front ranks of the imperial troops; wipe out the humiliations suffered by the dynasty; restore the accomplishment of the forefathers. This is what “resolving not to coexist with the enemies” means. It is also known as “giving one’s all and not stopping till death.” This is also a matter of duty.

Alas! Someone like me could die anywhere. Had I died in the wasteland, even though I had nothing to be ashamed of, I would have had no chance to explain myself to my lord and parents. What would they have thought of me? I never expected that I would be able to return in one piece and see his majesty again. Now that I am back in my homeland, even if I die any moment, what regret would I have? What regret would I have?

In the fifth month of the same year, after the reign title was changed to Jingyan [1276], I, Wen Tianxiang of Luling [Jiangxi], wrote this postscript to my poem collection, Record of Heading South.

source: Zeng Zaozhuang 曾棗莊 et al., eds., Quan Song wen 全宋文 (Shanghai: Shanghai Shiji Chuban Youxian Gongs, Shanghai Cishu Chubanshe, Anhui Chuban Jituan, Anhui Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 2006), 359:8315.96–98.
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