

Ancient letters unveil life in border area

By ZHU JIANJUN

The earliest known letters in China are two wooden slips unearthed from a tomb of the Qin state, dating to the late Warring States Period (475–221 BCE). Before the invention of paper, letters were usually written on wooden slips. Since the length of a wooden slip used to write letters at that time was usually one *chi* [a traditional Chinese unit of length], which is approximately equal to 23.1 cm, letters were also called *chi du*. In ancient times when transportation was poor, the only way for people to communicate was to write letters. Among the tens of thousands of wooden slips and silk manuscripts unearthed from the sites of the frontier fortresses at Hexi Corridor [an important historical region located in modern Gansu Province in northwest China], which were built during the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), there are many valuable letters in various forms and with rich content.

There is a large number of ancient personal letters preserved in the Gansu Jiandu Museum [*Jiandu* refers to bamboo and wooden slips on which ancient Chinese wrote with brush and ink before paper was invented]. The content of those letters ranged from asking a friend to buy something to calling for help due to shortages, or even to expressing a longing for home. Those private letters unveil the lives of garrison officials and soldiers in the Hexi frontier of the Han Dynasty.

Letters to family members

The Hexi region is dry and windy,



FILE PHOTO: Collections in the Gansu Jiandu Museum

with harsh sunlight in summer and extremely freezing temperatures in winter. This special natural environment had a great impact on soldiers who migrated from warm and humid areas. Unable to adapt to the Hexi climate, they often got sick both physically and emotionally. Writing letters was the only way for them to express their homesickness. There is a personal letter to a family preserved in the Gansu Jiandu Museum. Unfortunately, this letter was not likely to reach its intended recipient:

“The environment in the frontier area is harsh and cold. Now I’m sick. I’m afraid that we will never see each other again in my life. I only hope that I can be your brother in the afterlife.”

This is a letter excavated at the ruins of the Jianshui Jin Pass [located near the Hei River in Gansu

Province]. The writer and addressee of this letter remain unknown. Judging from the writing format, it might be a letter to the writer’s family member and the letter was possibly never sent. The writer said in the letter that because he left home and was stationed at the frontier as a garrison official, he had been separated from his brother for several years. His sorrow was beyond words and moved readers to tears.

Life at the frontiers was hard. Many soldiers fell ill, which was a great hardship, but even harsher could be the feeling of helplessness that came with news of relatives and friends at home getting sick and being powerless to aid them. Soldiers could only express their concerns with letters because they were far away from their hometowns. There are many letters of this type in the Gansu Jiandu Museum.

“Your mother is seriously ill. She is dying. Please come back as soon as possible.”

This is a letter left at the ruins of the Han Dynasty *Jiaqu Houguan*’s office [located in the present-day Gobi Desert]. There is no way to know who the writer was, but the writer’s concerns come through in his writing.

Letters to friends

When reading the letters written thousands of years ago, readers may have a comprehensive understanding of the living conditions of the frontier garrisons at that time. In the Gansu Jiandu Museum, there is a letter seeking help, due to a shortage of food, from a friend who was stationed at the border areas.

“[Dear] Tian Ziyuan, it’s been a long time since we last saw each other. You have been quartered at the border area in recent years. I’m very happy to know that you are living well. Recently, I’m deeply worried because I have been receiving guests for three days and the food is almost gone. I hope you can pay attention to this matter.”

This slip was discovered at the Maquanwan Site, Dunhuang, Gansu Province. It is inferred from the text

that the writer wanted to borrow some food from a person named Tian Ziyuan. This letter was written in a similar way as people do today, which began with a few words of courtesy, and then got down to business. This letter indicates that Tian Ziyuan was a soldier who had been quartered on the frontier for a long time. In the eyes of his friend, Tian was “living well.” So, Tian’s friend hoped he could help with the food problem. However, were the lives of garrison soldiers truly as good as suggested by this letter? Another letter collected in the Gansu Jiandu Museum, unearthed from a site of frontier warning beacons on the Ruoshui River in northern China, tells of the embarrassment of garrison soldiers’ lives:

“My trousers are torn and I have to send them home for stitching. I wanted to borrow a pair of trousers from you before. However, I was too embarrassed to tell you because there were many people around at the time. Now, I have no other options but to be thick-skinned and turn to you for help. Could you lend me a pair of trousers for a few days? I will return them to you as soon as mine are mended. I’m not badly in need of money right now, but I will let you know when I need some.”

This letter shows that a garrison soldier named Yuan Chang wrote to his friend, Zihui, to borrow trousers in a very urgent tone. Compared with Tian Ziyuan, who seemed to live a happy life in the eyes of his friend, Yuan was so hard-pressed that he had to borrow trousers from his friend. To this day, it’s unclear whether Yuan succeeded or not, but just a simple letter reveals that the frontier garrison soldiers were in a difficult situation, lacking food and clothing, during the Han Dynasty.

Letters written on silk

In addition to wooden slips, silk was also used as a writing material during the Qin (221–207 BCE) and Han dynasties. However, silk as a writing material was not popular at the time because of its high price, and due to the difficulty of preservation, only a few examples remain extant. They are of great historical value for studying the culture of the Silk Road dated to the Qin and Han periods.

There is a silk manuscript in the Gansu Jiandu Museum, which was unearthed at the Xuanquanzhi Site in Dunhuang in 1990. The silk manuscript is 23.2 cm long, 10.7 cm wide, and includes 319 characters. This is a letter written by a person named Yuan to Zifang, hence known as “A Letter from Yuan to Zifang.” Among all the unearthed Han Dynasty texts, this personal letter is best-preserved and with the most characters. Based on research, this letter might have been written in the late Western Han Dynasty (206 BCE–8 CE).

In this letter, Yuan asked his friend Zifang for a favor, with several individual components. Yuan was on duty at Dunhuang as a garrison official. He asked Zifang to buy a pair of shoes with a size of 27 cm (equivalent to size 43). He also set requirements on the quality of the shoes, to wit: the shoes should be made of leather as soft as silk, and the soles should be thick and stout. Yuan also noted that the shoes could be taken to him by a colleague who would visit Dunhuang on a business trip. Meanwhile, Yuan asked Zifang to buy five good writing brushes for him. Another thing that Yuan hoped Zifang to do on his behalf was to send greetings to Ciru, or his wife Rongjun if Ciru was not at home. Furthermore, a person named Lyu Zidu wanted Zifang to engrave a seal for him, but he was too shy to speak directly to Zifang, so he asked Yuan to relay his request. The last thing Yuan noted in this letter was that a *Yingwei* [*Yingwei* was a title of military officers] whose surname was Guo sent 200 coins to Zifang, and asked him to use these coins to buy a whip.

“A Letter from Yuan to Zifang” seems to be a simple correspondence between friends, but it reveals important information of the daily life of frontier soldiers and officials in the Han Dynasty. It is inferred from the letter that Yuan was a junior official in Dunhuang. Because shoes, writing brushes, and whips were not supplied by the court, he had to purchase those items himself. On comparing the items that Yuan asked Zifang to buy in his letter with the brushes, inkstones, leather shoes, silk, and woolen and linen fabrics unearthed from the Xuanquanzhi Site, the dressing style and daily life of the ordinary people who lived along the Silk Road during the Han Dynasty can be clearly revealed.

Unfortunately, Zifang probably never received the letter, because the letter was excavated from the Xuanquanzhi Site in Dunhuang [where the writer lived]. It indicates that the letter might have been delayed at Xuanquanzhi for some reason and was not sent to the next stop. Did Zifang know the four things that Yuan asked him to do? Were Yuan’s wishes fulfilled? The answers have been lost to history.

Wooden slips are the earliest material for writing personal letters and official documents in China. They provide us with precious first-hand information for studying the living conditions and inner world of the frontier garrison soldiers and officials who lived along the Silk Road during the Qin and Han dynasties. When reading those 2000-year-old wooden slips and silk manuscripts preserved in the Gansu Jiandu Museum, readers can still feel the emotions of the writers and the fragments of their daily lives behind the letters.

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“A Letter from Yuan to Zifang” written on silk Photo: PROVIDED TO CSST