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## The bare details

Though most people know the name of Marco Polo, very few, if challenged, admit to having actually read his book. Leaving the academic doubts of contemporary scholars and the problems of spaghetti and ice-cream aside for the moment, Marco Polo's own book and the claims made in it are enormously important, for most of what we know (or are told) about Marco Polo is to be found in one or more versions of his own work.

Probably written in 1298, the *Description of the World* begins with a short Prologue which offers the background to the Polo family's travels and describes how the book came to be written. According to the Prologue, Marco Polo's father and uncle, Maffeo and Niccolo Polo, who were Venetian merchants, arrived in Constantinople in 1260 'with their merchandise'.<sup>1</sup> There, they decided 'that they would go across the Black Sea in the hope of a profitable venture . . . and went to Sudak'. At the time, this was one of the main trading posts on the Black Sea, on the northern peninsula, just east of Sevastopol, and it offered access to goods from Russia, Turkey and Persia. 'After staying there for a while, they resolved to go further afield.' They travelled through the territory from the Volga to the Caspian Sea held by the Mongol ruler Berke (ruled 1257-67), and under his author-

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ity traded 'very profitably'. However, they found themselves unable to return to Constantinople because war had broken out between Berke and Hülegü, the Mongol ruler of Persia (died 1265). Though Berke and Hülegü were cousins, sharing a grandfather in Qinghis (Chinghiz or Ghenghis) Khan, in 1261–62 they fought the first of a series of wars between the two Khanates based on disputed borders, with both sides claiming North-West Persia and the Caucasus.

The Mongol wars drove the two Polos further eastwards until they found themselves in Karakorum, the home base and capital city of the Mongols, who already controlled much of Central Asia and were beginning to threaten Eastern Europe.

In Karakorum, the two Venetian merchants met the great ruler, or Khan, Qubilai (Kubilai) and, rather than talk of trade, they discussed Christianity with him. Qubilai 'had letters written in the Turkish language to send to the Pope and entrusted them to the two brothers'. 'He sent word to the Pope that he should send up to a hundred men learned in the Christian religion . . . to argue and demonstrate plainly to idolators . . . that their religion is utterly mistaken. . . . Furthermore the Great Khan directed the brothers to bring oil from the lamp that burns above the sepulchre of God in Jerusalem.' He then sent one of his men to accompany the Polos on the first part of their journey and gave him a tablet of gold 'on which it was written that . . . they . . . should be given all the lodging they might need and horses and men'.

They returned to Venice, only to set off again almost immediately in 1271, this time taking Niccolo's son Marco (aged about 17) with them. They had managed to obtain the holy oil, but were not accompanied by any theologians; nor were they able to take a papal letter to Qubilai, since the Church was between popes at the time, but they had been given a covering letter from the papal legate in Acre.

In Karakorum once more, the Polos were welcomed with

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'mirth and merrymaking' and Qubilai was much taken with the 'young stripling' Marco. The Khan began to use him as an emissary, sending him off throughout the distant provinces of China, which he was then bringing under Mongol control. (The Mongols had taken north China in 1260 although the south was not fully conquered until 1279.) Marco first went to Yunnan province in south-west China, which took him six months to reach.

It appears that Marco knew how to tell a tale, for the Khan's normal emissaries were scorned by their imperial master as dolts and dunces since they could tell him nothing about the 'customs and usages' of the areas they had visited. Building on their failure, Marco 'paid close attention to all the novelties and curiosities that came his way so that he might retail them to the Great Khan'. On his return to court, he would first deal with the serious business and then 'recount all the remarkable things that he had seen on the way'.

The Prologue is short, only twelve pages long, and it gives an extremely brief overview of the Polos' long stay in China. 'What need to make a long story of it. You may take it for a fact that Messer Marco Polo stayed with the Great Khan fully seventeen years; and in all this time he never ceased to travel on special missions.'

Eventually, the Polos became homesick and begged to be allowed to return home to Italy. They were given permission to depart and returned, not overland as they had come, but mainly by sea, accompanying a young Mongol princess destined to marry the Mongol ruler Arghun, variously described as the Ruler of the Levant or Ilkhān of Persia (who ruled some time after Hūlegū, from 1284 to 1291). The trip was a difficult one: only eighteen of the 600 men survived the journey. When this depleted band arrived in Persia, they found that Arghun, too, had died, but they managed to off-load their royal charge on his son, Ghazan. Having discharged their duty, the Polos proceeded on

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horseback and by sea to Venice, where they arrived, 'in the year of the Incarnation of Christ 1295'. The Prologue concludes, 'Now that I have given you all the substance of the prologue, as you have heard it, I will begin the book . . .'

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## Omissions and inclusions

Marco Polo's apparent failure to pick up even a few Chinese or Mongol place-names in his seventeen-year stay in China remains puzzling. His apparent curiosity about the places and things he saw obviously did not extend to the languages by which he was surrounded.

Pelliot's complex work on the language raised many doubts as to Marco Polo's accuracy as well as the foundation for his information, but Professor Pelliot, though frequently baffled, always left Marco Polo with the benefit of the doubt. However, the German Mongolist Herbert Franke queried Marco Polo's veracity partly on the grounds of the contents of his book, most notably things that he omitted from his description of China.<sup>1</sup>

In the popular imagination, Marco Polo's descriptive gifts provided much significant information on the inventions and exotica of the East. In his descriptions of rare and costly luxury goods from the Near and Far East, Marco Polo's eye was that of a merchant accustomed to dealing in such commodities rather than a papal observer; for one thing he was interested in the value of money, which the missionary William of Rubruck did not mention. Some of the things Marco Polo described were just beginning to be known in Europe, such as porcelain, and it is worth looking at the

things he included, as well as his omissions, for they help to create an idea of the acquisitive audience for whom he was writing.

His description of porcelain, though linguistically confusing, must have been of great contemporary significance. At a time when Europeans were using heavy, solid, but easily chipped earthenware vessels, the few examples of porcelain that made their way across the Asian land mass must have seemed of a mysterious lightness, elegance and strength. Porcelain is made from a very fine clay, fired to a high temperature. It is characterised by the fusion of the body and the glaze, a resonant note when struck and, when the body is fine enough, translucence, all characteristics lacking in the more robust earthenwares and stonewares of Marco Polo's Europe. It was all the more fascinating because the method of manufacture was quite unknown (it took European potters some 500 years of unsuccessful experiments, mistakenly using crushed shells and bones, to discover the secret).<sup>2</sup>

Fine white porcelain was exported from China in enormous quantities by the Arabs from the time of the Tang dynasty (618–907), for the durable and elegant white wares were superior to anything produced anywhere else in the world at the time. Such isolated examples as made their way to thirteenth-century Europe were almost certainly bought from Arab middlemen.

Marco Polo's description of porcelain appears to locate its origin in the province of Fujian. Immediately, the sort of problems that dogged Professor Pelliot arise, for Marco sited its production at the mysteriously named town of Tingiu (or Linigui, Tranguay, Tyunguy, Tinguise in various manuscript editions). He described the preparation of the clay<sup>3</sup> and said that the ware was 'azure' and 'glassy'. The difficulty of locating the kiln source is compounded by the colour reference. Pelliot takes '*accuri*' or azure to mean green and identifies the ware as a green celadon of the type produced

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widely in southern China at the time. This identification makes it more difficult to identify the town where it was produced since none of the celadon centres had names closely resembling Tingiu (or Tranguay or Linigui).

One of the earliest recorded pieces of Chinese porcelain to reach Europe was a *qingbai* vase, now known as the Fonthill vase. This arrived at almost the same time as Marco Polo's return, in about 1300, was later fitted with silver mounts at the order of Louis the Great of Hungary (1348–82), and eventually acquired by the National Museum of Ireland in the mid nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> It is possible that the Fonthill vase provides a clue to Marco Polo's siting of porcelain manufacture, for *qingbai* ware, a white ware produced at many southern Chinese kilns, has a glassy glaze that is often greeny-blue, which you might possibly describe as 'accuri' or azure, where it collects in the base of bowls or in drips. *Qingbai* fragments of the Song (960–1279) and Mongol Yuan (1279–1368) period have been found in the Dehua kiln sites,<sup>5</sup> antedating the production of creamy white *blanc de chine*. A possible candidate for the site, stretching transliteration, might be Tongan, also in Fujian, which produced green wares and *qingbai* during the Song and Yuan periods<sup>6</sup> and seems to have specialised in export wares, as noted by Polo.

Another example of relevance is the so-called 'Marco Polo jar' in the Treasury of St Mark's in Venice.<sup>7</sup> The white jar is lobed and covered with a moulded floral decoration and a shining glaze. It is considered to date from the thirteenth or fourteenth century, though there is nothing but tradition to link it with Marco Polo, and it certainly does not accord with the account of his return with only the clothes he stood up in. Interestingly, it is an early example of *blanc de chine*, a white ware with a thicker body and a creamy appearance (without the green glassy drips seen on *qingbai* wares) made at kilns in Dehua in Fujian, but not in

Tongan. Thus it does not fit with either the green wares or, by stretching the azure, *qingbai*, possibly described by Polo.

Though luxury goods dominate Marco Polo's descriptions of foreign produce, he did include some more domestic peculiarities such as the use of coal. Coal had been used as a fuel in China for 2000 years before Marco Polo described it and, though it had apparently been known in Bronze Age Wales, it was not until the fourteenth or fifteenth century that it was used in England. It was probably unknown to the Italians of the time. It is described in the *Description of the World* quite accurately as 'a kind of large black stones which are dug up from mountains as veins which burn like logs and burn away like charcoal'.<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting that the description appears to be marginally better than that of the slightly later Arab traveller Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (1304-77/8), who described coal as having the colour and consistency of clay (and wrongly stated that the same stuff was used to make porcelain) but also used the comparison with charcoal.<sup>9</sup>

One of the great innovations of Song (960-1279) and Yuan (1279-1368) China was the use of paper money. It was not only the practice of using a substitute for coins, whose worth was based on the actual value of the metal, but the material itself that was unusual, for paper had only just begun to be known in Europe when Marco Polo was writing. Paper had been invented in China sometime during the early Han dynasty (206 BC-AD 220) and its use was widespread by the Tang (618-907) for official documents and printed books, as well as domestically for letters and notes. Arabs had learnt how to make paper from the Chinese, probably in the ninth century, and introduced it to Europe, where it was first manufactured in Spain in the early twelfth century. It was known in early thirteenth-century Italy, though its use for official documents was prohibited in 1221 as it was thought to be too fragile to be durable. The earliest paper mill in Italy was established in Fabriano between 1268 and 1279; thus, at the time that Marco Polo was in China,

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it must still have been a rare commodity.<sup>10</sup> Since paper was suspect as a material in Europe, it must have been particularly striking to find it used as currency.

Printed promissory notes or drafts (known as 'flying money') were first used by merchants and government agencies in ninth-century China. The system relied upon the well-established trade guilds of merchants, who travelled throughout the country staying at special guild halls built in every major town for merchants from each province. The guild hall for travelling merchants from the distant southern province of Guangdong still stands in Tianjin, its richly carved decoration demonstrating the wealth of the merchant guilds. For the convenience of merchants travelling long distances, paper 'promissory notes' could be used instead of the heavy bronze coinage or great gold and silver boat-shaped ingots normally used in financial transactions. True 'paper money', rather than these promissory notes, appeared in the early eleventh century. During the Mongol era, several issues of paper money were made, printed on small sheets of darkish paper, using a woodblock carved with the Chinese text in reverse, and finally authorised with a red seal in the Mongol script.

In the *Description of the World*, paper money is described in detail as to its convertibility and relative worth.<sup>11</sup> The method of making paper is also described, but the complexities of woodblock-printing (over one hundred years before Gutenberg) are not explored and the notes are only described as 'stamped'. The reference to 'stamping' could arise from the stamped authorisation seal or, perhaps, refer to the whole woodblock itself. (William of Rubruck also described the paper money he saw in Mongolia some thirty years before Marco Polo: 'The everyday currency of Cataia is of paper, the breadth and length of a palm, on which lines are stamped as on Mangu's seal . . .'<sup>12</sup> He did not go into the detail of the exchange rates at all, perhaps because he was not a merchant.

When comparing other accounts of the Mongols and Chinese written by contemporary or near contemporary European visitors, there are some very significant omissions in Polo's text. The very next line in Rubruck's account of paper money (which he only saw in Mongolia as he did not get to China) continues with a description of Chinese writing, which remains one of the most exotically different things about the country, but which does not seem to have struck Marco Polo.

William of Rubruck's extremely brief introduction to the Chinese writing system was inspired by the Chinese characters printed on the bank notes. 'They write with a brush of the sort painters use, and in a single character make several letters that comprise one word.'<sup>13</sup> This is quite a good, if excessively succinct, description of the Chinese writing system, which has no alphabet but up to 40,000 separate characters which represent words. Developed from pictographs and ideographs and a complex system of phonetic loans, characters consist of anything from one to over twenty strokes and were, as William of Rubruck noted, traditionally written with a brush.

The lack of reference to this extraordinarily different script in the *Description of the World* was defended by Leonardo Olschki, who felt that the language was quite inaccessible to Marco Polo as 'a foreigner lacking in any literary or spiritual initiative . . .'.<sup>14</sup> Even if it was incomprehensible, it must have been difficult to miss, for the Mongols themselves were cowed by the Chinese written language. They had only adopted their own writing system in the early thirteenth century<sup>15</sup> and, as nomads, had hardly developed a paper-consuming bureaucracy. In 1279, however, faced with the task of controlling the whole of China, of collecting taxes and administering the law, they had to adopt the Chinese attitude to paper and record-keeping. It has been estimated that the annual tax assessments of one single ministry (the Board of Revenue) required half a million

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sheets of paper per year during the Tang dynasty (618–907),<sup>16</sup> and the Mongols were compelled to join the paper mountain. They probably added to it, for documents were written in the Mongol script and then translated into Chinese (this in itself presented a problem, for Chinese were not usually allowed to learn Mongol).<sup>17</sup> Though Qubilai is not thought to have been comfortable with classical written Chinese, his successors became increasingly sinicised and adept at Chinese calligraphy and composition.<sup>18</sup>

It is also the case that the Chinese have always used the written language far more widely and with greater inventiveness than we do. Inscriptions praising the natural beauty of a scene were frequently carved into mountain-side cliffs and in the gardens of Suzhou, and on rocks surrounding the lake at Hangzhou, poetic inscriptions by emperors and famous calligraphers were carved into stone. It is not only nature that was embellished and given greater significance by the addition of the beautifully written word: the poetic names of pavilions and temple halls were inscribed on boards over their doors, enhancing the elegant architecture with calligraphy and adding a depth of meaning to scenes or groups of buildings. Thus, even as a traveller unconcerned with the business of government, it would have been difficult to ignore the Chinese script. It is hard to conceive that in the country where paper was invented and the written word revered more than almost anywhere else, a person, even a foreigner, could claim to have served in the government bureaucracy and either fail to notice the Mongol and the Chinese writing systems or consider them of little interest.

Though the *Description of the World* contains references to the use of paper effigies of people, caparisoned horses and camels, and paper money burnt at funerals,<sup>19</sup> the widespread use of woodblock printing (at the time still unknown in Europe) is not mentioned. The markets of the towns that Marco Polo describes would have been full of small book stalls selling cheaply printed popular handbooks and works

of fiction, many of which were illustrated. The southern coastal province of Fujian (described by Marco Polo at some length) was a centre of book production during the Song dynasty and known for the export of printed books throughout the country. In Hangzhou (Polo's Kinsai), capital of the Southern Song, one of the seventeen markets was a book market and booksellers clustered around the Orange Garden Pavilion.<sup>20</sup> Despite this, although Marco Polo described the markets, he only described food and silks on sale.

Perhaps even more surprisingly, despite a considerable interest in the edible produce displayed in Hangzhou's markets and the drinks and wines served at imperial banquets, Marco Polo never mentioned tea. Made from the leaves of a southern Chinese bush related to the camellia, tea was drunk in southern China from the Han dynasty (206 BC–AD 220) onwards but, according to written sources including the official history of the Tang and Lu Yu's *Cha jing* (*Classic of Tea*), it only really became widely popular in north China in the late eighth century. From then on it became the standard drink throughout China. Many of the places described in the *Description of the World* are famous for different sorts of tea, like the Wulong of Fujian and the green Longjing of the Hangzhou area, which was prepared with local spring water. Beauty spots that Marco Polo visited, like Hangzhou and Suzhou, were filled with tea-houses of all grades, with simple ones near the meat market and more elegant versions in the better shopping areas. A 1275 description of Hangzhou, written at about the time Marco Polo probably stayed there, described the lacquer trays, porcelain cups, varieties of tea (from plum flower to medicinal brews), and the displays of painting and calligraphy and flowers and bonsai that decorated the tea-houses.<sup>21</sup> Had the Polos been as well-connected as Marco suggests, they would almost certainly have been entertained in such tea-houses, for the Chinese did not entertain at home. Entertaining

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aside, the street-side tea-houses would have been difficult to miss. Polo describes various varieties of wine, made from grapes, rice and sugar-cane, and it might be argued that, despite the enthusiasm for tea amongst the Arabs and Persians, who had acquired the taste from China, an infusion of boiled leaves would be of no interest to his European audience. It is, however, difficult to imagine a sojourn of seventeen years in China without noticing the popularity of the drink.

However, even if it can be argued that the ghost-writer Rusticello threw out boiled leaves as incredible or lacking in interest, it is difficult to imagine a romance writer discarding a reference to exotic femininity and the peculiar custom of foot-binding.

Yet there are relatively few references to women in the *Description of the World* and nowhere is the practice of foot-binding even mentioned. Marco Polo describes the women of Fujian as very beautiful and the merchants' wives of Hangzhou as decked in silks and jewellery.<sup>22</sup> In a passage occurring only in Ramusio, there is a description of the courtesans of Hangzhou<sup>23</sup> and their seductive techniques, but still no mention of their presumably bound feet.

Foot-binding became popular amongst the upper classes during the Song dynasty (960–1279) when small girls had their toes bent under the soles of their feet and tied with wet bandages (which would shrink as they dried) to create a small, pointed foot.<sup>24</sup> Once the foot had been successfully deformed they were unable to walk far and could never even stand without their foot-bindings, for the bandages formed a necessary support for the hoof-like foot. Eventually, the practice spread until by the early twentieth century it had become virtually universal amongst all but the poorest peasants, who needed able-bodied women to work in the fields. However, the Manchus, who ruled China from 1644 until 1911, never adopted it and neither did the Mongols. Thus it could be argued that during the Mongol

period, when the Polos were supposed to have been in China, it was not so widespread and, since women whose feet had been bound could not move far, possibly invisible to foreign travellers.

It could also be argued that the enclosure of women meant that Marco Polo would have seen few upper-class Chinese women. It is perhaps significant that he describes merchants' wives, for merchants were traditionally despised and their sons barred from entry into the bureaucratic class (unless they changed their status to that of landowner by investing their wealth in the purchase of land). Thus merchants' wives were perhaps not immediately affected by the upper-class fashion for foot-binding and were maybe more likely to flaunt their wealth on the streets, where they could be seen by strangers.

In later traditional China, it was rare for a foreigner or outsider to see respectable women other than servants. Despite Confucius' (c. 500 BC) early advocacy of the separation of men and women (to the point where it was considered improper for a man to reach out a hand to save his sister-in-law from drowning), the strict enclosure of women does not seem to have been widespread until the Ming (1368–1644). A famous painting depicting the capital city of Kaifeng in the early Song period (c. 1100–1130) shows only a few women in the streets of the city,<sup>25</sup> but there are at least a few. By the Ming, enclosure had become much stricter, with upper-class women confined to the side and rear courtyards of the family home and not introduced to male visitors even within the home. However, it is quite possible that in the laxer days of Mongol rule, Marco Polo might have seen women with unbound feet on the streets of Chinese towns.

Nonetheless, Friar Odoric of Pordenone, who travelled in China from 1320 and dictated his memoirs in 1330, describes foot-binding in South China, in conjunction with the then current male fashion for growing enormously long

finger-nails.<sup>26</sup> Long finger-nails, protected by jewelled nail guards, remained fashionable amongst women until the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), although by that time gentlemen usually only allowed one or two finger-nails to grow long, as an indication that they had no need to take part in manual labour. Odoric's whole passage about foot-binding was lifted almost verbatim by Sir John Mandeville, writing in the mid fourteenth century: 'The mark of nobility in women there is to have small feet; and so as soon as they are born, they bind their feet so tightly that they cannot grow as they should.'<sup>27</sup> It does seem inconceivable that fashions could have changed so rapidly within fifty years that Marco Polo did not see bound feet whilst the pious Friar Odoric, who did not have the entrée into society that Marco Polo claimed, described them in some detail.

Aside from women, another activity that Marco Polo either failed to notice or lacked interest in was cormorant fishing. One of the sights for today's travellers on the river from Guilin is the use of tame cormorants by fishermen. Supplied with a ring around their necks so that they cannot swallow large fish, the birds dive from bamboo rafts and bring back their catch. The sight fascinated members of Lord Macartney's embassy to China (1792-94): 'This bird is so like another species of the pelican . . . or common cormorant . . . these birds will seize and grip fast fishes that are not less than their own weight . . .'<sup>28</sup> They were also noticed by Friar Odoric, who left the earliest description to reach Europe of cormorants 'catching large numbers of fish and ever as they caught them putting them of their own accord into the baskets'.<sup>29</sup>

In Marco Polo's favour, it is argued against the German Mongolist that, given the lapse of time before the compilation of the *Description of the World*, he may have forgotten about things. Some things, like tea-drinking, might have been put before Rustichello and discarded as of no interest to the general public or, given the variations of texts and

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multitude of copyists, erasures may have occurred. He may, equally, have so lacked interest in Chinese culture or been so narrowly European in outlook that the writing system, for example, was of no interest to him, though it is claimed in his Prologue that he mastered Mongol at least and spoke directly to Qubilai Khan. In these arguments, the failure to describe foot-binding seems the most extraordinary for it, almost above all else, certainly fascinated later travellers. Barrow described bound feet seen in 1793-4 during the Macartney embassy<sup>30</sup> and they were illustrated in Staunton's account of the embassy.<sup>31</sup> Early photographers in China took photographs of them and my impression after looking through the collections is that the largest single group of artefacts held in the Chinese collections of the Museum of Mankind in London is the group of tiny embroidered shoes made for bound feet, brought back in their hundreds by nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European visitors and missionaries.

Thus, it is puzzling that tea and bound feet, things that symbolise China in the Western imagination, are missing from an avowedly popular text. Nor does he mention chopsticks . . .

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## Conclusions

Beginning with the negative, the *Description of the World* is not an itinerary or a straightforward account of travels. Experienced travellers attempting to follow in Marco Polo's footsteps were invariably forced to abandon the attempt: John Julius Norwich admitted to having to give up following the trail somewhere in Persia; Lord Macartney's embassy was forced into geographical hypothesis round and about the Great Wall; and Clarence Dalrymple Bruce became deeply confused in the Persian Gulf.<sup>1</sup>

If it is not an itinerary (excepting the Prologue with its sparse details), the rest of the text fulfils more accurately the promise of the title as a 'description of the world' beyond Venice. One of the spurs to its compilation may have been the slightly premature sense that there was a growing demand for geographies in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. Jacopo da Acqui, Vincent of Beauvais and even Sir John Mandeville all compiled world histories and geographies, an activity paralleled by Rashīd al-Dīn in his *World History* in Arabic. The appearance of these early geographies heralded the great age of discovery when pioneering seafarers set out to prove the limits of written description. Christopher Columbus had a copy of Polo's *Description of the World* with him on his epic voyage,

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though the fact that he ended up on the other side of the world was not due solely to the difficulty of physically following in Polo's footsteps. Unaware of the American land mass that lay in the way, he had convinced himself that he could get to Asia by sailing westwards and found himself making topographical somersaults trying to identify Cuba with Japan (where Marco Polo only described a palace and a major sea-battle fought two hundred years previously). Christopher Columbus' own copy of Marco Polo with marginal notes still survives in the Capitular and Columbus Library of Seville,<sup>2</sup> but his scribbles do not appear to hint at massive disillusion.

The gradual growth in popularity of the genre of travel writing is evident in the translation and spread of manuscript editions of the *Description of the World*. Some fifty years later, Sir John Mandeville's fictional account, *Travels*, was greeted with the same enthusiasm: it, too, was translated and was available in every common European language by 1400 and Czech, Danish, Dutch and Irish by 1500.<sup>3</sup> It is perhaps significant that some of the early copies of the *Description of the World* were reproduced as part of collections of works of travel and topography, which also often included Sir John Mandeville's *Travels*.

The *Travels* also formed part of Christopher Columbus' pre-exploration researches,<sup>4</sup> but by comparison it is interesting that, not long after Ramusio rediscovered and promoted Marco Polo as a great traveller, doubts began to be expressed about Mandeville's veracity. By the early sixteenth century, Bishop Joseph Hall was referring to the 'whetstone leasings of old Mandeville', and a satirical play of 1636, *The Antipodes*, by Richard Brome, was based entirely on Mandeville, who by that time must have been almost a household name, albeit as a fake.<sup>5</sup> It has been demonstrated that Mandeville did, in fact, lift passages from fifteen or more sources, including Vincent de Beauvais and Odoric of Pordenone,<sup>6</sup> his word-by-word copying giving the lie to his claims. In contrast, the second-hand nature of the *Description of the World*, written by

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Rustichello from information provided by Marco Polo and added to by later translators, may have helped to conceal any obvious borrowings. As Mandeville's star waned, Marco Polo was enjoying a posthumous revival which still flourishes.

It is possible that the lack of a coherent itinerary in Marco Polo's *Description of the World* may be due to the enthusiasm of the romance-writer Rustichello, who could have dictated the form of the text and encouraged its expansion beyond a description of travel into a grander world history with the incorporation of irrelevant geographical descriptions of places like Russia and Japan and ancient battles.

It was perhaps Rustichello, a writer by profession, who hoped to exploit the growing popular demand for such books on the marvels of the distant corners of the world. The method of creation of the text is probably crucial. Though we do not know for sure even which battle it was that resulted in Marco Polo's imprisonment, one of the relative certainties about the *Description of the World* is that it was written as a joint effort. Impressed by the fantastic tales told by Marco Polo to pass the time, whether in a dungeon or other form of confinement, Rustichello perhaps proposed a literary collaboration. In the days before printing and copyright, it is difficult to imagine making a fortune out of a best-circulating (rather than best-selling) manuscript; but Rustichello, who had previously relied upon the support of the heir to the English throne as a result of his literary efforts, may have aimed for similar favour.

The source material that they used to create the work is more difficult. If Marco Polo arrived back in Venice in only the clothes he stood up in (albeit with jewels sewn into their linings) as Jacopo da Acqui described, he is unlikely to have had many personal papers, which Jacopo da Acqui also described as being sent for from prison. If family, rather than personal, papers were provided, they might well have included material relating to family trading trips eastwards

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and, perhaps, Persian guidebooks for merchants. There may have been Persian historical works which enabled them to include ancient battles, and descriptions of Russia and Japan that were not part of Marco Polo's or his family's personal experience.

Yule noted that the earliest foreign eyewitness descriptions of China were 'all, with one slight exception, Arabic'.<sup>7</sup> The Arabic accounts of China, written from the Tang dynasty onwards, were based on close contact, for Arabic and Persian traders, attracted by rich produce and exotic culture, resided in the major cities and ports of China most involved in the export of porcelain and silks, such as Chang'an (the capital, today's Xi'an), Canton, Quanzhou and Fuzhou. Paul Pelliot's work on Marco Polo's vocabulary (or that of his multitudinous copyists) contains much reference to Persian and Arabic sources. Examination of Arabic and Persian sources was also considered to be of paramount importance by Herbert Franke, not only for the vain hope that there might be a reference to Marco Polo, but also for the possibility that Marco Polo might have relied upon a Persian guidebook as his major source material.<sup>8</sup>

An anonymous Arab writing in 851<sup>9</sup> described the port of Canton and its mosque, public granaries and dispensaries, the complex administration and its stress on the written document, the practice of secondary burial, protection afforded to travellers, and the use of porcelain, rice-wine and tea. Other Arab travellers to China in the Tang dynasty have left similarly detailed accounts, but it is the later accounts, including the *World History* of Rashīd al-Dīn, and Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's early fourteenth-century account of his travels, which provide the closest parallels to parts of the *Description of the World*.

Rashīd al-Dīn, the most significant writer in the Marco Polo story, was a Jew, the son of an apothecary, born in about 1247 in Hamadan. He converted to Islam at the age of thirty. He seems to have entered the service of Abaqa

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(ruled 1265–82), the second Mongol Khan of Persia, as a physician. His great achievement was the compilation of a universal history of the world, undertaken at the order of Öljeitü (Khan of Persia, ruled 1304–16). His *Jāmi 'al-Tawārikh* (*Complete collection of histories*) included a history of the Franks (Europeans) and a history of China from the earliest creation legends to the reign of Temür Öljeitü, Qubilai's successor (ruled 1294–1307).

Rashīd's history of China in many instances paralleled Marco Polo's account. As Professor Pelliot demonstrated, the spelling of place-names frequently tallied, though it is obviously less surprising to find Persian versions in Rashīd. Even where there are mysteries or mistakes, such as the exact location of Iachi (the 'Duck' pond or 'Ear' Lake) in Yunnan, Rashīd and Polo run parallel. Their accounts of the murder of Wang Zhu are equally and similarly confused.

Rashīd was writing an account of China which was not personal, for he did not visit the country, but relied instead on various contemporary sources, both written and verbal, and, as *Encyclopaedia Britannica* has it, his sources were Mongol. For his history of the Mongols, he used the *Golden Book*, a chronicle of Mongol history, and for the campaigns of Qinghis Khan, the narrative of Juwaynī (1226–83).<sup>10</sup> The basis for his account of China is unknown.<sup>11</sup> Rashīd sets out Chinese history according to the traditional chronological arrangement of dynasties, beginning with the Xia (supposedly from c. twenty-first to sixteenth century BC) and ending early in the Mongol era. The fact that the non-Chinese Jin dynasty (which ruled North China after its capture from the the Chinese Song dynasty between 1125 and 1234) is regarded by Rashīd as 'legitimate' suggests that his source was more recent than the Song period for a 'Song author could never have listed the Jin emperors as legal rulers of China'.<sup>12</sup>

Another Persian author, Bernaketi, apparently stated that two Chinese assisted Rashīd in his history. Following this

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clue and – pace *Encyclopaedia Britannica* – hoping for a Chinese source for Rashīd's history (a parallel to the Persian source he thinks might have been used by Marco Polo), Professor Franke was excited to discover a Chinese Buddhist account by Nianchang. The *Fozu lidai tongzai* (*Account of the Buddhist ancestral generations*) described events up to 1333 and included prefaces to the printed editions dated 1341 and 1344, in which 'the parallels are so striking and so numerous' that it could well have been the source for Rashīd. Unfortunately, Rashīd's history was completed some twenty years earlier in 1310.

As the dates do not tally, if Nianchang's work was not Rashīd's source Professor Franke suggested that there must have been some (as yet undiscovered) Chinese Buddhist chronicle which served as a 'common source for Nianchang as well as for the monks who, according to Benaketi, compiled the chronicle serving as a source for Rashīd'.<sup>13</sup>

Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's account of China presents some of the same problems. He was a native of Tangier, born in 1304, who spent much of his life, between 1325 and 1355, travelling in the Far East. His account of his travels was apparently written down in 1355.<sup>14</sup> Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's description of Hangzhou included the pleasure boats and entertainers, the markets and their produce, including bamboo handicrafts, and he remarked upon the intensive cultivation of the eastern seaboard of China.<sup>15</sup> He also described paper money, coal and china clay, silk and its production, and the consumption of pork.<sup>16</sup> That Marco Polo did not single out pork, still the favoured meat of China, could be because its popularity was less striking to a Christian. Ibn Baṭṭūṭa also noted, without citing the place where they were found, enormous cocks and hens,<sup>17</sup> not unlike Marco Polo's giant geese.<sup>18</sup>

Although there are differences in emphasis, such as Polo's failure to remark upon the cultivation of the Yangtse delta area (defenders of Polo might leap forward to point out that he was a city-dweller, not a farmer), the similarities

between Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's and Polo's descriptions of China are striking. It is these similarities that led Herbert Franke to suggest that Marco Polo might, perhaps, have been relying upon a Persian or Arabic guidebook to China filled with the sort of detail that both he and Ibn Baṭṭūṭa provided. Though several have searched for such a guidebook, it is unfortunate that the thirteenth century is a 'Dark Ages of Persian popular literature'<sup>19</sup> and no such guidebook has surfaced. Thus Franke concluded that, in the absence of any clear source, Marco Polo must be left with the benefit of the doubt.

Nevertheless, his possible reliance upon Arabic or Persian sources could explain the similarities with Rashīd and Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, particularly in vocabulary and in the odd descriptions such as the giant fowl of the south. It might also explain his padding out of his description with events that he had not seen, like the attempted invasion of Japan, early Mongol battles and the complexities of the Wang Zhu affair. If he had, indeed, been provided with documentation by his family whilst in prison, a Persian guidebook in the family's possession, or Persian accounts of the Mongol conquests, could have given him source material.

The question of Marco Polo's possible reliance upon Persian sources is very difficult to resolve since nothing that fits the bill has yet been discovered. Rashīd al-Dīn's account, which closely parallels Marco Polo in parts, appeared too late in its finished form to have been any use to him, as did Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's. Even Rashīd al-Dīn's sources, as Professor Franke has demonstrated, are tantalising. Though, given the enormous stress in China on the preservation and transmission of written texts, it is still possible that a Chinese source for parts of Rashīd al-Dīn's *World History* may be discovered.

Reliance on other people's work to fill out the *Description of the World* might account for some of the glaring omissions, for Persian and Arab travellers had a longer tradition of knowledge about the Far East and, coming from a different

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culture, might have been surprised by different things. For Chinese historians like Yang Zhijiu the omission of significant details, amidst all the detail that was included, is not seen as a major problem, and the argument has its points, for if Marco Polo had included everything there was in China, he and Rustichello would probably never have emerged from prison. Perhaps we should accept the editorial prerogative of author and ghost writer to miss things out. Foot-binding might interest me but not Polo and Rustichello.

Professor Yang also considered, with some reason, that getting things wrong is not necessarily a result of a reliance upon second-hand sources. The errors in the story of Wang Zhu's assassination attempt were also made by Rashīd al-Dīn, so anyone could make a mistake. Marco Polo's failure to set down the accurate lineage of Qubilai Khan, mentioned as a problem by Craig Clunas, was also dismissed by Yang as an easy mistake and, given the complexities of the various Mongol empires and their rulers, he had a point.

Some of the mistakes cannot be Marco Polo's 'fault' but are clear indications that second-hand material was used, perhaps by others. That copyists took on the role of 'improvers' and compilers seems evident from the account of the defeat of Togta by Nogai, which occurs only in the fifteenth-century Toledo version.<sup>20</sup> According to Rashīd, this battle occurred in 1298–99 and thus could not have been known to Marco Polo and Rustichello in time for its inclusion in the (lost) original manuscript, unless we discount the date of compilation given in the Prologue. This must be a later 'improvement' to the text, raising the question of how much 'improvement' and interpolation occurred and how early.

Yet if Marco Polo was not in China, there is, unfortunately, nothing to prove he was anywhere else.

In the absence of proof of his existence elsewhere between 1271 and 1295, there is only the *Description of the*

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*World* for evidence, and I think that the complicated structure of the book may offer some insight. The details offered in the Prologue to the *Description of the World* refer at greatest length to the early journey by Marco's father and uncle. Their plausible eastward progress from their known bases in the Crimea and Constantinople, driven on by war and chance meetings with important persons, may perhaps be the only concrete evidence of such a journey by any Polo.

The sudden transformation of his father and uncle from merchants to self-appointed papal go-betweens could have been the springboard for Marco Polo's description of a second, longer journey. The existence of the golden passports are evidence of reasonably high-level contact with one of the Mongol rulers, though not necessarily Qubilai himself. Might part of the family dispute over gold tablets (revealed in 1310, after the compilation of the *Description of the World*) have been Marco Polo's claim to have been there himself when he wasn't? Might his father and uncle have made a dangerous journey and returned with one or more gold *laisser-passer* tablets, only to have had their chance of glory stolen by Marco writing himself into the story whilst in prison? To add insult to injury, Maffeo's will of 1310 suggests some jiggery-pokery over one of these gold tablets by Marco. Different texts suggest that a varying number of these tablets were distributed to the Polos at different times; it is not easy to count how many there eventually were, and whether Marco himself ever received one from the hands of the Khan. The dispute, recorded in a will, seems perhaps more significant than the possible number surviving.

Perhaps in the final analysis the text should be treated as two separate entities. The details of the Prologue, particularly those describing the first trip of Niccolo and Maffeo Polo, suggest a credible venture, whilst the rest of the text is a mixture of legend and geographical and historical description which hangs together in a quite different way. I think it quite likely that the elder Polos travelled a long way

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across the deserts of Central Asia, like William of Rubruck and John of Plano Carpini, perhaps to Karakorum or a Mongol encampment nearby, and returned, protected by the gold safe-conduct tablets of one of the Mongol leaders. Marco's participation and the whole second trip seems unlikely, even allowing for exaggeration.

That Marco Polo himself might not have gone to Karakorum, let alone Peking, seems more likely to me than that he wrote everything he knew from a view of Peking (as John Haeger suggested). The major part of the book is a description of China and beyond. If he had spent years in Peking, a more detailed account of that city alone by its first Italian, or indeed European, visitor would have been sufficiently exotic to attract attention.

If he did not travel to China and India and the South East Asian archipelago, where did he get his information? Family stories and family familiarity with the Near East and beyond could have provided much material. His father and uncle's plausible excursion to Karakorum was a valuable starting point. Though merchant secrecy was an important aspect of safeguarding sources of supply, a family with houses in the Crimea and Constantinople might have gathered material, including Persian guidebooks, maps and histories, on the areas beyond in order to facilitate travel and trade. If Pegolotti could write a credible guide to merchant travel to China based entirely on second-hand information, Marco Polo could, too. Franke has demonstrated the difficulty of finding the Chinese source for Rashīd al-Dīn's history of China and raised the same problem as occurs in comparison between Polo and Rashīd: an uncanny similarity, but a chronological impossibility. It is equally difficult to demonstrate a reliance upon the rich sources provided by European missionaries, for William of Rubruck's report was apparently not widely circulated and Marco Polo was clearly not in a position to trawl libraries during the period of his collaboration with Rustichello.

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Odoric of Pordenone's later account, which tallies with Marco Polo in parts, and yet departs from Polo in parts, could not have helped Marco Polo, but may itself have been partly based on Marco Polo's book.

The sources used by Marco Polo and Rustichello must have been information of the sort available to Rashīd al-Dīn: perhaps written sources on geography and Mongol history, and much oral legend relating to the marvels of the East, the Magis' home village, the legendary Prester John and his real 'grandson' George, salamanders, and foxes that ate only sugar-cane. Family knowledge might have been the basis for much of the information on produce such as dates and on handicrafts like pearl-piercing in Baghdad. Combined with Rustichello's flourishes and, perhaps, dictated by his sense of composition, the text remains valuable, even if not an eyewitness account.

Whilst I incline to the view that Marco Polo himself probably never travelled much further than the family's trading posts on the Black Sea and in Constantinople, and was not responsible for Italian ice-cream or Chinese dumplings, this does not mean that the *Description of the World* does not remain a valuable source of information on China and the Near East, in particular. His usefulness as a recorder of information otherwise lost is similar to the case of Herodotus (c. 484 BC to c. 425 BC), who did not travel to all the places he described and who mixed fact with fantastic tales, but whose work is nevertheless not to be discarded lightly.<sup>21</sup> When used in conjunction with Arabic, Persian and Chinese texts which bear out the spirit, if not always the detail, of its contents, the *Description of the World* remains a very rich source. The portrait of the chessboard city plan of Peking still stands, and remains, whatever its source, a credible account of a city which no longer exists, but which has its place in the history of the settlements in the area. The contents of the *Description of the World*, used critically, remain important, and can be regarded as an example of the type

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of world geography which was beginning to become popular in the fourteenth century. This interest in the world beyond Europe and its legends, rulers and products led to the great voyages of exploration of the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; and even in the early twentieth century, great travellers like Sir Aurel Stein set off into the little-known Gobi desert, for which Marco Polo's *Description of the World* remained one of the few reference sources, however unreliable.

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# Notes

## Introduction

- 1 Colonel Sir Henry Yule, *The Travels of Marco Polo: the complete Yule-Cordier edition* (1903, 1920; New York, 1993), vol. 1, pp. 4–6.
- 2 Herbert Franke, 'Sino-Western relations under the Mongol Empire', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch*, 6 (Hong Kong, 1966), pp. 49–72, reprinted in a collected volume of Franke's work *China Under Mongol Rule* (Aldershot, 1994). For a bibliography, see H. Watanabe, *Marco Polo Bibliography 1477–1983* (Tokyo, 1986).

## 1 The Bare Details

- 1 This quotation and quotations of Marco Polo throughout are taken from Ronald Latham's translation of *Discovery of the World: Ronald Latham, Marco Polo: The Travels* (Harmondsworth, 1958).

## 2 Why go at all?

- 1 F. Fernandez-Arnesto, *Columbus* (Oxford, 1991), p. 39.
- 2 Ronald Latham, *Marco Polo: The Travels* (Harmondsworth, 1958), p. 217.
- 3 Donald Lach, *Asia in the Making of Europe* (Chicago, 1965), vol. 1, p. 20.
- 4 *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 15.
- 5 *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 21.
- 6 *The Silk Book* (London, 1951), pp. 14, 90
- 7 Roberto Sabatinio Lopez, 'China Silk in Europe in the

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- 20 Pelliot, *Notes*, vol. 1, p. 781.
- 21 Latham, *Marco Polo*, p. 132.
- 22 Pelliot, *Notes*, vol. 1, p. 781.
- 23 Latham, *Marco Polo*, p. 244.
- 24 Moule and Pelliot, *Marco Polo*, vol. 1, p. 93.

## 8 Omissions and Inclusions

- 1 Herbert Franke, 'Sino-Western relations under the Mongol Empire', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch*, 6, Hong Kong, 1966, pp. 49-72.
- 2 Böttger of the Meissen factory finally succeeded in the mid eighteenth century: see Margaret Medley, *The Chinese Potter* (Oxford, 1980), p. 261.
- 3 A. C. Moule and Paul Pelliot, *Marco Polo: The Travels* (London, 1938), vol. 2, p. 352.
- 4 Shelagh Vainker, *Chinese Pottery and Porcelain* (London, 1991), p. 143.
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- 6 *Ibid.*, pp. 26-9.
- 7 See John Ayers, 'Blanc de Chine', *Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society*, 51 (London, 1986-87), pp. 16-17.
- 8 Moule and Pelliot, *Marco Polo*, vol. 1, p. 238.
- 9 Colonel Sir Henry Yule, *Cathay and the Way Thither* (London, 1916), vol. 4, p. 113.
- 10 Tsiên Tsuen-hsuein, 'Paper and Printing', in J. Needham (ed.), *Science and Civilisation in China*, vol. 5, part 1 (Cambridge, 1985), p. 299.
- 11 Moule and Pelliot, *Marco Polo*, vol. 1, p. 238.
- 12 Peter Jackson, *The Mission of William of Rubruck* (London, 1990), p. 203.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 203.
- 14 Leonardo Olschki, *Marco Polo's Asia* (Berkeley, 1960), p. 139.
- 15 M. Rossabi, *Khubilai Khan* (Berkeley, 1988), p. 154.
- 16 D. C. Twitchett, *Printing and Publishing in Medieval China* (London, 1983), p. 12.

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- 17 Rossabi, *Khubilai Khan*, p. 15.
- 18 Herbert Franke, 'Could the Mongol Emperors read and write Chinese?', *Asia Major*, new series, 3, 1 (London, 1932), p. 30.
- 19 Moule and Pelliot, *Marco Polo*, vol. 1, p. 337.
- 20 Twitchett, *Printing and Publishing*, pp. 45-52.
- 21 Jacques Gernet, *Daily Life in China on the Eve of the Mongol Conquest* (Stanford, 1970), p. 49.
- 22 Latham, *Marco Polo*, p. 217.
- 23 See P. B. Ebrey, *The Inner Quarters: marriage and the lives of Chinese women in the Sung period* (Berkeley, 1993).
- 24 Ebrey, *The Inner Quarters*, pp. 26-7.
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- 26 *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 153.
- 27 C. W. R. D. Moseley (ed.), *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* (Harmondsworth, 1983), p. 187.
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- 30 Barrow, *Travels*, pp. 75-7.
- 31 Sir George Staunton, *An authentic account of the embassy from the King of Great Britain to the Emperor of China* (Dublin, 1798).

### 9 Ice-cream and spaghetti

- 1 Aeneas Anderson, *A Narrative of the British Embassy to China* (London, 1795), p. 81.
- 2 Verbal communication, Dr Albertine Gaur.
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- 4 Claudia Roden, *The Food of Italy* (London, 1989), pp. 176-9.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 26.
- 6 Chang Kwang-chih, *Food in Chinese Culture* (New Haven, 1977), p. 7.
- 7 W. Watson (ed.), *The Genius of China* (London, 1973), p. 133.
- 8 For Mongol dietary terms see Yan-shuan Lao, 'Notes on non-Chinese terms in the Yuan imperial dietary

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taught to eschew this missionary dictionary produced in 1931. To be fair to Matthews, his famous inaccuracies are mostly to do with a prim unwillingness to mention sex or concubinage, so concubines always appear as wives, sisters or great-nieces, which can considerably confuse family relations.

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- 8 Ibid., p. 189.
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## Conclusion

- 1 Clarence Dalrymple Bruce, *In the Footsteps of Marco Polo* (London, 1907), p. 171.
- 2 Translation by Juan Gil, Madrid, Testimonio, 1986.
- 3 C. W. R. D. Moseley (ed.), *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* (Harmondsworth, 1983), pp. 9-10.
- 4 Ibid., p. 9.
- 5 Ibid., pp. 9, 33.
- 6 Ibid., p. 19.
- 7 Colonel Sir Henry Yule, *Cathay and the Way Thither* (London, 1916), p. 125.

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- 8 Herbert Franke, 'Sino-Western relations under the Mongol Empire', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch*, 6, Hong Kong, 1966, p. 54.
- 9 Translated into French by Abbé Renaud in his *Anciennes Relations de l'Inde et de la Chine de deux voyageurs Mahometans qui y allèrent dans le IXe siècle, 1718*, see Yule, p. 125.
- 10 J. A. G. Boyle, 'Rashid al-Din and the Franks', in Boyle, *The Mongol World Empire* (London, 1977).
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- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 23. For details of Rashid al-Din's historical writing, see also Bernard Lewis, *The Muslim Discovery of Europe* (London, 1994), especially pp. 150-7.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 23.
- 14 Yule, *Cathay*, p. 112.
- 15 *Ibid.*, pp. 110-13.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 110.
- 17 Yule, *Cathay*, pp. 129-137.
- 18 Ronald Latham, *Marco Polo: The Travels* (Harmondsworth, 1958), p. 234.
- 19 Ursula Sims-Williams, verbal communication.
- 20 John Critchley, *Marco Polo's Book* (Aldershot, 1992), p. 10.
- 21 Jarl Charpentier (ed.), *The Livro de Seita dos Indios Orientais of Father Jacobo Fenicio* (Uppsala, 1933), p. xi. Thanks also to Maurice Smith for raising Herodotus and similar useful references when I taught him Chinese literature. He rescued me from a virtual lynching by fellow students who could not tolerate the political force of Cultural Revolution literature by mentioning Shaw in the same gentle manner.