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MERCHANTS, BRIGANDS AND ESCORTS: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACH TO THE *BIAOJU* 鏢局 PHENOMENON IN NORTHERN CHINA

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The most remarkable thing about the economic upsurge of China in the eighteenth century was the size of the commercial streams and the extent of the regions controlled by certain corporations of merchants. [...] These rich merchants, who sometimes formed famous “dynasties”, played a political role thanks to the mere size of their fortunes and to the extent of their influence at the local level. They were also often men of taste and patrons of the arts, and this fact alone entitles them to a place in the intellectual history of the Qing epoch.¹

Introduction

While historical research struggles to identify the founder of the first *biaoju* 鏢局 or “escort company”, historians agree at least on the period during which they formally appeared. The *biaoju* are defined as structured companies providing escort, protective and insurance services that operated from the 17th century until their decline in the early 20th century. They were responsible for the transport of goods, for example money (tael), salt, silk and tea, but were also in charge of protecting the traders, who were victims of plunder organized by brigands during their journeys.

These traders came from Shanxi province and are commonly called Jinshang 晋商 (“Jin traders”, in reference to the short name of the province) since the beginning of the 20th century. The formal dimension of the *biaoju* recognized as a legal company system of protection and transport insurance was progressive: this formalization is manifested with the emergence of new professions embodied by a peasant social class interacting with the merchant class.

The origins of the *biaoju* phenomenon are nebulous, owing to the lack of data in the imperial archives. This absence, or rather lack of primary

¹ Gernet 1996, p. 488.

documentary sources may be an occasion to explore the question from an anthropological point of view.² Since the subject belongs to history and, therefore, cannot be confirmed by field investigation, the following analysis does not have the ambition to expose historical truth.³ Nonetheless, the method used for this research, namely ethnographic interviews,⁴ tends to provide new understanding of the *biaoju*, especially in questioning this phenomenon through the social interaction between escorts and merchants, but also through the role played by the threat of brigandage during the Qing period.

Biaoju composition, which is structured around the transmission of clannish martial art traditions founded on orality, may therefore be studied with greater insight through ethnohistory. Furthermore, the confidential practices born through intercultural exchange such as, for example, Daoist exercises in “internal martial arts” (*neijia quanshu* 内家拳術) and their inscription in China’s religious landscape,⁵ could also be approached from the perspective of structuralism,⁶ which contains the idea that “human activities are not intelligible except through their interrelation.”⁷ The microhistorical approach is also of great help, and leads us to focus on the cultural activities of social groups localized in precise places and time. Therefore, despite a certain lack of data in textual sources, we hope that the multiplicity of approaches used in this research will reveal new fields of understanding.

The information in historical literature is rare, however, two documents are of particular interest in that they are concrete historical markers essential to this analysis. The first one is a “request letter”, *zouzhe* 奏折, addressed to the court by a local official *difangguan* 地方官 from Shanxi province named Yan Ruilong

² Regarding the value of orality in the search for historical data. As Claude Lévi-Strauss pointed out, “the ethnographer is above all interested in what is not written, not so much because the people he studies are incapable of writing, but because that with which he is mainly concerned differs from everything men ordinarily think of fixing on stone or paper [...]” See Lévi-Strauss 2003, p. 39.

³ I agree in this respect with the historian Paul Veyne’s idea that “[h]istory exists only in relation to the questions that we ask of it [...] every historian is implicitly a philosopher, since he decides what he will take to be anthropologically interesting [...]” See Veyne 1976, pp. 9, 50.

⁴ This survey has been conducted together with the descendants of late-Qing’s escorts, who are currently representatives of the martial tradition’s schools concerned in my doctoral research. During this period, which totals four successive months of investigation (from January to April 2017), I did a participative observation of these practitioner’s groups, as well as long and non-directive ethnographic interviews. My field was mainly the districts of Taigu, Qixian, Yuci and Pingyao—precisely with the Dai 戴, Song 宋 and Che 車 lineages of martial arts practitioners.

⁵ As such, it is worth considering the idea dear to K. Schipper that Daoism is a concept invented by the West, see Schipper 1995, pp. 467-491.

⁶ Also, the structural approach “for the anthropologist comparative studies compensate to some extent for the absence of written documents.” See Lévi-Strauss 2003, p. 28.

⁷ Blackburn 2016, p. 461.

嚴瑞龍 (n.d.-1751).⁸ This letter, written in 1742, the 7th year of the reign of Qianlong 乾隆 (1735-1796), is entitled “Official Communication from Shanxi Province Governor Yan Ruilong Calling for Prohibition of Illegal Activities of Escorts” (山西布政使嚴瑞龍為請嚴禁保鏢胡作非為事奏折). The second document is an inventory of weapon possession written on May 14, 1906, that is to say during the 32nd year of the reign of Guangxu 光緒 (1875-1908), in which the mandarins identified the existence in Beijing of 13 escort companies, comprising a total of 134 rifles.⁹

My latest ethnographic research reveals that except those few pieces of information, scholar-bureaucrats of the imperial government did not actually record the social composition and economic activities of *biaoju*. This is not only due to the confidentiality of convoy activities and the process of transmitting escort knowledge based on orality, but also to the lack of interest on the part of officials for escort groups and their activities, thus explaining the lack of information in *difangzhi* 地方志, the local monographs. Moreover, the illiteracy of the escorts, originally from peasant backgrounds, is one of the causes for the very limited written information available in the *jiapu* 家譜, the family registers (many of which were burned during the Cultural Revolution).

This article is divided into three sections. The first two sections deal with two social factors which fostered the creation of the escort profession, namely: (1) the trade activities of Shanxi merchants and their rise from the end of the 16th century to the foundation of their banking system in China at the end of 19th century; and (2) the threat of brigandage in Northern China during the Qing Dynasty. The last section, taking into account the aforementioned factors, presents the *biaoju* phenomenon first in its informal, then formal dimensions, with the emergence of an escort profession in the middle Qing.

1. The Shanxi Merchants

1.1. Two Turning Points in Their Evolution

The purpose of this section is not to outline the history of Jinshang, but to present two of the main historical markers of their evolution: the “salt license” and the “market opening policies.” For this reason, we shall skip from one dynasty to another to focus only on the most significant turning points of their trading activities.

Since the beginning, trade activities in China have been closely related to the production and commerce of salt. In his historical work, Professor Zhang

⁸ Qianlong Qi Nian Baobiao Shiliao, 4: 157.

⁹ Guangxu Sanshi'er Nian Jingcheng Guanli Biaoju Qiangzhi Shiliao, 3: 61.

Zhengming 張正明 explains that the character 賈 (*gu*, meaning merchant) comes from its homophone *gu* 鹽 (lit. unrefined salt) related to the natural saline lake of Yuncheng 运城, and called *xiechiyan* 解池鹽, in Shanxi province. Professor Zhang argues in particular that the first three dynasties, the Xia 夏 (ca. 2070-1600 B.C.), the Shang 商 (ca. 1600-1027 B.C.) and the Zhou 周 (ca. 1046-256 B.C.) based their economy on the exploitation and consumption of salt which Yuncheng Lake, geographically close, offered in abundance. According to Zhang's researches, China's first merchants may well have been the Jinshang.¹⁰

However, the salt trade really turned to Jinshang's advantage a few centuries later. That brings us to 986, during the Song 宋 Dynasty (960-1279). The Song government established a monopoly on salt, issuing salt licenses, called *yanyin* 鹽引, to the merchants.¹¹ The *yanyin* policy of the Song may be considered as one of Jinshang's greatest development factors and, therefore, a factor that helped them establish their influence in the world of trade. Indeed, the Song took into consideration the advantage of the geographical location of Shanxi merchants, and the license to sell salt was first granted to them before it was applied to merchants from other provinces.¹²

The following dynasty, the Yuan 元 (1279-1368), imitated the Song *yanyin* policy. As early as 1284, the Mongolian authorities granted all traders the right to sell salt, provided they had a license.¹³ Nevertheless, the Jinshang kept the advantage of their privileged geographical location under the Ming 明 Dynasty (1368-1644), because the Ming government needed to transport army provisions to border posts, *bianzhen liangxiang* 邊鎮糧餉. In order to facilitate the transport of supplies to soldiers posted along the northern borders, the Ming introduced an economic measure called *kaizhongzhi* 開中制, the "[market] opening system." Implemented in 1370, it is a mutual agreement¹⁴ between the authorities and the merchants, aimed at removing the government monopoly on salt, as well as all restrictions on its production, sale and transport.¹⁵ However, this mutual and "informal" agreement was that the *yanyin* would be granted only on one condition: that

¹⁰ Zhang Zhengming 2001, pp. 1-8.

¹¹ Huang Jianhui 2002, p. 2.

¹² Zhang Zhengming 2001, pp. 8-30; Ye & Wilson 2001, p. 155. Among the various groups of merchants were the Huishang 徽商 (Anhui merchants), the Yueshang 粵商 (Cantonese merchants), the Minshang 閩商 (Fujian merchants), Jiangyoushang 江右商 (Jiangxi merchants), and Wuyueshang 吳越商 (Zhejiang merchants).

¹³ Huang Jianhui 2002, p. 2.

¹⁴ On the measure inherited from the Northern Song 北宋 (960-1127) called *zhezongzhi* 折中制 (trade-off policy), see *ibid*.

¹⁵ *Mingshi Shihuo* 明史 食貨志, 77: 155.

the armies at the border posts be supplied.¹⁶ It is also interesting to note that the *kaizhong* policy was applied in Datong prefecture 大同鎮 (current city of Datong), which became one of the nine military garrisons of China in 1372, called *jiuzhen* 九鎮 or *jiubian* 九邊,¹⁷ because of its location in a strategic area at the northernmost border of Shanxi province.

To summarize, the *kaizhong* policy satisfied the interests of merchants as much as it facilitated the transport of foodstuff to border regions. In other words, the government saw this “agreement” as a major means of solving both logistical and economic problems, while merchants could once again profit from the free trade, which made this social class one of the richest in late imperial China.

1.2. Interactions between Merchants and Peasants

In 1681, the Manchu government entered a period of stability¹⁸ that proved prosperous since a number of economic reforms were implemented at that time. These encouraged the resumption of regular trading activities, which were held back for more than fifty years by revolts and conflicts.¹⁹ The various groups of regional merchants once again resumed their activities, travelling the roads towards major urban centres. Large fairs with multiple regional characteristics, formerly known as *tianxia siju* 天下四聚 (“The Four Great Assemblies”), were created in the four important urban centres of that time: Beijing for the northern regions, Foshan for those in the South, Suzhou for the

¹⁶ According to Professor Liu Jiansheng 劉建生 (Shanxi University), this agreement was “informal” by nature, in the sense that the government had made a special “deal” with the merchants from Shanxi province. Prof. Liu also argues that this “deal” meant that a relative freedom in trade would be granted the Jinshang only if they invested money to support the building of the Great Wall sections at the northern border of Shanxi. Ethnographic note collected in Taiyuan (Shanxi) on 20.03.2017.

¹⁷ *Qianlong Datong Fu Zhi*, 4: 32.

¹⁸ Indeed, trade did not immediately resume when the Manchus seized power. The Revolt of the Three Feudatories (*sanfan zhi luan* 三藩之亂), led by General Wu Sangui 吳三桂 (1612-1678) and two other vassals, Geng Zhongming 耿仲明 (1604-1649) and Shang Kexi 尚可喜 (1604-1676), again paralyzed trading, from 1673 to 1681, mainly in the provinces of Sichuan, Guangxi, Hunan, Fujian, Guangzhou, Jiangxi, Shaanxi and Gansu. See Spence & Petterson 2002, p. 159.

¹⁹ Popular uprisings, linked to tensions between the peasant class and the powerful landowners, were expected to lead to a slowdown in trading activities for almost half a century. Firstly, the Wang Er 王二 revolt in 1627 in Shaanxi 陝西 province, which lasted 31 years and marked the end of the Ming Dynasty. Secondly, from 1644 to 1658, another war led by the peasants in a dozen regions such as the Mianchi 澠池 in Henan province, Shanhaiguan 山海關 in Hebei, and Xiangyang 襄陽 in Hubei. See Guo Chengkang 2002, pp. 293-294.

East and Hankou (now Wuhan) for the West.²⁰ These fairs were to produce a trade flow, which inevitably required the establishment of logistical organization for long-distance transport. This concerned the transport of merchandise, but above all, the essential factor in all commercial exchange: the convoy of merchant's capital.

Consequently, as we will see in the section below devoted to the brigands, the frequent traffic and movement of caravans through isolated roads led to an increase of insecurity embodied by the phenomenon of brigandage. The risk thus incurred by the merchants on the roads received little attention from the Qing government. Indeed, the Qing inherited the *kaizhong* policy from their predecessors,²¹ but, paradoxically, they also retained another policy from previous dynasties which was to “promote agricultural development and restrict commercial activities” (*zhongnong yishang* 重農抑商).²²

At that time, China's imperial economic ideal was, to a certain extent, close to the physiocracy theory,²³ according to which the promotion of land agriculture was deemed more “natural” and therefore put forward instead of trading activities.²⁴ As a result, it was inconceivable for the Manchus to even consider placing at the disposal of the merchant class a military service whose function would be to ensure the protection of convoys. The convoys of funds consisted in the transport of silver money, and two social classes were, at this period, mainly concerned with long-distance travel, namely merchants and future candidates for imperial examinations.

The volume and the weight would become problematic not only for the provincials who applied for imperial examinations in the capital, but also for the merchants, whose sums of money exceeded by far those of the scholars.²⁵ We note in this regard that, as far as brigandage was concerned, the implicit rules of travel through isolated areas placed two hierarchically different, even opposed social classes—merchants and scholars—on the same level. Furthermore, it is interesting to observe how the appearance of a new efficient agent—the brigand—tended to modify the structure of the “field”, and forces social relationship between the two classes which otherwise would not interact.²⁶

²⁰ *Guangyang Zaji*, p. 54.

²¹ Ye & Wilson 2001, p. 155. However, at the end of Ming, the *kaizhong* policy was replaced by a system close to *kaizhong* (the so-called *gangyunzhi* 綱運制) which allowed the traders to continue their commercial business. See Zhang Zhengming 2001, pp. 9-29; Zhongguo Shehui Kexueyuan (ed.) 2008, p. 49.

²² Reynolds 1985, pp. 102-103.

²³ According to the notion of “rational economy” defined by the anthropologist Maurice Godelier. See Godelier 1965, pp. 32-91.

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁵ Wang Ermin 2009, pp. 396-397.

²⁶ Bourdieu 2000, pp. 235-259.

The martial arts practitioners belonged to the peasant class. But because they were in charge of protecting the convoys, they were certainly one of the social classes that had the strongest collaboration with the traders. This collaboration, which increased with the emergence of brigandage in the northern regions of the empire, would become, for the numerous families of merchants travelling through dangerous and isolated roads, a safe and sustainable means of developing their commercial activities.²⁷ Finally, the collaboration with peasants who had inherited a martial art tradition not only helped the merchant class activities, but also promoted social recognition of the traders. Initially located at the bottom of the social ladder, the traders were then able to compete with social classes of higher rank. Indeed, during the Ming-Qing period, the merchant class was ranked at the fourth position in the traditional hierarchy of the four social classes in imperial China: bureaucrats (mandarins) and scholars, *shi* 士; peasants, *nong* 農; workers, *gong* 工; and merchants, *shang* 商.²⁸

1.3. *Piaohao: The Jinshang's Banking System*

As we have seen above, brigandage in Shanxi province, which essentially took place in the remote northern plains of the region, forced collaboration between two social classes—peasants and merchants—that everything seemed to oppose. This social interaction supported a regional economy which led to a form of economic liberalization. Merchants could thereby enjoy a new autonomy in capital exchange which can be “characterized as [an] old [version of] capitalism where free competition prevailed.”²⁹ In return, this form of liberal economic system induced cooperation between merchants and escorts. These factors gradually gave birth to the first formal escort companies.

Besides the responsibility of protecting merchants and their goods, the escort companies also played an important role in enforcing loans repayment. Indeed, due to increasingly dynamic monetary exchanges, transportation under escort contributed significantly to the coordination of commercial transactions submitted to delays and applied to the entire circle of regional trading. Thus, new financial structures aimed at providing better conditions for the opening of credit and acquisition of debt rights for traders were soon to appear. In comparison, the merchants of late imperial China closely resembled the European merchants of the 16th century, who made up the pre-eminent capitalist organizations.³⁰

²⁷ Liu Jiansheng 2014, pp. 28-31.

²⁸ Ye & Richard 2001, p. 174.

²⁹ It can be argued that merchants were the bearers of a capitalist tendency in late imperial China, and the word “capitalism” is used here according to the meaning that is given in the long-term historical approach. See Braudel 2008, pp. 117-118.

³⁰ Pairault 2009, pp. 25-26.

Moreover, the argument which defines this new commercial dynamism as the preamble of a merchant capitalism trend is becoming more convincing, as trade has been linked, during the 18th century, to the creation of firms based on a banking system called *piaohao* 票號, “[money] order firm.” The Rishengchang 日升昌 firm is recognized as the first *piaohao* of China, founded in Pingyao by the merchant Lei Lütai 雷履泰 (1770-1849).³¹ Nonetheless, historical research based on primary sources contained in the *Shanxi Piaohao Shiliao* 山西票號史料 [*Historical Documents of Shanxi's Order Firms*], presents some controversial hypothesis about the origins of *piaohao*.³² Indeed, to quote only one example, according to the manuscript *Pingyao Piaozhuang Jilie* 平遙票庄紀略 [*Memories of Pingyao's Order Firms*], from the Institute of Historical Research of Pingyao, the first *piaohao* would, actually, have been the Xiyucheng 西玉[裕]成 firm.³³

Piaohao structures were obligated to produce *huipiao* 匯票, a sort of paper document guaranteeing the payment of money at a set time. Indeed, in order to overcome the problems encountered due to the weight of the goods carried and insecurity on the roads, Lei Lütai set up a new system of exchange of these documents based on a secret code, *mimafa* 密碼法.³⁴ The other existing related monetary structures such as *qianzhuang* 錢庄 (lit. cash reserve) or *zhangju* 賬局 (account companies) were also adapted to the settlement mode of the goods transit system operated by the *piaohao*, as well as on the common calendar of transits, *biaoqi* 標[鏢]期. The interest earned by merchants by providing these particular banking services, called *biaoli* 標[鏢]利, were calculated on a monthly or annual rate applied to the money deposited by customers.³⁵

2. The Brigands

2.1. Shanxi Province and Brigandage

To understand the context in which the phenomenon of brigandage took place in the life of merchants, we have to consider the natural environment, the distances travelled and the administrative situation of the areas crossed.

³¹ Wei Juxian 2008, pp. 80-81.

³² Huang Jianhui (dir.) 2002, pp. 11-15.

³³ The head office was located in the actual West Street (Xidajie 西大街) of the ancient town of Pingyao, and the second branch in Beijing, precisely in the 10th alley of Caochang 草厂, south part outside the gate of Chongwen 崇文. See Wei Juxian 2008, p. 11.

³⁴ Data collected during my ethnographic survey in Rishengchang 日升昌 Museum, Pingyao, Shanxi, 09.03.2017.

³⁵ Kong Xiangyi 2004, pp. 117-125.

A commercial trip, depending on the means used for the transport of goods— animals (i.e. horses, and camels) or vehicles (one- or two-wheel carts, and boats)—could take from one month to a whole year, which would be spent on the road. Throughout the imperial era, environmental and political conditions in Northern China made Shanxi a geographically closed space, in which the movement of men was particularly difficult. On the one hand, natural conditions such as the encirclement of the province by the Taihang Mountains 太行山 to the East and the Yin Mountains 陰山 and Loess Plateau to the North, made the region hardly accessible. On the other hand, the region was controlled by border guard posts, *menguan* 門關, particularly by the Mengjin 孟津 post in Henan province and the Tongguan 潼關 post (Shaanxi) in the South, and especially the city of Lüliang 呂梁 in the West and the Yanmen 雁門雁門 post in the North.

Historical research has pointed out that brigandage tends to be present in areas where state authority is weak. In other words, brigands lurk in mountains and frontier zones.³⁶ Due to its geographical location, Shanxi was a favorable environment for organized groups involved in criminal activities such as plunder. The north of Shanxi province is indeed a vast desert plateau covered by fertile loess sediment suitable for agriculture, but the population distribution is uneven because of the erosion of soil and arid climate, which make human settlement difficult.

In late imperial China, Shanxi was, among other provinces like Sichuan or Anhui, one of the “brigands’ regions”, and the Qing government treated these regions differently in its penal code.³⁷ It is interesting to note that Shanxi province was receiving special attention from the authorities without real consequences: acts of plunder appeared to be more severely punished than in other provinces, but the willingness of merchants to escort their goods may show the state’s lack of power when faced with robbery. As for the escort activities, robbery as a phenomenon itself does not seem to be well documented in archives³⁸ essentially because of its minor historical significance. However, we can appreciate how seriously caravan attacks were taken from the following comment:

In Shansi, a general provision prevails that robbery by three or more entails a degree greater severity of punishment than for the ordinary offence. The above provisions in their entirety apply to what are called ‘armed bands’, to constitute which it is sufficient that but one member of the band has but a knife: but not much distinction is made in the application of the rules to unarmed bands—the various penalties being lessened by one degree.³⁹

³⁶ Braudel 1947, pp. 129-142.

³⁷ *Notes and Commentaries on Chinese Criminal Law, and Cognate Topics*, p. 402.

³⁸ At least at the current status of my research.

³⁹ *Notes and Commentaries on Chinese Criminal Law, and Cognate Topics*, p. 403.

2.2. Brigandage Linked to Governmental Corruption and Violence

The purpose of this brief section is not to provide exhaustive research or to focus on one precise dynasty, but to underline two factors which come into play in the development of brigandage and that we consider relevant for this article: corruption during the Ming Dynasty, and violence during the Qing Dynasty. During the Ming period, the majority of banditry cases were concentrated in South China, and had been since the reign of Yongle 永樂 (1402-1424), because of a lack of governmental presence.⁴⁰ Indeed, at that time, the capital, which represented the government's power, had been transferred to the North. However, the atmosphere of insecurity, to a certain extent, was no less real in the desert regions of the North close to the capital than on the maritime coasts of the South.

In this regard, the proposal supporting the fact that a strong imperial presence around Beijing could have played a role in the development of brigandage is particularly interesting.⁴¹ This point of view makes it possible to grasp another logic that could drive a population to plunder. In this sense, brigandage in northern China during late Ming Dynasty should not be separated from the corrupt mode of governance. The two are linked by a complex interaction between officials and smugglers.⁴²

By the time of the Qing conquest of China, however, another factor that may relate the mode of governance to the development of brigandage is the many massacres and slaughters perpetrated by the Manchus. Although these lasted for several years, some were virtually forgotten. The Yangzhou massacre, for instance, remained so until the discovery of the *Yangzhou Shiri* 揚州十日 (*Ten Days of Yangzhou*), which “is certainly the most complete testimony of the worst atrocities that occurred during the Ming-Qing transition.”⁴³ The Manchus established their domination on the whole Chinese territory with such violence that it is difficult to imagine how this conquest could have no consequences on the social stability of the country, especially in the most remote regions of the North shared by Han and Manchu ethnic groups. Violent governance caused social disorder⁴⁴ in the major

⁴⁰ It is well explained in historical researches how and why pirates and “mountain bandits” could precisely thrive in the southern regions. See James Tong 1991, p. 58; Calanca 2011, pp. 135-136.

⁴¹ Robinson 2000, p. 528.

⁴² This would also be the reason why the flourishing salt trade, encouraged by the authorities and undertaken by the merchants, was to be the subject of a great deal of smuggling. Moreover, the six places where salt was stored, were located around the capital, so that it could be transported to the strategic defensive border areas such as Datong, and the northern part of this region, the actual border of Inner Mongolia, was paradoxically renowned as being a particularly risky area for merchants. See Robinson 2000, p. 533.

⁴³ Wang Xiuchu (Pierre Kaser transl.) 2013, pp. 36-37.

⁴⁴ Ethnic conflicts, class tensions due to social inequalities and the appearance of anti-Manchu sectarian movements under the cover of secret societies were among the main social disorders.

urban centres that diverted the authorities' attention away from rural areas, and thus provided a suitable ground for the development of "highwaymen"⁴⁵ plunder on border roads. In this sense, far from being an isolated and innocuous phenomenon, brigandage is by nature a social activity that remains the result of economic and political decisions, but also of social order which relates to the degree of virtue and moral duty emanating from the powerful representatives of society.⁴⁶

2.3. Brigandage on Long-distance Commercial Trips

While during the Ming Dynasty Jinshang's development relied primarily on the flourishing salt trade and the success of the *kaizhong* policy, from the 17th century onwards Shanxi merchants also started trading tea, thus opening a new *chashang* 茶商—a "commercial tea [road]" which connected Shanxi province to Kyakhta, near the Mongolia-Russia border. Moreover, at that time, the Jinshang also traded precious lacquer from Sichuan, sheep wool and buffalo hides from the Hure Banner in the south-east of Inner Mongolia. The success of commercial business manifested itself through the increasing volume and frequency of caravan's convoys and naturally attracted the attention of thieves.⁴⁷

An archival document presenting the history of Sino-Russian relations under the Qing Dynasty states that trade between Shanxi and Russian merchants took place as early as 1733—the document relates, in particular, that various goods were exchanged between Zhangjiakou and Kyakhta.⁴⁸

In 1765, Jinshang's commercial activities became more international. As it is mentioned in *Shanxi Lishi Ditu Ji* 山西歷史地圖集, tea exports to Mongolia and Siberia even reached Europe.⁴⁹ Xu Jiyu 徐繼畲 (1795-1873), a geographer and a Shanxi native who had collected information about the Jinshang's trading activities, also wrote a few words about the Shanxi province brigandage activities in his scholarly work.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Since brigandage has its own field, governed by its rites, its laws, its code of honour and even its justice, it results in a complex phenomenon, which can however be understood through two social dimensions, namely the "declared" brigands and the "illegal" brigands, also named "highwaymen." See Guichet 2005, pp. 131-141.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁷ Huang Jianhui 2002, pp. 109-115.

⁴⁸ *Qingdai Zhong-e Guanxi Dang'an Shiliao Xuanbian*, pp. 119, 272-274.

⁴⁹ See also "Qingdai Jinshang Shanglu" 清代晋商商路, in *Shanxi Lishi Ditu Ji* 山西歷史地圖集, mentioned by Liu Jiansheng 2014, p. 37. The tea was transported from Fujian province to Henan province, from where the goods transited to Shanxi province via Pingyao, Qixian, Taigu, Xinzhou and Datong. The merchandise was then transported again from Datong to Zhangjiakou in Hebei province; from there, the transit resumed to Kyakhta after crossing the Mongolian steppes of the Hure Banner, see *ibid*.

⁵⁰ *Song Kan Quanji*, 3: 3.

2.4. Collective Representations of Brigands

This section proposes a modest reflection about the image of brigands in the civil society's collective representation⁵¹ of northern China by exposing, first, a Chinese classification of plunderers and, secondly, by defining their socio-cultural identity. In my research, the information collected about the brigands emanates essentially from the vision that merchants and escorts had of them, whether this information being recorded either in official historiography or transmitted by popular narratives from one generation to the next. The methodological approach used in this survey is less concerned with the historical truthfulness of the information studied as facts to understand brigandage,⁵² than by the way brigand's image fed into the collective consciousness, that is to say, into a set of moral attitudes, shared beliefs and ideas, which operated as a unifying force within society.⁵³

In northern China, brigands were commonly associated with the marginal and barbaric populations living beyond the Great Wall, “*saiwai* 塞外”, and were called *tufei* 土匪, *daofei* 盜匪 or *zei* 賊 which are all terms used as synonyms of “brigand.” However, there are subtle nuances between the terms used in Chinese to describe robbery.

At least two practices of brigandage are to be distinguished: *daoqie* 盜竊, “steal furtively”, and *qiangjie* 搶劫, “armed plunder”, or robbery by force and violence. Brigands did not systematically resort to violence during their attacks, and according to escort's descendant testimonies, there were three kinds of plunderers:⁵⁴ the “professional” exerting his hegemony in an isolated territory; the ancient criminal “specialized” in robbery and hidden in rural areas; the “amateur” in a situation of desperate poverty.⁵⁵

The “professionals” avoided conflict as much as possible because they knew that violence was not profitable. They endeavoured to open negotiations by forcing the merchants to pay a right of way, and a complex cooperative relationship was established between them and the escorts. The “specialists” were former criminals on the run, and their interest in money pushed them to risk their life in plundering a convoy, but these attacks were always well

⁵¹ Durkheim 2014, pp. 339-340.

⁵² In an anthropological approach, man as a social being and his activities are always observed and analysed through their ethnic background and cultural context. Considering writing history as a social activity in itself, the historian is therefore never entirely free from social conditioning. This research is more focused on how merchants and escorts considered brigands rather than on the veracity of their testimonies. Far from refuting the historiographical approach, it nevertheless raises the epistemological question of truth in history. See also Jacques Derrida's thought on history by Hervé 2016, pp. 231-244.

⁵³ D. Jary & J. Jary 1991, p. 93.

⁵⁴ Liu Jiansheng 2014, pp. 176-178.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

prepared. They preferred to “steal furtively” rather than use violence. On the contrary, “amateurs” represented the most dangerous threat to merchants and escorts because of the absence of an organizational framework structured around a long-term logic. They were wandering groups, had little regard for life and little prospect for the future.⁵⁶

In the north of Shanxi, the brutality of attacks against convoys is expressed in some popular narratives. For example, the following popular song describing the region of Shahukou 殺虎(胡)口⁵⁷ probably best symbolizes the Shanxi merchants’ fear of brigands.⁵⁸

殺虎[胡]口，殺虎[胡]口，
沒有錢財難過口。
不是丟錢財，
就是刀砍頭。
過了虎[胡]口心還抖。

The Killing-tigers [strangers]-pass⁵⁹
Hard to cross without wealth.
By the sword, your head will be cut off,
If all of your belongings are not given.
But even after passing through,
Your heart keeps shivering.

The above information is somewhat relevant to plunder practices which affected Shanxi merchants on their commercial trips in northern China, but says little about the brigand’s ethnicity nor what language they spoke during the Qing period. Knowing more about their cultural background and language would tell us a lot about their mode of interaction with merchants and escorts, which is essential to understand how escort companies organized the protection of caravans.

According to historical research and considering that these brigands were groups inhabiting the steppes “beyond the Great Wall”, that is to say belonging to various “nomad tribes” of Northern China, they certainly had a

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

⁵⁷ Originally 殺胡口 (lit. the “killing-strangers-pass”), the toponymy reveals that the name used for this place was considered as an offense for the Manchus authorities, who changed the character *hu*, 胡 “stranger”, into its homophone *hu* 虎 “tiger”, to finally become Shahukou 殺虎口 (the “killing-tigers-pass”). Shahukou being the only commercial route to connect Shanxi province to Baotou, the merchants had no alternative but to take this route; it was the main border linking Shanxi to the Mongolian steppe. Data collected during an ethnographic survey at Shahukou’s museum in Shuozhou, Youyu County, on April 2nd 2017.

⁵⁸ Liu Jiansheng 2014, p. 37.

⁵⁹ See *supra.*, footnote 58.

social and cultural affiliation. During early imperial China, some of their ancestors may well have been the Xiongnu 匈奴⁶⁰—a population organized around a pastoral, semi-nomadic tradition⁶¹ and living in yurts or troglodytic houses. They dwelt in peripheral regions of the empire and, according to the Chinese historical vision that the “Middle Empire” is at the centre of the world, the Xiongnu appeared as an “uncivilized” population in the mind of the Chinese.⁶² The non-Han people of the steppes were therefore assimilated to barbarians under generic and recurring terms such as *yi* 夷, *rong* 戎, *di* 狄 and *man* 蠻.⁶³

The Jesuit missions during the late Qing Dynasty led the missionaries to Mongolian lands, but also to Manchuria, where the missionaries’ observations indicate that these tribes could speak a little Chinese, notably Mongols living between Shanxi and the current Inner Mongolia.⁶⁴ Among the scattered tribes of northern China, those met by the missionaries were mostly “Tungus, Evenks, Daur, Solons, Mongol Khalkas, Nivkh (Ghiliaks), Oroquens, Goldes (Nanai) and Yakuts”,⁶⁵ but also Chinese.⁶⁶

Merchants and escorts were travelling through lands where these ethnic groups lived and, without claiming to have identified the groups which threatened travellers in these regions, we can however imagine that the ethnic groups mentioned above could have a place in the complex robbery network operating during the Qing.⁶⁷

Still, the threat of brigandage was real for merchants and escorts who perceived it via either physical violence or at least some sort of psychological pressure:

按著鏢行的規矩，“賊”是朋友[...] 可是干鏢行的死在賊手裡的，也不在少數。⁶⁸
In accordance with the rules of the escort profession, “brigands” are friends [...].
However, a large number of escorts died by the looters’ hand.

⁶⁰ Grousset 2008, pp. 209, 419, 466.

⁶¹ According to Charles Hucker, northern nomads were not entirely nomad, especially the Manchus who, for Hucker, were not nomads. Hucker, in fact, claims that after 1368 “the tension between farmer and nomad was no longer a major theme in Chinese history.” See Hucker 1978, p. 2 (cited in Wakeman 1985, p. 24).

⁶² The following question seems quite relevant: “[...] mobility, the strategic position of Mongolia, and a space offering a certain fluidity of movements are ideal conditions for the exchange of goods. Why would the Xiongnu use such assets only for looting in China [...], when they had the opportunity to get rich in long-distance trade?” See Holotová Szinek 2009.

⁶³ Rabut (ed.) 2010, pp. 13-14.

⁶⁴ *Monseigneur Verrolles et la Mission de Mandchourie*, p. 104.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

⁶⁶ The Han were admitted to Manchuria, but they could not build a home nor start a family; they were vagabonds and no longer represented a social elite. See *Ibid.*, pp. 135-136.

⁶⁷ I am therefore careful not to confuse any of the aforementioned ethnic groups with the brigands involved in the plunder of trader’s caravans.

⁶⁸ *Baobiao Shenghuo*, pp. 236-237.

Nevertheless, the reality and the effectiveness of brigandage should not be investigated only through the stories growing out of collective imagination, but should also be taken into consideration from the point of view of the social organization of the above steppe groups. Therefore, understanding the nature of the interactions between merchants, escorts and brigands calls for an inquiry on the very nature of their plunder practices, and deeper research on their cultural background and social organisation in late imperial China.

3. *Biaojū: The “Escort Companies”*

3.1. *Non-formal and Formal Dimensions of Escort*

The existence of formal escort companies is directly linked to the needs traders had to ensure the frequency and the routing of high-value goods by inland waterways or by land.⁶⁹ This research, according to the ethnographic data mentioned in the introduction, confirms the hypothesis that formal escort activities date back to the reign of Qianlong 乾隆 (1735-1796). The existence of the first company, *Xinglong Biaojū* 興隆鏢局, is well attested during this period, but it remains unsure who founded it.

The creation of the *Xinglong* company is attributed to a martial artist supposedly from Shanxi province and known as Zhang Heiwu 張黑五 (n.d.).⁷⁰ The term “*biaojū*”, translated as “escort company”, would yet appear lately and for the first time under the form “鏢局” during the Republican period (1912-1949).⁷¹

However, we cannot ignore the fact that a non-formal escort activity had to exist long⁷² before the historical appearance of private and formal companies.⁷³ Li Yaochen 李堯臣 (1876-1973), former escort from late imperial period until the first decade of the Republic, for example, mentions in his testimony that vagrants with some skill in martial arts used to improvise escorting by selling their rudimentary protection services to travellers and traders in roadside inns.⁷⁴ Yet,

⁶⁹ Wang Ermin 2009, p. 396.

⁷⁰ Wei Juxian 2008, p. 4.

⁷¹ Ji Canzhong 2013, pp. 13, 185; see also Wan Laisheng 1929, p. 257.

⁷² It would be relevant to identify from the ancient texts and imperial archives the various activities related to the escort of traders since the beginning of the Chinese imperial era. Current conditions do not allow me to explore such a broad chronological framework, so I am essentially sticking to the Ming and Qing periods.

⁷³ The meaning I give to the notion of “formal” corresponds to the definition of anthropologist Jean-Marc de Grave, according to whom “the formal dimension implies a will to rationalize knowledge or know-how in order to systematize its transmission.” See de Grave 2012, p. 31.

⁷⁴ *Baobiao Shenghuo*, p. 231.

rather than hiring vagrants of unknown reputation, the merchant class from Shanxi preferred to trust masters who could claim a socially recognized martial lineage. It is under these circumstances that the connection between Shanxi merchants and renowned local martial arts masters initiated the new profession of *biaoshi* 鏢師, the “escort-masters”, and the structure of escort activity formally took shape.

To summarize, at the current stage of research, the escort activity can be chronologically divided in two moments: before 1735, escort existed in a non-formal dimension; afterward, it progressively became formal. The professionalism at work during transport explains this distinction insofar as it is part of the degree of cooperation initiated by merchants and escorts. Indeed, the primary forms of escort had a limited spatial and material scope. These “amateur’s” services were mainly concerned with occasional close protection: the transport of heavy goods, over long distances, often exceeded their organizational framework. The creation of formal escort companies, on the other hand, made it possible to structure the profession, in particular to allow the market value of the skill that the escort-masters implemented in the protection of caravans to increase in parallel with the evolution of their social status.

3.2. Escort Activity in Classical Literature and Oral Tradition

As is mentioned above, the non-formal escort activity carried out by “vagrants” and “amateur” martial arts practitioners may well be prior to the Qing period. Based on studies done on pre-modern Chinese fiction literature and on oral tradition, hypotheses have been proposed about the first escort activities. The historian Fu Yiling 傅衣凌 (1911-1988) expressed his doubts as to the fact that escort companies originated in the Qing Dynasty. According to him, during the Ming period the convoy’s activities were known as *biaoke* 標客 ([to make] goods travel) and the origin of escort companies would date back to the Wanli 萬曆 era (1563-1620).⁷⁵ This is a plausible version considering that, at that time, it was quite common for goods stored in the capital to be moved under protection.⁷⁶

Classical fiction literature also provides information on escorts before the Qing. It would have been surprising if the *Shuihuzhuan* 水滸傳⁷⁷ (14th century) had not mentioned this phenomenon. Chapter 16, for example, describes the transport under close protection of a gold and silver merchandise convoy.⁷⁸ Moreover, the narrative gives precise details as to the tactics being used by brigands to steal

⁷⁵ Fu Yiling 1956, p. 174.

⁷⁶ Wei Juxian 2008, p. 6.

⁷⁷ See Shi Nai'an & Luo Guanzhong 1985.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 197-225. Research concerning escort activities through information in classical literature is, in fact, detailed in most Chinese studies about *biaojie* phenomenon. See notably Li Jinlong & Liu Yinghai 2007, pp. 9-11.

merchandise, but very little about the methods to protect it. Chapters 55, 66 and 69 of *Jin Ping Mei* 金瓶梅⁷⁹ (late Ming) also mention the transport of money under protection on “escort boats”, *biaochuan* 標船. The unknown author of the novel used the character *biao* 標 to designate the convoy.⁸⁰ This character appears again in the works of Pu Songling 蒲松齡 (1640-1715), where he describes the crossing of a dangerous region of Shanxi province: “[...] 雇了二十名標槍 [...]” (“[...] twenty lancers were hired” [...]). This brief passage clearly illustrates that the practice of the employment of a non-formal armed escort group existed at the beginning of the Qing.⁸¹

Lastly, another version, based on oral traditions and exposed by the contemporary researcher Wei Juxian, remains acceptable considering the social context of the Ming-Qing transition, but cannot be seriously taken as historical evidence of the creation of escort companies in their formal dimension. The hypothesis in question suggests that escort companies were created by the historian and linguist Gu Yanwu 顧炎武 (1613-1682), with the support of the scholar and calligrapher Fu Shan 傅山 (1607-1684), who both were fervent opponents of the Manchus. They would then have set up an organization to protect convoys carrying the funds for revolutionary militias composed essentially of peasants and martial arts practitioners. Protecting merchants and their goods would have been a disguise to dispel doubts the authorities might have had.⁸²

3.3. Transmission of Escorts and Martial Arts Lineage

Since Qianlong’s reign, in order to avoid any risk of attack in the steppes, several escorts-masters formally accompanied merchant’s convoys. Like men, animals were also part of the caravans. Among them were camels or pack-horses and dogs, which had a guard role along the journey, especially at night.⁸³ The escorts travelled at an average of three to four times a year. A convoy usually lasted three months. Since merchants and escorts had a relationship based on mutual trust, the receipts for the delivery of goods were not claimed by the latter and they were paid once a year, on the first month of the Lunar Year.⁸⁴ At the end of the 19th century, escort activity was specialized in six distinct sectors: “escort of letters”, *xinbiao* 信鏢; “escort of mandates”, *piaobiao* 票鏢; “escort of money”, *yinbiao* 銀鏢; “escort of food”, *liangbiao* 糧鏢; “escort of various merchandise”, *wubiao* 物鏢; and “escort to the person”, *renshenbiao* 人身鏢.

⁷⁹ Lanling Xiaoxiao Sheng 1992, vol. 1, pp. 727, 904; and *ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 963.

⁸⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁸¹ Pu Songling 1999, pp. 676-677.

⁸² Wei Juxian 2008, p. 6.

⁸³ *Qing Bai Lei Chao*, 5: 2309.

⁸⁴ Liu Jiansheng 2014, pp. 53-54; Ji Kongrui 1986, p. 49.

Escort-masters claimed to belong to a specific martial lineage going back to a founding master, to whom they attributed the creation of the martial skills used in their profession. The process of lineage transmission based on the master-disciple relationship was thus used to legitimate, through its diachronic continuity, the authenticity of their skills which were organized around a “set of techniques”, that is to say “acts traditionally held to be effective.”⁸⁵

In this sense, the *biaojū* acquired a formal dimension insofar as they are structured around the transmission of martial arts—fighting skills that supposedly guaranteed the effectiveness of the implemented protection service. The Shanxi merchants were themselves martial arts enthusiasts, so they found a response to the threat of brigandage by using the martial skills of local peasants.⁸⁶ According to Chinese martial arts classification, escort-masters were both “boxers” and “swordsmen”,⁸⁷ since their bare hand fighting skills fell into the *quanshu* 拳術 category, that of the “art of boxing.”⁸⁸ One of the main boxing lineages involved in the escort profession was the *Xinyiquan* 心意拳 (lit. boxing of intention), from which a new style called *Xingyiquan* 形意拳 (boxing of form and intention) was created in the second part of the 19th century.⁸⁹

Nevertheless, the martial tradition claimed by Shanxi escorts—in particular by the lineage of the Dai 戴 family (*xinyiquan*)—finds its origin in the military art of spear handling, a process based on the principle of the “transformation of an art of the spear into an art of boxing” (*jiang qiangfa wei quanfa* 將槍法為拳法). The first known document to mention this evolution is the *Quanlun Zhiyi Xu* 拳論質疑序 [An Essay that Raises Doubts about the Boxing Theory], written by the military Wang Zicheng 王自(子)成 (n.d.) during the reign of Yongzheng 雍正 (1678-1735).⁹⁰ Nowadays, both *xinyiquan* and *xingyiquan* lineages belong to *neijia* 內家—an “internal martial art” based on Daoism’s conception of human body and Chinese ancient cosmology thought such as *Yin Yang Wu Xing Jia* 陰陽五行家 (Yin Yang and Five Phases).

⁸⁵ Mauss 1950, pp. 368-369.

⁸⁶ Ethnographic note taken on 16.03.2017 during an interview with Wang Jianzhu 王建筑, Shanxi, Yuci.

⁸⁷ I use the term “swordmen” first because of the armed fighting origin of the escort’s martial arts, and secondly because of various weapons such as single and double swords or spears carried by escorts during convoys.

⁸⁸ *Quan* literally means “fist.” During the late imperial period, it designated unarmed fighting techniques. Despite the fact that it can refer, as mentioned by Meir Shahar, to a specific Western sport, I have chosen to keep the term “boxing” instead of “hand combat” or “fist.” See also Shahar 2008, p. 113.

⁸⁹ Huang Xinming 1985, pp. 71-75; Wu Dianke 1993, pp. 14-15.

⁹⁰ *Yuncheng Renwu Zhi*, p. 50.

3.4. Martial Arts as *Biaoju*'s Intangible Assets

In this research, the link between *biaoju* and clannish martial arts traditions is studied through the ethnographic investigation presented in the introduction, in particular through interviews with the Dai family lineage, who trace their origins back to Qi County in Shanxi province. Dai family members were the founders of the Guangsheng 廣盛 company in Henan province (Shedianzhen 賒店鎮, localized in the current Nanyang 南陽 prefecture).

The company was active between 1802 and 1830, and oral testimony, as well as archival documents, reveal that the creation of the company is attributed to Dai Erlü 戴二閭 (1778-1873), the nephew and heir to Dai Longbang 戴隆邦 (1713-1803).⁹¹ The Dai family owed the Guangsheng's reputation to their martial art tradition. Merchants had great confidence in the effectiveness of their close protection.

However, the very confidential nature of Dai's skill "transmission within a closed circle" (*fengbi shidi* 封閉式地) based on the rule *yidi yixing yizu de chuanbo* 一地一姓一族的傳播 (lit. to pass down [knowledge] in one's region, to one's descendants, and within one's clan) proved to be a brake to their *biaoju*'s business.

The commercial success of an escort company naturally depended on the number of contracts signed with the merchants: the more a company hired and trained escorts, the better it could meet the trader's expectations, especially since their convoy's frequency was increasing. The Dai family therefore had to allow their knowledge and the teaching of their art to spread in order to remain competitive relative to other companies and to save the family business.

And so, since the second half of the 19th century, driven by a commercial development logic in cooperation with Shanxi merchants, Dai's lineage began an unprecedented expansion and transmission of its local and family tradition. We can therefore see how the *biaoju* phenomenon pushed martial traditions inheritors to open up the transmission of their confidential art, which became, in a way, an intangible asset guaranteeing commercialization of the escort services.

The peasants who were martial tradition inheritors were then able to exploit their fighting skills as a means of subsistence. Moreover, being an escort to merchants proved particularly lucrative for those peasants who also gained a degree of social recognition.⁹²

⁹¹ Ethnographic note taken during an interview with Dai Chuanceng (zeng) 戴傳曾 on 07.03.2017, Qixian, Shanxi.

⁹² Especially in the context of economic reforms initiated by the Manchus, and the government decision to break with sharecropping based on an autarkic system.

Tab. 1. Formal *biaoju* list⁹³

Escort companies	Place of foundation	Period of activity	Representative founder
Xinglong 興隆	Beijing, Shuntian Pref.	Qianlong (1735-1796)- Jiaqing (1796-1820)	Zhang Heiwu 張黑五 (n.d.); Zhang Huaiyu 張懷玉 (n.d.)
Huiyou 會友	Beijing, Qianmen	Qianlong (1735-1796)- 1921	Liu Dekuan 劉德寬 (1826-1911); Song Caichen 宋彩臣 (1868-1943); Wang Zhiting 王芝亭 (n.d.); Li Shaochen 李堯臣 (1876-1973)
Chengxing 成興	Cangzhou, Hebei	Jiaqing (1796-1820)- Tongzhi (1861-1875)	Li Kouming 李寇銘 (n.d.); Li Fenggang 李風崗 (n.d.); Liu Hualong 劉化龍 (n.d.); Ma Fuli 馬福利 (n.d.)
Yongsheng 永勝	Beijing	Daoguang (1820-1850)- Late Qing	Zhang Huaiwu 張懷武 (n.d.)
Weihai 衛海	Tianjin	Daoguang (1820-1850)- Xianfeng (1850-1861)	Dai Guoye 戴國爺 (n.d.)
YuYong 玉永	Suzhou, Jiangsu	Qianlong (1735-1796)- 1839	Zhang Delou 張德樓 (n.d.)
Wansheng 萬勝	Raoyang, Hebei	Jiaqing (1796-1820)- Daoguang (1820-1850)	Unknown
Zhongyi 忠義	Beijing	Tongzhi (1861-1875)- Xuantong (1908-1912)	Zhang Zhan'ao 張占鰲 (n.d.)

⁹³ List of Qing and early Republic's formal *biaoju* collected during an ethnographic survey at the Tongxinggong Escort Company Museum (Tongxinggong Biaoju Bowuguan 同興公鏢局博物館), on 08.03.2017, Pingyao, Shanxi.

Guangsheng 廣盛	Shedianzhen, Henan	1802-1830	Dai Erlü 戴二閭 (1778-1873)
Changlong 昌隆	Suzhou, Jiangsu	1840-1911	Zuo Erba 左二把 (1808-1879)
Tongxinggong 同興公	Pingyao, Shanxi	1855-1913	Wang Zhengqing 王正清 (1801-1877)
Taifen 太汾	Taiyuan, Shanxi	Daoguan (1820-1850)- Tongzhi (1861-1875)	Dai Liangdong 戴良棟 (1834-1915); Li Luoneng 李洛能 (1788-1876)
Yuanshun 源順	Zhushikou, Beijing	1878-1900	Wang Zibin 王子斌 (1844-1900)
Sanhe 三合	Zhangjiakou, Hebei	1890-1907	An Jinyuan 安晉元 (n.d.); Zhao Guangdi 趙光第 (n.d.)
Wantong 萬通	Baoding, Hebei	1891-1899	Li Cunyi 李存義 (1847-1921)
Xingyuan 興元	Sanchahe, Inner Mongolia	Late Qing	Wang Fuyuan 王福元 (n.d.)
Hongqi 紅旗	Xuzhou, Jiangsu	Guangxu (1875-1908)- Republic (1912-1949)	Xu Xingwu 徐興武 (n.d.)
Desheng 德勝	Shenyang, Liaoning	Guangxu (1875- 1908)-Republic (1912-1949)	Dong Zhongyi 佟忠義 (1878-1963)
Gongsheng 公勝	Beijing	Daoguang (1820-1850)- Xianfeng (1850-1861)	Ma Fen 馬芬 (n.d.)
Qidong 濟東	Feicheng, Shandong	Daoguang (1820-1850)- Republic (1912-1949)	Yan Jiyun 嚴繼蘊 (n.d.)
Yongsheng 永勝	Xi'an, Shaanxi	Daoguang (1820-1850)- Xianfeng (1850-1861)	Wu Zhiying 武智英 (n.d.)
Qingyuan 清遠	Xi'an, Shaanxi	Daoguang (1820-1850)- Xianfeng (1850-1861)	Fu Jiannan 傅劍南 (n.d.)
Longxin 龍信	Chongqing, Sichuan	Guangxu (1875-1908)	Du Xinwu 杜心五 (1869-1953)

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to highlight the importance of the social relationship between peasants and merchants, but also the importance of brigandage practices, in order to understand the logic of formal escorting activity in late imperial northern China. The concept of social interaction which is so important to structural anthropology is therefore central in this analysis, and for this reason the approach could not fail to mention the main socio-economic factors that contributed to the emergence of the escort profession.

This research does not claim to be exhaustive, nor does it claim to be free from any misinterpretation. However, we hope that it provides a modest contribution and that it will help further studies on the subject, which might expand on, or even refute the present work.⁹⁴

The idea commonly accepted in most *biaoju* historical research is that, through their unarmed and armed fighting skills, peasants were able to protect traders and their goods from brigand's attacks. From this point of view, it can be argued that without martial arts, there would not be any formal escort profession. Nonetheless, in order to explore new lines of inquiry, extend debate and reflection, I would like to propose the idea that fighting skills were less important than communication competence. Indeed, the efforts undertaken by escorts to pacify relationships with brigands were a guarantee to the safety of convoys, and the escort's defensive art rarely had to be put into practice against the brigands.⁹⁵ Both groups, escorts and brigands, were interested in maintaining friendly relationships rather than conflictual ones.

According to the testimonies collected during my ethnographic survey, this process of relational exchanges between escorts and brigands was based on the implementation of a communicative competence, a form of common "language", devoid of written tradition and coming from marginal social groups. Popular representation of these marginal circles converged to form the word *jianghu* 江湖. *Jianghu* is an environment inhabited, among others, by travelling buskers, acrobats, brigands, martial artists and prostitutes. The *jianghu chundian* 江湖春點 (the "codeword of the marginals"),⁹⁶ also called *heihua* 黑話 (the "dark jargon"), established the structural coherence and the social logic of the relationship between the different groups concerned.⁹⁷ This mode of communication is considered unconventional because of its "slang" and "secret" nature (*yinyu* 隱語), but it is in fact structurally close to the same

⁹⁴ I would like to thank Mr. Philippe Che and Mr. Mark Collins for the English revision.

⁹⁵ Ethnographic note taken during an interview with Zhang Yuren 張育人 on 08.03.2017 in Pingyao, Shanxi.

⁹⁶ Also written *chundian* 唇典, which is translated as "argot" or "codeword."

⁹⁷ *Baobiao Shenghuo*, pp. 236-238.

linguistic codes that are characteristic of the *hanghua* 行話, or “professional language.”⁹⁸

The role of martial arts may have been more dissuasive than effective. In other words, the martial skills of the escorts had to intimidate the robbers and favour the negotiation of a “passage fee.” This peaceful means of exchange was to encourage the dynamism of commercial activities and increase the lucrative nature of escort activities.⁹⁹ The interaction of the social group represented by the “merchants/escorts/brigands” trio, built upon mutual interest, can therefore be described as a set of forces within which the agents involved can guarantee their existence only through “working collectively towards an agreement.”¹⁰⁰

In addition, the protection of these convoys, which covered a vast network of trade routes linked together by important commercial hubs, would in return significantly contribute to the economic development of the provinces concerned by this trade.¹⁰¹ Again, the emergence of the escort profession proved to be particularly rewarding for peasants, and also became a means of recognition and social ascension.¹⁰²

Finally, the building of railways, the evolution of means of communication and of the banking system among others, but also the progressive collapse of Shanxi merchant’s activities during the Qing-Republic transition, led to the obsolescence of *biaoju*. Nowadays, the escort profession has disappeared, however, the escort’s martial art practices—the Dai’s know-how for instance—although certainly different in form from what they were in the *biaoju* times, are still transmitted in Shanxi province, as well as outside China.

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⁹⁸ However, this mode of communication cannot be defined as a sociolect. Indeed, its exclusive nature fosters a secret mutual understanding, limited only to the field of action between escorts and brigands, and it is not implemented in all known marginal spaces.

⁹⁹ Max Weber 1995, p. 137.

¹⁰⁰ Bourdieu 1994, pp. 54-55.

¹⁰¹ Liu Jiansheng 2014, pp. 28-37.

¹⁰² Qu Yanbin 1991, pp. 123-141.

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