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**What It Takes To Be A Caravaneer?**  
The Art of Moving Across Loess and Steppes (18th-20th)

**Laurent Chircop-Reyes**

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figure 1: A camel caravan in Inner Mongolia, early 20th century.  
Source: photographic archive from the book *Yadong yin hua ji* 亞東印畫輯, 1924.

The study of historical mobility invites reflection on adaptation to environmental and social change. The different ways in which humans interacted with their environment in the context of uncertainty, economic and social crises or hostile conditions, as well as the multiple ways in which various communities have practised space by moving. There are many excellent works on human mobility, both in Asia and in other parts of the world (for Asia see for example Guerassimoff *et al.*, 2020; Jami, 2014; Li, 2010; Wang, 2021; or in other regions see Noiriél, 2008; Ahmida, 2009). They are too numerous to mention here. However, it seems to me that many questions remain unanswered concerning the plural functioning of Chinese human mobility across the land in the North (see fig. 3), and the different local knowledge used to move by caravaneers and migrant communities before and at the turn of the 20th century.

In this article, we attempt to understand the plural functioning of circulations, particularly in spaces where the trajectories of different groups were deployed in hostile environments and on the periphery of the scope of political action. In particular, we discuss what it took to move through these regions before the great cycles of modernisation at the beginning of the 20th century.

### **Constrained and Risky Travel**

The cost of crossing the Loess Plateau and the Sino-Mongolian steppe was sometimes high. Before the first half of the 20th century, these remote areas were indeed risky, for natural and human reasons. Windy and icy in winter, subject to intense drought in summer, these regions were also characterised by a relative absence of government. Various forms of brigandage were practised on caravans travelling north and west, especially from Shahukou (Northern Shanxi) (see figs. 5 and 7), also known as the “gateway to the West” (Xikou 西口). The abuses were particularly violent against groups moving with high-value goods, such as merchants from Shanxi Province (Jinshang 晉商), some of whose families went to trade far away and migrated as far as Kiakhta, a “trade town” (*maimaicheng* 買賣城) in Russia. But also migrants with hopes of a better life in the vastness of the steppe “beyond the fortifications” (*saiwai* 塞外). Coming from diverse professions (farmers, artisans and also traders), they were forced to leave Shanxi and the surrounding provinces (Shaanxi, Hebei) from the 15th century onwards, among other reasons because of environmental problems (drought, aridity of the soil) and overpopulation.

Merchants and migrants struggled to provide their own security. However, the powerful and corporately organised merchants could still seek the private protection services of escort-caravaneers (*baobiao* 保鏢). Between the eighteenth and early twentieth centuries, escort-masters (*biaoshi* 鏢師), as interstitial actors, bridged the gap between merchants and brigands, on the one hand, and participated in the maintenance of trans-regional trade as well as in the marking of trails for commercial and migratory journeys, on the other. Some previous work (including my own) on the phenomenon of escort companies (*biaoju* 鏢局) has enabled us to learn a great deal about the role of knowledge for moving in a context of insecurity. These studies concern especially communicative knowledge (verbal and non-verbal codes, jargon, vehicular language) and defensive knowledge (martial arts practices).

However, these escorted human circulation are only the tip of the iceberg that was Chinese human mobility in the North.

### **Walking to the West**

Trade routes and migrations were intensely connected over several generations in North China. Some have shaped the phenomenon of “*zou Xikou* 走西口” (walking [towards] the West gate). This term is derived from local folklore. It refers to the local songs, dances, and operas still practised today by the people of Shanxi, whose ancestors once migrated to the north-west. These stories tell, among other things, of the nostalgia for the native land, but also of the arduous and dangerous nature of the journeys during which the caravans were regularly victims of brigandage. *Zou Xikou* thus has a strong local historical and cultural dimension. Its present-day heritage is a valuable source of field data.

This mobility also participated to shape the sino-russian “tea trade routes” (*chaye shanglu* 茶葉商路) in the early 18th century. The settlement of Shanxi people along these routes was supposed to be temporary. Partly for reasons related to respect for ancestor cults. But Cui Sipeng and Wang Chunxin (2017) point out to us that, in order not to “dishonour the families left behind”, only those groups who were “successful in trade could harbour the hope of returning to their homeland”.

No study to date can indicate a precise number of Shanxi people who left the province to trade and migrate to the north-west. In comparison, more accurate data are available for the north-eastern migration, known as the “Manchuria rush” (*chuang Guandong* 闖關東) — lit. “East gate rush”. A report in 1933 (Zhang, 2001: 322) gives the (underestimated) figure of 170,000 having migrated to the provinces of Jilin, Liaoning, Heilongjiang, as well as to the Siberian and current Inner Mongolia regions. Representatives of Shanxi merchant companies, who migrated to Russia and then returned to their province following the October Revolution in 1917, estimated that at the beginning of the 20th century more than 10,000 Shanxi merchants were living in Russia. Migration and trade were, according to historian Zhang Zhengming (2001), the two most common activities in the daily lives of Shanxi people.

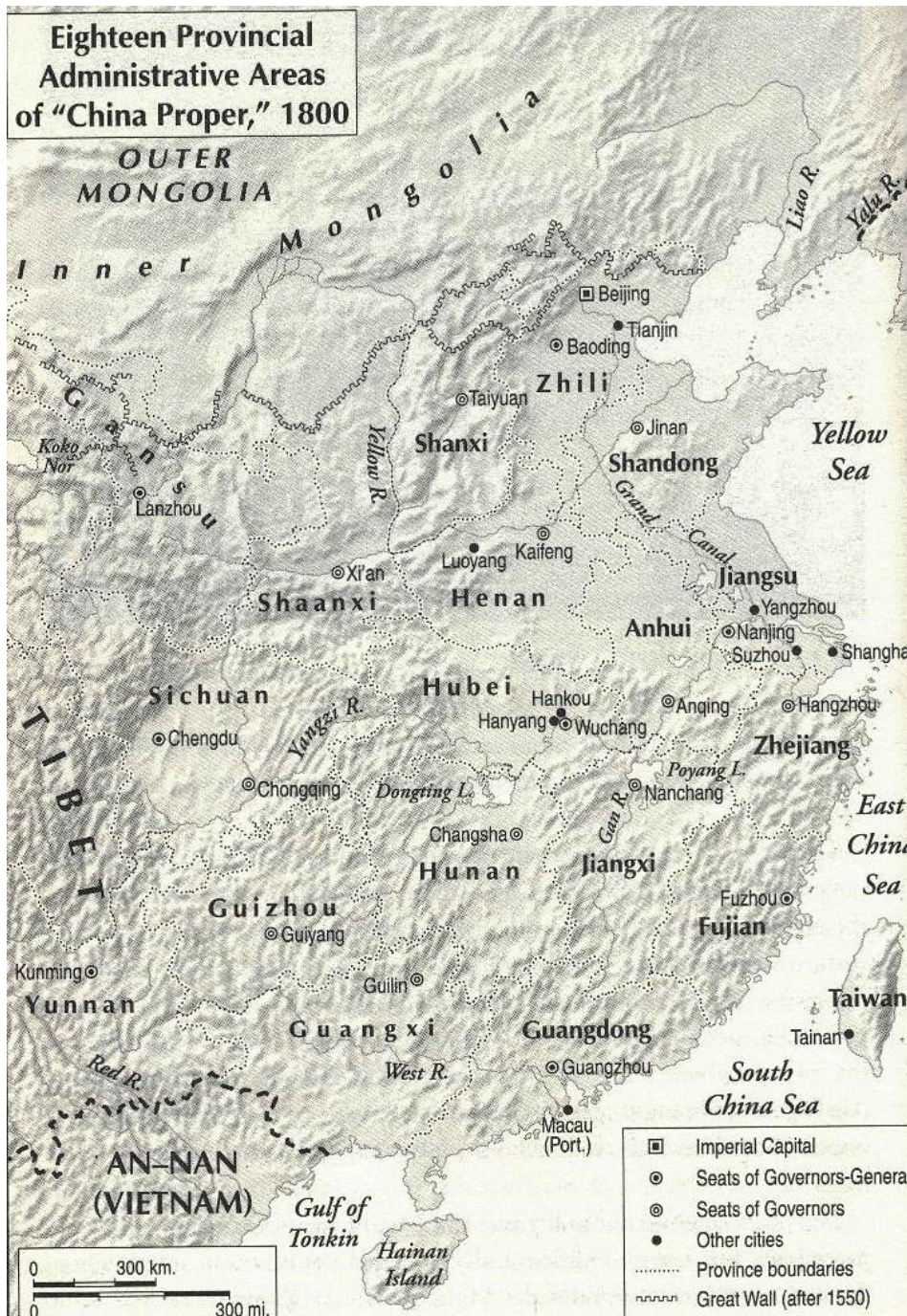


figure 2: Provinces in Qing China and Great Wall after 1550.  
 Source: William T. Rowe, *China's Last Empire. The Great Qing* (2009).



figure 3: Current Northern China Provinces.  
Source: William T. Rowe (2009).

### Desert Ship and Professional Escort

What did long-distance caravan trade consist of? First, animals were indispensable. These were animals exploited for their carrying power (camels, mules and horses), but also for security (guard dogs) or communication (domesticated pigeons). While the mule accompanied (and still does) the caravans from Yunnan to the Tibetan, Burmese and Vietnamese regions (Ma Jianxiong, 2016), the camel, a true “desert ship”, renowned for its endurance and resistance, played a central role in these expeditions. The caravan size varied between twenty and eighty individuals, and a hundred animals per expedition. This is of course incomparable with the colossal number of sub-Saharan caravan families between the 8th and 16th centuries, who could lead caravans of thousands of dromedaries to protect themselves from brigand attacks (Bernard Nantet, 2008). In order to overcome the problem of brigandage, the Shanxi Merchants entrusted their goods to private armed militias, some of which maintained tacit “friendly” relationships with the brigands to “rent the passage” (*jielu* 借路) of the caravans. Note that this passageway trade worked in two ways: the caravaneers bought their way from the brigands, and the brigands could also buy their traffic from the regular soldiers posted at the interregional border posts (*guankou* 關口).



figure 4 : A caravan of goods on camels between Shanxi and Hebei provinces.  
Source: T.C Chamberlin, 1909.

The Shanxi caravans (also those of Hebei and Shandong) were thus unique in that they were composed of professional escorts (*biaohang* 鏢行). That is to say, specialists mastering, among other things, human power transportation techniques (driving handcarts), brigands' jargon and local languages (such as 'dark language', *heihua* 黑話), as well as martial arts techniques and the use of the rifle. Both the escorts and their companies belonged to family or clan lineages of martial arts schools, and recruitment into a company was done internally and according to the rules of the particular lineage. The members of an escort company had a different status depending on their seniority and skills, and on the knowledge they possessed by natural disposition or transmission. For example, there are those who are recruited for their knowledge of the environment and ways of communicating with different local groups, or for their mastery of a particular skill (healer, craftsman). There are also those who are recruited for their good eyesight, others for their keen hearing, and still others for their olfactory sensitivity - being able to recognise which animal a particular smell belongs to (via faeces) in order to detect the possible presence of brigands, who usually travel with horses.



figure 5: Routes recognised and taken by escort companies during the Qing period.  
Source: Liu Yinghai, Qiao Zengguang, *Biaoxing sihai* 鏢行四海 (2014).



figure 6: A handcart passing through a loessic valley in northern Shanxi.  
Source: *Yadong yinhua ji*, 1924.

Long-distance travel required a keen sense of direction and a fine “reading” of the environment. These parameters were vital to avoid getting lost and to be able to locate water points. An expedition could take between one and three months from Shanxi to Hebei or Inner Mongolia, or even six months to the Russian border. The caravaneers were also affected by the deleterious natural conditions. A simple badly healed chapped skin or a superficial lesion of the skin could cause cracks, followed by a skin infection, fever, etc., and could compromise the progress of the whole group. Among the many “prescriptions” to be followed was that of not washing during the entire journey. This protected them from the dry, cold climate by allowing the fat secreted by the pores of the skin to accumulate and cover the face until it formed an effective protection against the wind and sand. Moving through these spaces meant mastering the techniques of fire production, cave dwelling, etc. For fear of poisoning, the master escorts were strictly forbidden to eat food from the inns. The latter, which resembled modest caravanserais, were rest stops on the road, but not places of trust. According to local oral tradition, it was not uncommon for innkeepers to be associated with local brigands

The studies carried out on Chinese human mobility across the land in the North (see figs. 2 and 3) prior to the 20th century indicate that caravaneers could not do without individuals who mastered local knowledge and the most elementary techniques of daily life. They highlight the relevance of investigating a hitherto little-investigated everyday life, whose apparent “banality” reveals situations that are rich in information about know-how (knowing how to repair and make shoes, for example) and social functioning.



figure 7: An ancient route in Shahukou 杀虎口, Shanxi/Inner Mongolia “border”.  
Source: photographs by Laurent Chircop-Reyes, June 2018.

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