

Marco Polo's Asia

The Middle Ages represents a unique period in world history. An advanced Chinese civilization had been flourishing for many centuries, but at the time was under Mongol rule. Although many records of Chinese history exist from within the culture, an outsider's perspective on Chinese civilization would yield further information. Fortunately, there is one historical document that offers such an account: the text of Marco Polo's journeys in Asia. This book serves as an important work on Chinese civilization during Mongol rule.

It is important to understand the perspective that Marco Polo had on Asian civilization. Therefore, a summary of the background of Venice and China at the time, as well as the events leading to Marco Polo's arrival in China, are included. The details of Marco's stay in Asia and his impressions are reviewed in a detailed biography of Marco Polo's journeys. It will be shown how Marco Polo's accounts can be used to re-examine the history of China.

I. Marco Polo's Legacy

In the year 1295 A. D., after an absence of twenty-four years, Maffeo, Nicolo, and Marco Polo returned to their hometown of Venice, Italy. The Polo trio looked like strangers to their fellow citizens: they wore bizarre and ragged clothes and spoke in an accented tongue. It is said that their own family neither recognized nor acknowledged them due to their foreign appearance.

Marco, having left Venice as a young man of 17, was now 41 years old. He had spent most of his life traveling in Asia. Having spent so much of his life in the Orient, Marco must have experienced an extreme culture shock upon returning to his homeland. While in Asia during the voyages to and from China, Marco Polo saw vast numbers of different lands and lifestyles. His Venetian upbringing gave him a unique perspective on Asian civilization.

A few years after his return to Venice in 1295, Marco found himself aboard a Venetian ship under the post of gentleman-commander during a regional war between Venice and Genoa. The ship was captured by the Genoese fleet and Marco consequently spent the next few years, until May of 1299, in a Genoa prison. It was during this period that Marco found the time

to dictate, possibly with the help of notes taken during his voyage, the story of his years abroad. Rustiglielo, a citizen of Pisa and fellow prisoner of Marco, took down Marco's story. The book was dictated in prison and copied by hand, as the technology of mass printing had not yet immigrated to Europe from China. As a consequence, there exist today many versions, translations, and reconstructions of the Rustiglielo transcript.

Polo's book, entitled The Description of the World, covers the area from Constantinople to Japan to Siberia to Africa. Because these locations are told in the third person, the exact route of Marco Polo is not known. Instead of narrating the journey of the Polos, the book contains historical observations and detailed descriptions of cultures and geography. For this reason Marco Polo's accounts can be used to re-examine the history of China.

Details that the young Polo observed included regional histories, descriptions of cities, architecture, inhabitants, races, languages and governments. Also described are peoples' different lifestyles, diets, style of dress, marriage customs, rituals, and religions. There are further accounts of the trading practices, crafts, manufactured products, plants, animals, minerals, and terrain. Such a diverse and detailed account of the lands that he journeyed earned Polo the name 'the father of modern anthropology.'

At first, the places that Polo's book tells of were too strange for the Western mind to accept. Crocodiles and coconuts had never been seen before by most Europeans, and were more easily ascribed to the product of one Venetian's overactive imagination than taken as fact. Yet more so than this, that the ethnocentric European mind refused to entertain the notion that a civilization larger and more advanced than its own existed seems the most likely reason for the rejection of Polo's story. Europe had come to think of itself as the center of civilization, and this belief was difficult to change. In addition to observations of exotic wildlife, descriptions of the technological advancements of Chinese civilization, such as the use of paper currency, were staunchly rejected.

Far from being hailed as a daring adventurer and enlightening explorer, the phrase 'It's a Marco Polo' came to denote an exaggerated tale. Fearing for his historical reputation, friends of Marco Polo even asked him to recant his story on his deathbed in 1323. Polo refused, reportedly saying, 'I have not written down

the half of those things which I saw.' Indeed, several wonders of Chinese civilization, such as the Great Wall, are not mentioned in Polo's book. He either forgot to include things in his book, or knowingly omitted them, thinking that they would not be believed.

Polo's book offered many geographic contributions concerning the layout of the land of Asia. However, it took more than one hundred years for Marco Polo's book to be accepted not as a work of fiction, but as fact. It was not until the nineteenth century that his itineraries were corroborated in detail. This eventual verification was made possible by further explorations into Asia. Marco Polo's story also came to encourage further exploration of the world: a well-read edition of Marco Polo's book was taken by Christopher Columbus on his first voyage to the New World.

II. Background History

Marco Polo lived in an interesting period in world history. Europe was awakening from the Dark Ages in a time of religious crusades and was quickly expanding trade areas. In contrast, Chinese civilization had very deep roots, but at the time was under Mongol rule. The empire of Kublai Khan was one of the largest kingdoms to ever exist. Marco Polo was one of the very few people to observe this period in traditional China through the eyes of a European. His book, a rare perspective on Asian cultures, is an important work on this era in China's history.

By the 1250s, Venice had conquered its Greek rival trading capitol of Constantinople (present day Istanbul) with the help of the momentum of the crusades. Venice, a trading city on the Mediterranean, profited from many ship building contracts for the crusades. Europe had by now come out of the Dark Ages, a time in which trade and development languished. Venice at the time was a bustling town, thriving with trade.

Up until this time, only fables existed about the far away land of China. Most information had been passed down from the time of Ancient Greek civilization during the time of Alexander the Great. Ever since, the civilization in the Middle East presented itself as an unfriendly barrier between the two realms. It was possible for an exchange of goods through a chain of traveling merchants, but this did not entail an exchange of culture and ideas. For example, silk, made from the silkworm, was thought to be a vegetable product or made from bark.

The silk trade had in fact been so heavy since the times of the Roman Empire that a route between Europe and Eastern Asia had been known as the 'Silk Road.' As with the ignorance of Asian civilization in Europe, little was known of Europe in China. Advanced cartography did exist, however, within the Middle Kingdom. After its isolated development into a highly organized society, China came to be constantly threatened by tribes of so-called "barbarians" to the North. Although the clans of nomadic horsemen had military superiority over the farmers of China, conquests by these northerners usually led to their absorption into the firmly established Chinese culture.

When Marco Polo arrived in China, Mongols had recently completed a conquest of the entire country. The Sung Dynasty of China had collapsed and had been run over by the descendants of Ghengis Khan. Kublai Khan, born 1215, the grandson of Ghengis Khan, completed the defeat of the stubborn Southern Sung Dynasty in Southern China. The Mongolian invasion of Southern China took longer than most victories of the Mongolian army, which swept across virtually all of Asia, from Hungary to Siberia to Vietnam.

The vast size of the domain of Kublai Khan, which covered most of East Asia, greatly impressed Marco Polo. His book boasts that: "If you put together all the Christians in the world, with their Emperors and their Kings, the whole of these Christians, - aye, and throw in the Saracens to boot, - would not have such power, or be able to do so much as this Kublai, who is Lord of all the Tartars [Mongols] in the world."

Unlike the Chinese farmers, Mongols lived a nomadic lifestyle out of portable tents. Rather than agricultural products, their diet consisted of mostly meat. Mongols were expert and highly organized horsemen and warriors. Their religion was based on shamanism. Due to scarcity of water in the Mongolian Steppe, they did not believe in bathing.

Mongol rule of China established four social classes: the Mongols who ruled the country, non-Chinese aides to the Mongols, Northern Chinese, and lastly, the Southern Chinese. Southern Chinese were viewed as the lowest in the social system because of their stubborn resistance to the Mongol invasion. Because of the high status of foreigners, the Polos were able to find themselves posts as trusted advisors to Kublai Khan.

Ghengis Khan was the founder of the Mongol dynasty. Rule succeeded from him to his son Ogedai, then to Mengu Khan. Kublai Khan assumed the throne in 1260, founded his capitol found in Peking in 1263, and ruled all of China after 1279. After his death in 1294, the Mongols were expelled from China by the Ming dynasty in 1368. Kublai Khan's reign was an uneasy rule, as he had to control the discontent of many rival groups, deal with failed invasions of Japan, put down rebellions, and defend attacks from more northern tribes. In the end, the Mongol Empire was too large to maintain a stable rule.

During the time of Mongol rule in China, most of Chinese culture still survived, although control of the government was temporarily handed over to foreigners. For example, Kublai Khan maintained the practice of Confucianism, but made efforts to halt the use of the Chinese civil service examination system. Even though China was under a foreign rule, it maintained its cultural integrity by remaining true to its deep cultural roots. In fact the years of Mongol rule had a surprisingly small impact on Chinese culture: "Despite this century of contact, things foreign remained superficial in China, as did the Mongol conquerors themselves." For this reason, Marco Polo's observation of a China under Mongol rule will still provide much information into Chinese civilization.

III. Marco Polo's Precursors

The first European travelers to Asia during the Middle Ages were either merchants, like the Polos, or missionaries. A series of Catholic friars were the first to bring back factual reports of the Mongolian empire. This was in the early 1200s, before the Mongolian conquest of Imperial China; none of the friars traveled as far as east the Chinese civilization. Because these holy men viewed little more than primitive lifestyles and pagan rituals, they were not pleased with what they saw.

The earlier mentioned Middle Eastern barrier between Europe and Asia had been broken by the Mongolian expansion. This left the way open for the first merchants to challenge the uncertainties to the East and introduce European trade in Asia. Brothers Nicolo and Maffeo Polo, merchants of Venice and members of its great council, left their trading station in Constantinople in 1260, crossed the Black Sea to the Crimean peninsula, and traveled to Western Russia, all for trade purposes.

The Polo brothers found their way home blocked by a war that had broken out for the Caucasus region between two grandsons

of Ghengis Khan. They decided to take a roundabout way home, proceeding southeast. In Bokhara, a city to the north of Afghanistan, they were invited to the court of Kublai Khan by one of his ambassadors. Eager for more trading prospects, and to make the connections that would ensure a safe journey home, they accepted the invitation and traveled to the Khan's court in China, where they arrived in 1265.

Being so far away from home, the Polo brothers realized that their roles at this time were more as ambassadors than as merchants. They were introduced to Kublai Khan, who was eager for more cultural expansion and trusted foreigners more than the Chinese. To this aim, the Khan skillfully requested that the pope send him one hundred skilled missionaries to persuade his people to convert to Christianity. Although this was something that he knew would be an enticing prospect, he was mainly interested in obtaining more foreign advisors.

To illustrate the sincerity of his interest in Christianity, Kublai Khan: "signified his pleasure that upon their [the Polos] return they should bring with them, from Jerusalem, some of the Holy Oil from the lamp which is kept burning over the Sepulchre of our Lord Jesus Christ, whom he professed to hold in veneration and to consider as the true God." Kublai Khan's taste for rare religious items would later be shown when he sent to India for a beggar's bowl said to have belonged to Buddha.

Marco claims that Nicolo and Maffeo helped to aid the conquest of the last city in Southern China holding out against the Mongols by designing catapults for a siege. The Polo brothers were given a royal golden tablet that guaranteed safe passage within the Mongol Empire. They took a Mongolian ambassador with them, but the ambassador took ill during the journey and was left behind. After a long voyage, Nicolo and Maffeo Polo returned to Venice in 1269. Nicolo found that although his wife had died in his absence, she had given birth to a son, Marco, who was now a grown lad of fifteen.

Marco Polo was raised in Venice, and became a devout Catholic in time of the fervor of the crusades. Venice was a place for trade, the arts, and Mediterranean fun loving, although strict physical punishments came with criminal convictions. "In these crowded streets, amid this open immorality, cruelty, and inhumanity, this vice and crime, strangely mingled as they were with beauty and pageantry, were molded the character and mind of the boy Marco

during the years his father, Messer Nicolo, and his uncle, Messer Maffeo, were trading in Constantinople and Bokhara, traveling across the deserts and steppes of Central Asia, and sojourning with the Great Khan Kublai in his capital, Khanbaligh, many thousands of miles from Venice."

IV. The Journey

Nicolo and Maffeo were unable to present their request for one hundred missionaries to the Holy See because Pope Clement IV had died recently, and the College of Cardinals had to agree upon his successor. After a long wait of two years without the election of a new pope, in 1271, the brothers decided to depart on their return journey anyway. They took with them Marco, who was considered a young man at the age of seventeen. The trio sailed the Mediterranean and stopped in the city of Acre, just north of Jerusalem. The papal legate, Teobaldo, gave them permission to get the oil from Jerusalem that the Khan had requested.

After getting the oil, the Polos returned to Acre, and decided to begin their journey, but were halted at the Northeastern Mediterranean port of Lais by a rebellion. At this time, messengers from the legate in Acre sent word that a new pope had been chosen, Teobaldo himself, who had taken name Gregory X. The trio returned to Acre, and Pope Gregory X sent two friars along with the Polos to deliver letters to Kublai Khan. However, the two friars, afraid of the journey ahead, soon left the Polos. They joined a group of Templar Knights returning to Acre, and entrusted letters from the Pope to the Venetians. In this manner the task that was to be handled by one hundred missionaries was to fall upon the shoulders of the young Marco Polo.

Marco learned to speak the language of the Middle East with the help of his father and uncle, who had learned the Persian tongue on their previous journey. The young man also developed a sense of patience, as the trip to the Khan's court was to take three and a half years. The growth of his attraction for Asian women is apparent. He describes the North Persians as "a handsome race, especially the women, who, in my opinion, are the most beautiful in the world." In a region farther east, he says that: "The women are in truth, very handsome, very sensual." Later in his book, he praises the virtues of Chinese women.

From the port of Lais, the Polos traveled through Armenia, where Marco observed the presence of petroleum and tells of a

Mountain said to hold Noah's Ark. He relates a legend of a mountain near Baghdad that was moved with the help of a prayer. Marco also describes the tomb of the Three Magi in Iran and its related legends. Other regional myths passed on are the existence of an 'Old Man of the Mountain' and his band of young assassins, and John Prester, a legendary Christian ruler of West Asia.

In 1272, the Polos had reached the Persian Gulf, where they planned to have boarded ships to take them from Hormuz to China. However, the poor condition of the ships were not deemed worthy to brave the storms of the Indian Ocean. Marco describes the ships as being built without the benefit of nails, but rather sewn together. The Polos continued on land through Afghanistan, where Marco speaks of ruby mines. They rested in this area for about one year from a fever that Marco had contracted. Marco claims that the almost magical quality of the high altitude and pure air cured his sickness.

After passing through Kashmir, the trio crossed the plateaus of Pamir between Afghanistan and Tibet. These mountains were commonly labeled the 'Roof of the World.' Marco noticed that fires were less efficient at such high altitudes. He later describes how in Java the North Star could not be seen well so far south. Yet amid such scientific observations are tales of illusions and evil spirits that exist in the deserts: "Marvelous indeed and almost passing belief are the stories related to these spirits of the desert." The Polos stayed in Campichu, the area of Tibetan Buddhists, about one year for trade purposes. They next traveled from Turkestan through the Gobi desert to the east coast of China.

Forty days from the residence of Kublai Khan, escorts were sent to accompany the Polos to the palace. The Polos arrived in the court of Kubla Khan, in the city of Shangtu, about 180 miles northwest of Peking, in 1275. Marco was now a man of twenty-one years. He had finished his upbringing on a rugged journey across the continent and had developed his mental facilities by observing and adapting to many different cultures and places.

V. A Venetian in Kublai Khan's Court

Marco Polo describes the Khan's summer palace in Shangtu in its entire splendor. Even more glorious is a heroic portrayal of the Khan's epic life, including the story of his rise to power, the suppression of his enemies, and the royal life that he led. Such a

flattering account shows how fond Polo was of the man. Marco thought that Kublai Khan invented the monetary system and built the Grand Canal, but in fact he only unified the currency system and repaired the canal. A New Year's feast took place on the Khan's birthday, involving intricate ceremonies concerning sitting in the presence of the ruler. Marco also devotes a detailed section to the selection process of Khan's many wives, and we also hear of his forty-seven sons.

Marco Polo depicts Kublai Khan as the man who brought order to the lands that he ruled. He was responsible for placing restrictions on gambling and doing away with one region's peculiar custom of killing admirable house guests in their sleep so that their spirits would adorn the house. The Khan bought many crops in times of surplus, which he gave freely to the needy, especially in times of drought. He also helped to beautify cities by decorating the roads with trees.

Of particular interest are the Khan's tactically eclectic religious beliefs. Polo relates that Kublai Khan reportedly stated: "There are four great Prophets who are worshipped and revered by the different classes of mankind. The Christians regard Jesus Christ as their divinity; the Saracens, Mahomet [Mohammed]; the Jews, Moses; and the idolaters, Sogomombar-kan [Buddha], the most eminent amongst their idols. I do honour and show respect to all the four, and invoke to my aid whichever amongst them is in truth Supreme in Heaven."

The Khan was a leader of people with a number of different faiths, unlike the Christian European kings at the time. He skillfully upset none of his subjects by refuting the existence of any person's God. It is of note, however, that Kublai Khan did not recognize Confucianism and Taoism in his list of religions. These two practices were distinctively Chinese. Therefore, the omission can be taken as a sign of some degree of disdain that Kublai Khan held for his conquered subjects. This is a sentiment that, after many years in the Khan's service, Marco Polo grew to share. The history of the Mongolian rise to power that Marco Polo gives is a version that exalts the Mongolian culture above all others. In general, the events that Polo describes are somewhat accurate. Having spent so many years in the service of the great Khan, Marco developed a rather one-sided perspective on Asian cultures. Throughout his book, Marco Polo makes it clear how highly regarded he holds Kublai Khan. A scholar states that: "the

book does at times seem to have been intended to celebrate his power and glory."

Marco speaks of the Mongols' highly organized military, and large personal bodyguard of the Khan. The Mongol military made heavy use of their horses in combat. The chain of command was split so that each man commanded ten men one rank lower than himself. Scouts were sent out to protect the army from surprise attacks. One of the favorite tactics of the Mongols was to feign a retreat, and then enclose the enemy in with a barrage of arrows.

Marco Polo also describes how tablets of command guaranteed good treatment among the citizens of the empire. Hunting expeditions, led by the Khan from atop his elephants, are portrayed in such detail that Marco must have been included in some of the hunting parties. Marco speaks of the use of lions, leopards, and eagles in hunting, including a long description of the methods of hunting with a hawk. Kublai Khan spent the three spring months on hunting expeditions, the summer months relaxing at his palace in Shangtu, and the six winter months governing at his palace in Peking.

The winter palace in Peking was a large and organized fortress. Polo must have spent much of his time there, for he offers a detailed account of the structure. As for the city itself, the Venetian was thoroughly impressed with its size and organization. The city core was originally laid out on a five by six mile checkerboard grid, containing 110 blocks with north-south and east-west central thoroughfares. Marco greatly admired this efficient city road system, which was a far cry from the twisted streets and canals of his hometown of Venice, as he says: "In this manner the whole of the city is disposed in squares, so as to resemble a chess board, and planned out with a degree of precision and beauty impossible to describe."

A night curfew was strictly enforced throughout the city. Outside the city gates were more residences, merchants' shops, and hotels. The suburbs were also home to an organized system of prostitutes, some of whom the Khan paid to serve foreigners and ambassadors. This is an arraignment, given his age and fondness for Asian women that I suspect Marco took advantage of. Marco further describes the mercantile economy in the city, which was filled with many exotic goods: "To this city everything that is most rare and valuable in all parts of the world finds its way."

One sign of the advanced technology involved with such an efficient economy is the system of paper currency. To make the paper money, wood was pulped and pressed into rectangles, and cut into varying sizes. Larger bills were worth more money. The bills were stamped and sealed, and backed with a silver certificate: the bills could be exchanged for silver and vice versa. Old and worn out currency could be exchanged for new for a three- percent fee. This is an ingenious concept, as these transaction fees must have more than offset the printing costs.

Upon arriving in Kublai Khan's summer palace in Shangtu, the three Polos delivered unto him the oil from Jerusalem and the letters from the pope. Marco was introduced to the Khan as his servant, a role that the loyal youth soon accepted. Marco tells how he took to the Khan's favor and was appointed to several administrative posts. He noticed that Kublai Khan was at times bored by the brief and factual accounts of his lands, so Marco learned to notice and describe to him the peculiar features of the places that he traveled. After serving as a successful messenger, Marco was appointed to the post of a regional ambassador, a position that he held for seventeen years.

VI. Northern China

Marco Polo's job involved observing and reporting on the lands that he traveled. Thus the Venetian was in an ideal position to later recount a description of the Chinese civilization. The main text of Marco Polo hardly mentions the activities of Nicolo and Maffeo Polo during Marco's travels. Although these men were the original pioneers of the group, due to their age, they most likely stayed in the court of Kublai Khan and traded locally.

Marco first tells of, quite fondly, the inter-regional road system in China. It contained a series of regularly spaced rest stops and hotels. Service posts were laid out at thirty-mile intervals on the great roads, complete with large supplies of relay horses. Polo states that: "In consequence of these regulations, ambassadors to the court, and the royal messengers, go and return through every province and kingdom of the Empire with the greatest convenience and facility." To speed messages across the lands, there were also stations of running messengers at three-mile intervals.

Marco Polo was raised as a Catholic and remained one for the rest of his life. Some religious tunnel-vision of Marco's is shown in the omission of both Confucianism and Taoism in his book. These

spiritual practices may have been too subtle for Polo to categorize as religions. However, Marco Polo recognized many more religions than the friars that traveled Asia before him. He mentions many forms of worship, such as Buddhism, the practices of Nestorian Christians, the worship of Mohammed, and various pagan rituals: "Marco's attention is everywhere directed toward what may be called a denominational topography of the Orient."

Some general observations on the Chinese lifestyle are included. A large and dense population is credited to the well-cultivated lands and the practice of men keeping many wives. Various herbs and minerals were used for medicine. The Chinese grain diet is mentioned, along with a reference to saki, a drink that Polo warns us: "has the quality of making one drunk sooner than any other wine." Slow burning black stones (i. e., coal) provided more heat than any comparable European product at the time. The twelve year astrology cycle, with animals symbolizing each year in the almanac, is also described.

The reader next hears of the numerous farming and trading cities on western countryside from the Yellow River to the Indian frontier. The vast size of the Chinese civilization is hinted at by Marco Polo telling of many different regions, with months of traveling distances between, using such phrases as: "a country abounding with fine buildings"; "a fine country in which there are many cities and strong places"; "you continually meet with cities and commercial towns"; "you still find towns and castles"; "you see numberless towns and castles"; "containing many cities and castles"; "lie many towns and castles"; "you pass many cities and castles"; "you pass many considerable towns and strong places"; "you unceasingly meet with commercial towns and with castles"; and "passing plenty of cities and castles."

The overwhelming size of the Chinese civilization is revealed by reading chapter after chapter that speaks of many provinces, cities, towns, and castles. To drive his point home, Marco reminds the reader that, when considering all the lands of Northern China: "Not the twentieth part have I described." However, the monotony of Marco's expressions fails to capture the true splendor of Chinese Civilization; the repetitive descriptions fail to satisfy the reader's curiosity about the characteristics of individual regions.

Polo next eloquently recounts the history of Kublai Khan's conquest of the lands of Burma. He also describes the practices of

tattooing and the customs of sexual promiscuity among the women. Given the background of Marco Polo, this account is surprisingly non-judgmental: "The accounts of the peoples and tribes of China and the adjacent lands, the strange ideas of the Tibetans in the realm of sexual morality, the description of the primitive peoples of Yünnan and other remote provinces of the Middle Kingdom render his account curiously modern."

VII. Southern China

Marco Polo credits the success of the Mongolian conquest of Southern China to the lack of military training among the Chinese farmers. The last emperor of the Southern Sung is also described as self-indulgent. The Southern Sung also did not support the Northern China kingdoms' resistance to the Mongol invasion. Although swamps in Southern China slowed the advance of the Mongolian horses, Kublai Khan eventually conquered all of China. Polo tells how the last representatives of Imperial China surrendered to a Mongolian general in the capital city of Hangchow.

As in Northern China, Marco Polo describes the region as being filled with many large cities and towns. In addition to depicting the large size of the region, Polo also praises the splendor of the land: "The province of Manji is the most magnificent and the richest that is known in the eastern world." Salt for food and silk for dress were the main manufactured products, which were transported with the help of the Yellow and Yangtse Rivers. Polo speaks of many cities on the banks of the Yangtse, which was highly navigable and therefore held many merchant ships. Polo also adds how the country has one language and writing system, but many dialects.

The city of Soochow was a large cultural and commercial center at the time. It was located near the mouth of the Yangtse River, and produced silk, rhubarb, and ginger. The Great Canal, which ran from Peking through Soochow to Hangchow, had no equal in all of Europe. Marco Polo was not only impressed with the transportation technology of the Great Canal, but the economic movements upon it: "It is indeed surprising to observe the multitude and the size of the vessels that are continually passing and repassing, laden with merchandise of the greatest value."

Hangchow was the capital city of Southern China. Lying just south of present day Shanghai, Marco Polo describes the city as being 100 miles in circumference. He also speaks of an organized

system of canals, bridges and streets along a river and a lake. The city contained ten market squares. The buildings were pretty and the city was kept clean. Stone and brick streets had water drains that led to the canals. Taxis carried residents throughout the city. A highly organized census system made each family post its population on the front door. Using this system, Marco Polo estimated that he counted that the city housed 1.6 million families.

The former Imperial Palace is described, but it had fallen into decay since the Mongol conquest. The city was, in a very real sense, occupied by the Khan's garrison. Taxes collected from the city were delivered to Kublai Khan. Watchmen were posted across the city who served as peace officers. With the aid of water clocks they were able to signal the passing of each hour with gongs. Watchmen could also signal each other in the event of an outbreak of a fire or a general emergency. These troops, being tied to the city, were not all Mongol horsemen. The Khan recruited foreigners, Northern Chinese, and sometimes even Southern Chinese to serve in his army. However, Southern Chinese were never allowed to occupy a post in their hometown. The residents of the city are called idolaters, a name that may represent Buddhism, but represents a slight error in the classification of Confucianism and Taoism. The ceremonies involved in a funeral procession, such as the playing of music and the cremation rites, are described. Polo praises the Chinese as a handsome and friendly race, but faults them for their lack of military training. Hangchow residents' diets consisted of fish from the nearby sea and animals grazing in the nearby lands. Many merchant activities occurred within the city.

There were often parties and celebrations upon a nearby lake. Marco tells of the existence of pleasure boats, whose sole purpose was to send people around on the lake while they relaxed from the day's events. As with most Asian women, the man Marco adored the prostitutes of the city: "Strangers who have once tasted of their charms, remain in a state of fascination, and become so enchanted by their wanton arts, that they can never forget the impression."

Learned men of the city served as doctors and astrologers. When babies were born, the exact time and date of their birth was recorded. This information was later used in predicting peoples' life courses and giving them advice. Astrology and other similar

practices were similar to related pseudosciences that existed in Europe at the same time. For example, both Europeans and Asians shared a common belief in physiognomy, the practice of divining people's character through their facial appearance.

Marco Polo emphasizes the grace and virtue of Chinese women. He tells how well behaved they are, and characterizes them as timid, reserved, and modest: "They have much beauty, as has been remarked, and are brought up with delicate and languid habits." He portrays the Chinese society in general as very advanced and sophisticated.

As he was writing his story in a prison, he must have felt some longing for the civilized methods of Chinese society. As a scholar describes: "His keen eyes must have made mental comparisons every turn, and here, as in many other instances in his book, he appears by his comments to have reached the conclusion that his Venetian townsfolk had much to learn of gentility, breeding, and ethical attitudes from the people of the Middle Kingdom."

In contrast to this praise of Chinese society is Marco's slight contempt for their conquered status. He calls residents of Soochow, because of their lack of military training, a "cowardly race." Marco's omission of Confucianism and Taoism are further signs of his agreement with the Mongols' contempt for their conquered civilizations. After so many years in the service of Kublai Khan, Marco must have come to think of many things in the same way that the Khan did. Polo's agreement with Kublai Khan's claims concerning his rights of conquest can also be ascribed to the fact that the Mongols' position was similar to Venice's stronghold on the Mediterranean at the time.

Many of the aspects of the culture that Marco Polo lived in are not mentioned in his book. Most of these cultural institutions, such as teahouses, acupuncture, and footbinding, represent distinctively Chinese, not Mongol, customs. Furthermore, the tradition of filial piety is only hinted at with the misunderstood phrase: "the laws of their ancient kings ordained that each citizen should exercise the profession of his father."

Marco did not learn the Chinese language and therefore was not exposed to the Chinese classics. These traditional works had a key role in shaping the core of Chinese culture. For these and other reasons Marco learned to share the Mongols' contempt for their subject populations. Marco Polo's work was mainly written to show glory of the Mongol Empire. Omissions concerning Chinese

practices can be taken as Marco's judgment that they are not as important as information such as the vast size of the Mongol Army. Because Marco Polo's work is really a discussion of the Mongol glory, his writings are vital to the examination of Chinese culture under the Mongol Empire.

VIII. The Voyage Home

After spending almost twenty years in the service of Kublai Khan, the three Polos decided that it was time to return home. There were several reasons for this decision. Marco Polo describes other advisors as being jealous of his rapport with the Khan. Kublai Khan, although a stable ruler, was now approaching eighty, and there was no guarantee that his successor would be so kind to the Venetians. Furthermore, there was no clear standing on who the Khan's successor would be, and the Polos did not want to be trapped once again by a rebellion blocking their way home.

That the Venetians were homesick seems to be a factor, but not a strong one when considering the fact that they only wanted to leave after such a long and prosperous stay. "After having held for seventeen years various offices in the imperial administration in lands subject to the conqueror, attaining one after another the ascending grades of the courtly and bureaucratic hierarchy, Marco, like many other foreigners residing in China, considered himself an adoptive son of this new country and a faithful servant of its sovereign, in spite of some feelings of nostalgia for his homeland." In this manner, the Sinification of Marco Polo was like that of the Mongols' absorption into Chinese culture.

Nicolo and Maffeo Polo asked the Khan many times to grant them leave to return home, but the emperor, wanting to keep such trusted advisors, refused. It seemed that the Polos were destined to spend their lives in Asia until a strange opportunity presented itself. A Persian queen had died, and willed that a Mongol of royal blood be married to her husband to take her place. Persian messengers went to China and obtained a fitting female for this purpose, but their return to Persia by land was blocked by a regional war.

As the Polos had feared, the empire was already beginning to crumble. Not even the golden tablets of command could guarantee safe passage through such troubled areas. Yet this sign of the downfall of the Mongol empire would help to get them home again, just as the Mongols' destruction of Middle Eastern block helped them get them to China. The Persians and the

Venetians discovered that they had a mutual interest in returning to the West. They proposed to the Khan that the two groups should journey by sea to deliver to Mongol princess.

Although sad to see them leave, Kublai Khan realized that the Venetians' knowledge of ships could help him to honor the request of the deceased Persian queen. He granted the three Polos leave to depart with the Persians to deliver the Mongol princess. The Polos helped to supervise the building of the ships for the journey home. Kublai Khan gave the Venetians golden tablets of command and bid them to deliver his greeting to the pope and the kings of Europe. The strange companions of Persian ambassadors, a Mongol princess, and three Venetians set sail with their escorts from the coast of China in 1292.

The ships were well built and served the companions well. The travelers sailed south by Vietnam to Java, where they headed west to Sri Lanka and the coast of India. Marco tells some far fetched stories concerning Japan, Madagascar, and Siberia, lands that he never saw first hand. Upon reaching Hormuz, it was discovered that the man to whom the Mongol princess was to be delivered to had died. The woman was married off to his son instead. Marco includes a military and political history of Turkestan, Persia, and the Golden Horde in West Asia. The Polos rested from their journey in Tabriz, a city in Western Persia.

Marco Polo had learned four languages during his voyages in Asia. His systematic observations of nature, anthropology, and geography were ahead of his time. He was very broad minded, although somewhat gullible in relating fables. His book is a mix of accurate descriptions of things that he saw himself, such as the observations that water boils more slowly in the High Pamir and the North Star cannot be seen in the south, and the passing along of fables about far away lands, such as the Mountain of the Ark.

It is remarkable to consider the luck that the Polos had in returning home. Had not the opportunity of returning to Europe by ship had presented itself, they would have likely been stuck in China permanently. Marco closes his book with his explanation of these events: "I believe that it was God's pleasure that we should get back in order that people might learn about the things that the world contains. Thanks be to God! Amen! Amen!" After resting in Tabriz, the Polos journeyed back to Italy. In 1295, after an absence of twenty-four years, Maffeo, Nicolo, and Marco Polo returned to Venice.

It is clear from Marco Polo's writings that he was thoroughly impressed with the nature of Chinese civilization. Many of the organized and efficient systems that he saw working in China had yet to be developed in Europe. The history, geography, and anthropology in Marco Polo's book make it an important historical document concerning the era in Traditional China under Mongol rule.

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