

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is a supplemental episode.

In this episode, we're going to take a look at an aspect of Song Dynasty life that has come up many times in the novel -- traveling. As I'm sure you have noticed, this is a novel that goes places. Many of our characters are constantly on the move, whether it's running away from the law, taking a day trip to recruit some muscle for an illicit endeavor, or escorting precious cargo from one destination to another. Given the centrality of travel in our narrative, I thought it might be interesting to explore what traveling was like during this time.

So first of all, who were the travelers and why did they take to the road? Generally speaking, the most frequent travelers were, unsurprisingly, merchants and government officials. As trade and commerce flourished during the Song Dynasty, the merchant class grew, and so did their footprint, which spanned the whole Song empire and beyond. And officials have always needed to travel for government business, including moving between posts every few years.

But traveling was also something for the masses beyond those two groups. You also had scholars traveling to big cities for the imperial exam in hopes of landing a government position, craftsmen taking their wares to market, monks on pilgrimage or out raising alms, just to name a few examples. Farmers, who made up most of the population in the rural areas, did much less traveling relative to these groups, but one unfortunate circumstance that did prompt them to take the road was famine, when they were forced to migrate to flee starvation.

But there were also more positive reasons for commoners to travel during the Song. One notable reason was tourism, which became something for the masses during this time. Of course there were still significant class differences in how often you traveled for fun, where you went, and how you traveled, but generally speaking, thanks to the economic growth during the Song Dynasty, people from many levels of society had the means to pursue travel for leisure to some degree or another.

As I mentioned, on top of business trips, government officials also changed positions every few years, so they were frequent travelers. When they were going to assume a new office, they often had a rather generous deadline for getting there, so that lent itself to squeezing in a few side trips for pleasure along the way. Beyond officials and the aristocracy, commoners were also engaging in a fair bit of local tourism, making short-distance trips, usually around the holidays, to offer incense to the gods and to take in the sights along the way. The most popular travel holidays were Chinese New Year, the Qingming Festival in the spring, when people visited their ancestors' graves, the Mid-Autumn Festival, and the Winter Solstice.

So where did these tourists go? Popular destinations included trips to rustic countryside villages, ancient ruins, religious destinations like monasteries or temples, and metropolises like the capital Kaifeng. One popular activity was to travel to a particular place, such as the major city of Luoyang (4,2) to see the local flowers in bloom. There were also a lot of private gardens owned by officials and other wealthy individuals that also opened their doors to visitors.

Most of these attractions were free, though at temples and monasteries, while they didn't charge for admission, they did charge for incense, lamp oil, and such, and of course many of the visitors to those places were going to offer prayers, so the monasteries made back their money. And some of the private gardens that allowed visitors did charge for admission. For instance, at one official's garden, women were admitted for free, but men had to pay 20 coins for a tour of the grounds.

So we've covered who the travelers are, some of the reasons they traveled, and where they traveled to. Now, let's talk about how they got there. On land, travelers had the benefit of an extensive road system courtesy of the Northern Song government. There were government roads connecting all the prefectures and counties. The road-building initiative even extended to some notoriously difficult terrains. For instance, the roads into the Sichuan area in the southwest had always been infamous for

being treacherous. In many places, these were just galley roads, which were wooden planks banged into the side of mountains. But even here, the government built roads with many rest stops and guest houses.

The government roads were lined with trees to prevent soil erosion and cut down on dust. They also had trenches running alongside them for drainage to prevent flooding. There were regular distance markers every 5 or 10 li (3), with 1 li being the equivalent of about a third of a mile. And the markers showed a location's distance from the Northern Song capital of Kaifeng. Every 20 li, or a little less than 7 miles, there was a rest stop or pavilion for weary travelers to catch their breath. And every 60 li, or 20 miles, there was a government guest house. And there were rules about who had the right of way on these roads. The lower classes had to make way for the upper crust. The young had to yield to the old. Carts with light loads had to make way for carts with heavy loads. And travelers exiting a city should give way to those entering.

So how were people getting around on these roads? You might be naturally inclined to think of horses, and you would be wrong in many cases. Horses, as it turns out, were a luxury during the Song Dynasty. The Song did not control the fertile pasture lands to the north, and thus, it faced a constant shortage of horses. During the reign of the Zhenzong (1,1) Emperor, who sat on the throne from 997 to 1022, the Song had no more than 200,000 horses within its borders. For comparison, the Liao (2) kingdom of the Khitan people to the north had over a million horses, thanks to all that rich pasture land out there.

For a time, the Song tried to encourage its own people to raise horses for the government, but that effort went nowhere and was eventually abandoned. Instead, the Song made a habit of purchasing horses from its neighbors, and almost all of the horses were controlled by the government. Horses were divided into 15 grades, with the top 13 being used for battle, and only the bottom 2 tiers were allowed

to be used as pack animals. And during times of war, if you were a private citizen who owned horses, you might even have them confiscated for government use. Eventually, the government banned the private sale of horses, on the penalty of death if you were caught hiding horses from the authorities. So when the novel says, for instance, that the bandits acquired X number of fine horses on a raid, that's a big deal. And horse-thieving, in which some of our heroes were engaged, suddenly sounds like a much more daring act when you consider that the penalty if you got caught was death.

So, with horses being a generally scarce commodity, most civilians could not engage in horse-powered travel. In fact, even many officials typically had to be content with riding donkeys instead of horses when they went out. Carts were generally pulled by donkeys, oxen, or mules. Oxen in particular were a common pack animal, and we can see this depicted in the famous Northern Song painting *Along the River at the Qingming Festival*.

In addition to carrying or pulling passengers, donkeys, oxen and mules were also used to pull luggage and merchandise. And there were guidelines on how much weight each type of animal was allowed to carry. A donkey, for instance, was allowed to carry no more than 43 pounds, while a camel could be loaded with up to 130 pounds. And in case you're wondering, a person could carry 26 pounds. But if that person was a soldier, well, then you were allowed to load him up with 79 pounds. And it was a common practice for traveling government officials to bring along soldiers as porters. And if you throw in a hard-ass taskmaster like Yang Zhi the Bluefaced Beast, then being a soldier-turned-porter sounded like a really rotten gig.

Another popular means of land transportation was the sedan chair, and this was something that really became popular during the Song Dynasty. Before the Song, a sedan chair was called a shoulder carriage and was basically a chair on two bamboo poles. During the Tang Dynasty a few centuries earlier, only members of the royal family could use this shoulder carriage. It was off limits to officials and

civilians. That was still the case at the start of the Northern Song, but then, somebody got the bright idea that hey, we can change the design of the chair and turn it into an enclosed compartment, and there's no regulation against the use of whatever you would call that. Well, ingenuity paid off, and soon this new sedan chair became very popular. In fact, by the time of the Southern Song dynasty in the 12th and 13th century, sedan chairs had replaced animal-drawn carriages as the primary vehicle of transportation.

So that's land travel. What about water? The Northern Song had that covered as well. There were waterways that branched out from the capital Kaifeng and connected a network of rivers and canals. The government also undertook extensive construction of bridges, be they stone, wood, or pontoon.

There was also a lot of ship-building. During the reign of the second Song emperor, each prefecture was building more than 3,000 transport ships a year, both by the government and by civilians. The ship-building industry was centered in the Suzhou (1,1) and Ningbo (2,1) area around the Yangzi River. And there were a wide variety of ships built for different purposes, such as warships, horse-transporters, or tourist ships. Tourist ships, in particular, were very ornately decorated and had fancy names like the Hundred Flowers, the Seven Treasures, or the Golden Lion.

At important crossings, the government banned privately operated ferries. So no Uber boats for you, which was just as well since you probably could do without being stuck with a shady boatman who gave you the option of death-by-stabbing or death-by drowning. If you wanted to operate a ferry at these crossings, you had to pay for a license, and that license did not come cheap. According to records, during the reign of the second Song emperor, the license fees for private ferries at one crossing totaled 450,000 coins a year, so that was a rather lucrative revenue stream for the government. And I think that sheds more context on the illegality of the many private ferries we have witnessed in the novel.

So now that we've covered HOW people got around, let's talk about where they stayed when they were traveling. And here, we see a marked difference between government officials and everybody else.

I mentioned earlier that the government roads had a guest house every 20 miles. Well, those guest houses were for government officials only. Civilians were not allowed to even enter those places, much less stay there.

If you were a government official traveling on state business, however, you basically HAD to stay at one of these guest houses. There were very strict rules about where officials could stay on business trips. Only when there were no guest houses available were they allowed to stay at commercial taverns or inns. And if those weren't available, then they could stay at monasteries. And if that's not available either and they had no other options, then they were allowed to stay at a civilian home.

On the other hand, even if you were a government official, you couldn't just squat rent-free in these guest houses forever. Officials were not allowed to stay at a guest house for more than a month at a time, and you could be exiled for a year for violating this rule.

Some of these government guest houses could be very extravagant. The guesthouse in the capital reserved for envoys from the Liao kingdom, for instance, boasted 525 rooms, making it the largest government guest house in the city. And everything was provided in the guest house, such as oil, candles, firewood, wine, meat, and such. All the property in the guest houses, however, belonged to the government and could not be damaged or pilfered. In fact, you weren't even allowed to cut down trees around the guest house. So think twice before you stash those toiletries in your bag.

If you were a government official on business, you would be given a per diem for your daily expenses, and you would also receive a ticket that let you stay at these guest houses. And while you were staying at the guest houses, you could eat for free. But it was by no means an all-you-can-eat buffet. The rank-and-file officials received only half a catty of free lamb a day at the guest houses. That's just a little more than half a pound of lamb. And this was a source of much grumbling, apparently. In fact,

someone once left a poem on the wall of his guest house room, lamenting the feeble amount of lamb he received. The poem ended with the line, “How can one ever get fat on half a catty of lamb?” Well, I hope that guy didn’t get busted for leaving graffiti on government property.

So what about civilians? They weren’t allowed to set foot in the government guest houses, but there was no shortage of other options for them. Hospitality was big business during the Song, and there were many private hotels, taverns, and inns that catered to civilians. The government encouraged people to settle along the main thoroughfares and set up establishments to house and feed travelers. In fact, the earliest Chinese tourist map labeled all the inns and restaurants on the roads from various cities to present-day Hangzhou (2,1), which served as the capital of the Southern Song.

Taverns and inns were typically clustered in the seats of prefectures and counties, which tended to be the centers of government, commerce, and culture. And of course, lodging options abounded in major cities like the capital Kaifeng. For instance, near the Great Xiangguo (4,2) Monastery, where our favorite monk Lu Zhishen took up residence for a while, there was a street called the Third Sweet Water Lane, and this was known as “hotel row” for the number of inns lining the street. In such cosmopolitan locales, hotels competed on decor, atmosphere, and service. Some were extremely extravagant and even offered amenities like pet-sitting services.

At the other end of the spectrum, near the imperial college, there was a cluster of economy-class lodgings, catering to scholars coming from all over to take the imperial service exam. The government actually looked out for these exam candidates when it comes to travel and lodging. Some received per diems from the government. And there was a regulation stating that if scholars on their way to take the exam sought lodging at an inn, the establishment had to reserve several of its best rooms for them and also had to maintain a quiet atmosphere while the scholars were staying there, just as inns were required to do if officials dropped in.

If the hubbub of city centers didn't appeal to you, you could also seek lodging at quieter sanctuaries that were, in some cases, actual sanctuaries. Many inns were built inside monasteries and temples, and their appeal was obvious. These were often in scenic, serene locales. And the monasteries provided good food, as long as you didn't mind an all-vegetarian, non-alcoholic diet. There was no bringing-you-own-beer into the monastery. The bathhouses at the monasteries also offered travelers a place to have a nice, hot soak. Oh, and if you were so inclined, you could also listen in on the abbot's sermons. And if you were more the sightseeing type, then some of the monks could also serve as free tour guides.

Going farther afield, there were also lots of country or village inns and farmstays. These were often called "fire-starter inns", because when you stayed there, you would procure your own food, start your own fire on the stove, and cook your own meals. We've seen many examples of this in the novel, where we read that so-and-so found lodging at an inn and asked for some rice to make dinner.

Now, the government kept a close watch on taverns and inns. You had to have a government license to run an official inn, and you had to keep records of all the guests who stayed at your establishment. And as I mentioned earlier, there were regulations about reserving rooms for officials or imperial exam takers. And, if one of your guests fell ill while staying at your inn, you were required to report that to the local authorities and to take care of that traveler.

Finally, how much did lodging and other traveling expenditures cost? Obviously, the top-end options could be very pricey. In large cities, staying at a five-star establishment could cost as much as 3,000 coins a day. But just like today, there was a wide range when it came to affordability. One scholar, for instance, once calculated that renting a room at an inn cost about 150 coins a day. In another record, from 1072, a Japanese monk visiting some Buddhist holy sites in the mountains paid just 50 coins a day for a room at the home of a certain Zhang the Ninth.



As for transportation, if you weren't rich enough to own your own animal, cart, or boat, you could always rent one. In fact, travel rentals were a booming business. Apparently you could rent a horse and saddle for less than 100 coins, even though as we mentioned, horses were in short supply. And in general, the cost of renting transportation did not seem to be particularly onerous, thus contributing to making travel more accessible to the masses.

Alright, so that's a brief look at travel in the Song Dynasty. I hope you enjoyed this supplemental episode, and I will see you next time on the Water Margin Podcast. Thanks for listening!