

Marco Polo in China (1271-1295)

from *China: A Teaching Workbook*, East Asian Curriculum Project, Columbia University

Background Reading: Marco Polo in China

About Marco Polo

Marco Polo was born in the thirteenth century (1254 A.D.) in Venice, an Italian city-state, and he was very much a man of his time. He had the standard education for a young gentleman — knowledge of classical authors and the basic beliefs of the church, a good grasp of French and Italian, and skills in accounting. This combination is fortunate for us, since his writings offer a window onto the world of the thirteenth century. His knowledge of culture and business made Marco Polo very observant of humans, animals, and plants, as well as anything that might touch upon commercial opportunities. He was observant about cultures that were very different from his own and able to describe them without much bias.

European nations and city-states at this time were very much divided, vigorously competing with one another for power and markets. The Venetians were probably the most aggressive of all. Young Marco Polo was born into a powerful Venetian merchant family with extensive trade contacts. The Polos had traveled as far as the Black Sea, in present-day Turkey. There they heard from Persian traders about the great Mongol empire that stretched west to today's Poland, east to Java and Korea, south to Turkey and Persia, and north to the frozen wastelands of Siberia. Marco Polo's father and uncle traveled in 1260 throughout the Mongol empire, all the way to its capital in China. There they requested trade and missionary contacts. And on a second trip in 1271, carrying messages from the Pope, they took along young Marco, who was then only seventeen years old.

Marco was a shrewd businessman who won the Mongol emperor's favor and was sent on special missions all over the region. His stay in China lasted seventeen years, and by the time he returned home to Venice in 1297, twenty-six years had passed since his departure. On his return, Marco, a superb storyteller, was persuaded to write his memoirs. Relying on notes and memories he had stored during his years abroad, he set down his tale, entitled "**The Travels of Marco Polo, or, A Description of the World.**" The book was written with the help of a romance-novel writer, and it has been called one of the greatest ever written.

The World Marco Polo Knew

The Europe that Marco Polo knew was a collection of small nations and city-states constantly competing with one another. In the north the French empire was the strongest. To the east, northern German and Baltic city-states were united in a loose federation called the Hanseatic League. Scandinavian countries were relatively weak. In the south, southern German states were only loosely united and the Italian city-states were fiercely competitive, with Genoa and Venice especially bitter rivals. (After Marco Polo returned to Venice from China, he participated in a sea battle between Venice and Genoa. He was captured and imprisoned in Genoa, and it was during his imprisonment that he dictated his book.) Nearly all states were involved in wars with one another. Either the religious organization — the Roman Catholic Church — or the political entity — the Holy Roman Empire — could have been a unifying force, but they also were also locked in competition for power. In Asia Minor, the power of the Byzantine empire was in decline, and the power of the Turkish Ottoman Empire was increasing. In addition, Europe was still involved in its own Holy War against the "infidels" — the Crusades.

By contrast, the Mongol empire presented for a brief time in the thirteenth century a model of unity. A loose federation of separate nomadic tribes in most times, the Mongols were a rough, horseback-riding, yurt-dwelling barbarian group that had carried a dream of greatness until consolidation under Chinggis (Genghis) Khan. The word "khan" means ruler, so his name meant "Ruler Chinggis." Under Chinggis Khan's leadership the Mongols forged a new empire that reached from the Pacific to the Mediterranean oceans, and from the Arctic Ocean to the Persian Gulf. But Chinggis Khan died in 1227, before he could realize his dream of conquering the entire

world. If it had not been for the death of his successor in 1241, the Mongols would probably have conquered Europe, and the history of western civilization might have been very different.

The Mongols and Their Rise to Power

The Mongols' lightning-swift horses, surprise attacks, skillful military tactics, and use of terror to subdue populations had made them the feared scourge of China as well as Europe. Chinggis Khan is said to have remarked: "The greatest joy a man can know is to conquer his enemies and drive them before him. To ride their horses and take away their possessions. To see the faces of those who were dear to them wet with tears, and to clasp their wives and daughters in his arms." For centuries, Mongol-like tribes had settled near the northern border of China, attacking whenever the Chinese empire was weak. They had been able to win battles but could not succeed at prolonged sieges of the strong, walled cities of the Chinese. Yet in 1126 another tribe of "barbarians," the Jurchen, were able to defeat the Chinese in the north and set up their own independent rule, forcing the Chinese leaders to flee southward to establish a new capital at Hangchow. The Mongols realized that they could use this split to gain territorial advantage over the Chinese. In 1237 North China fell to the Mongols, but the whole of China was not united under Mongol rule until a forty-year series of grueling campaigns ended under Chinggis Khan's grandson, Kubilai Khan. Finally, in 1279, Kubilai Khan won his stubborn struggle with the Southern Sung dynasty and was lord over all China, with loose control over the vast Mongolian empire to the east that had been handed down from his grandfather.

By the time of Kubilai Khan a significant change had occurred in the Mongol leaders. Each successor to Chinggis had been influenced by the regions he controlled. To the west, the ruler of Persia resembled the Persian *shah*; in the north, the ruler was Russian; in the east, Kubilai was under the sway of the great civilization he long had battled — the Chinese Sung. *Chung kuo*, the "Middle Kingdom," as China was known, was the most splendid civilization of its time, outshining even Persia and the Ottoman Empire, and certainly out-distancing poor, divided Europe. Kubilai had moved his capital from the ancient tribal headquarters of Karakorum in the Gobi Desert to the Chinese city of Peking (Marco Polo's Cambulac or *Khan Bhalik*, meaning "The City of the Emperor"). This change signified the increasing Chinese influence over the khan, for by this time Kubilai regarded himself not as a nomadic barbarian but as a civilized, elegant Chinese gentleman. True, he still had a hunting tent like Chinggis Khan's, made of leopard skin, but its inside was trimmed with ermine and sable. Like Chinggis he had a pleasure house that was also a tent, but its roof was made of gilded bamboo and its tent poles were painted with Chinese dragons. And his palace was magnificent, as Marco Polo described. The Chinese were famous for their ability to absorb their conquerors who tried, in ancient times, to emulate Chinese culture. Kubilai Khan was one example of this.

How Marco Polo's Accounts Changed the World

Before Marco Polo returned and set down his memoirs, most Europeans were ignorant of the great civilizations to their east. The Chinese, for their part, called themselves the center of the earth, or *chung-kuo*. Other than establishing trade contacts and securing the defense of their borders, they had little interest in dealing with other peoples and scornfully labeled them all "barbarians."

It was through the eyes of Marco Polo that many Europeans first learned about those civilizations to the east, and his book was popular in his own time and for centuries thereafter. Other explorers in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the "Age of Exploration," all confessed that they were inspired by the great world Polo had described. Two hundred years after Marco Polo, another Italian seaman, Christopher Columbus, carried a well-worn copy of Polo's travels when he set out west for a new route to the fabled Indies. Let us now turn to the world Marco Polo saw, and let him tell us about the marvelous civilizations to which he journeyed.

| [back to top](#) |

Primary Source Readings: From *The Book of Ser Marco Polo: The Venetian Concerning Kingdoms and Marvels of the East*

[Note: Dr. Sue Gronewald, a specialist in Chinese history, was the consultant for this section. These selections, edited by Dr. Gronewald, are from *The Book of Ser Marco Polo: The Venetian Concerning Kingdoms and Marvels of the East*, Volumes 1 and 2, translated and edited by Colonel Sir Henry Yule (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903)]

Cambaluc (Beijing): Concerning The Palace Of The Great Khan

You must know that for three months of the year, December, January, and February, the Great Khan resides in the capital city of Cathay (China), which is called Cambaluc (Beijing), and which is at the north-eastern extremity of the country. In that city stands his great palace, and now I will tell you what it is like.

It is enclosed all round by a great wall forming a square, each side of which is a mile in length. It is also very thick, and a good ten paces in height, whitewashed and loop-holed all round. At each angle of the wall there is a very fine and rich palace in which the war-harness of the Emperor is kept, such as bows and arrows, saddles and bridles, and bowstrings, and everything necessary for an army. Also midway between every two of these corner palaces there is another of the like' so that in the whole enclosure you find eight vast palaces where the Great Lord's harness of war are stored. Only one kind of article is assigned to each palace; thus, one is stored with bows, a second with saddles, a third with bridles, and so on.

The great wall has five gates on its southern face, the middle one being the great gate which is never opened on any occasion except when the Great Khan himself goes forth or enters. Close on either side of this great gate is a smaller one by which all other people pass; and then towards each angle is another great gate, also open to people in general; so that on that side there are five gates in all.

Inside this wall there is a second wall. Inside this wall, there are eight palaces like those of the outer wall, and stored like them with the Lord's harness of war. This wall also has five gates on the southern face, and one gate on each of the other faces. In the middle of the second enclosure is the Lord's Great Palace.

This is the greatest palace that ever was. Towards the north it is in contact with the outer wall, whilst towards the south there is a vacant space which the barons and the soldiers are constantly traversing. The palace itself has no upper story, but is all on the ground floor, except the basement is raised a bit above the surrounding soil. The roof is very lofty, and the walls of the palace are all covered with gold and silver. They are also adorned with representations of dragons (sculptured and gilt), beasts and birds, knights and gods, and other subjects. And on the ceiling, too, you see nothing but gold and silver and painting. (On each of the four sides there is a great marble staircase leading to the top of the marble wall, and forming the approach to the palace.)

The hall of the palace is so large that it could easily dine 6,000 people; and it is quite a marvel to see how many rooms there are besides. The building is altogether so vast, so rich, and so beautiful, that no man on earth could design anything superior to it. The outside of the roof is all colored with vermilion and yellow and green and blue and other colors, which are fixed with a varnish so fine and exquisite that they shine like crystal, and lend a luster to the palace so it can be seen from a great distance. This roof is made too with such strength and solidity that it is fit to last forever.

On the interior side of the palace are large buildings with halls and chambers, where the emperor's private property is placed, such as his treasures of gold, silver, gems, pearls, and gold plate, and in which reside the ladies and secondary wives. These rooms are only for him, and no one else has access to them.

Between the two walls of the enclosure which I have described, there are fine parks and beautiful trees bearing a variety of fruits. There are beasts, such as white stags and fallow deer, gazelles and roebucks, and fine squirrels

of various sorts, and all manner of other beautiful creatures, that the whole place is full of them. (The parks are covered with abundant grass; and since the roads through them are all paved and raised above the surface, they never become muddy.)

To the northwest there extends a fine lake, containing fish of different kinds which the emperor ordered put in there, so that whenever he desires any he can have them. A river enters this lake and flows from it, but there is a grating of iron or brass put up so that the fish cannot escape.

On the north side of the palace, there is a hill which has been made (from the earth dug out of the lake). It is a good hundred paces in height and a mile in compass. This hill is entirely covered with trees that never lose their leaves, but remain ever green. And I assure you that wherever a beautiful tree may exist, and the emperor gets news of it, he sends for it and has it transported with all its roots and the earth attached to them, and planted on that hill of his. No matter how big the tree may be, he gets it carried by his elephants; and in this way he has got together the most beautiful collection of trees in the whole world. He has also ordered the whole hill to be covered with green stones. Thus not only are the trees all green, but the hill itself is all green likewise; and there is nothing to be seen on it that is not green; and hence it is rightly called the Green Mount.

On top of the hill there is another fine big palace which is all green inside and out. Thus, the hill, the trees, and the palace form together a charming spectacle. It is marvelous to see them. Everybody who sees them is delighted. The Great Khan built this beautiful prospect for the comfort and solace and enjoyment of his heart.

Now I am going to tell you of the chief city of Cathay, in which these palaces stand; and why it was built, and how.