



ARCHIVE PICK

## Marco Polo: Travel writer? Fraud? Sexpat?

*'The Travels of Marco Polo' is often held up as the earliest Western account of China and Asia. What's actually inside the covers might surprise you.*

JEREMIAH JENNE — DECEMBER 12, 2023

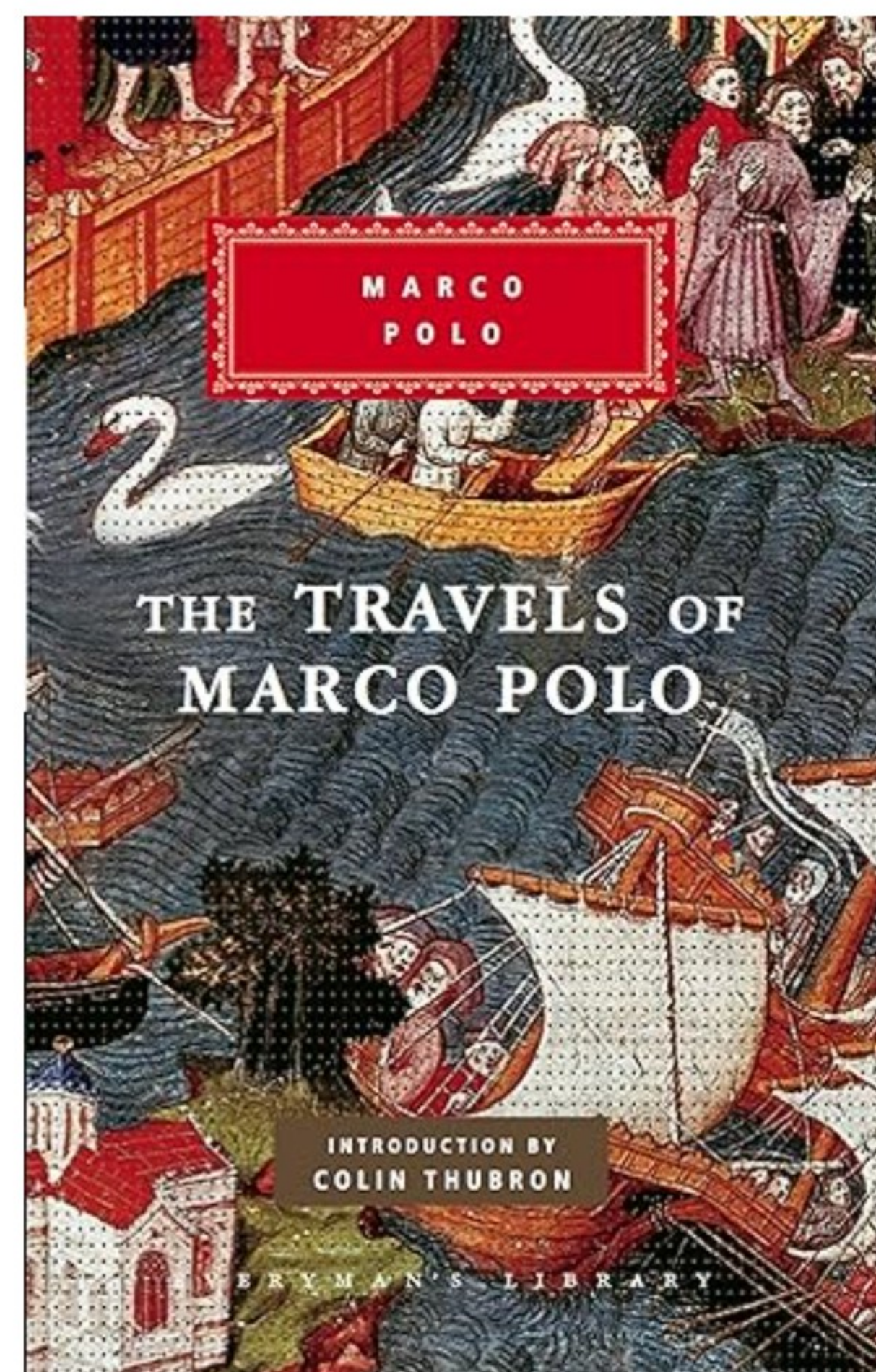
HISTORY



Did Marco Polo make it to China? Does it matter? The Venetian explorer — and arguably the first Western “China writer” — supposedly traveled, between 1271 and 1295, through Central Asia to Kublai Khan’s capital of Khanbaliq, the forerunner of modern Beijing, accompanied by his father and uncle as traveling merchants. His book *The Travels of Marco Polo* is about as deep into the China archive as we can delve.

Many in China, and around the world, believe Marco made it. The Sinologist Frances Wood famously [dissents](#). Most historians of China — like kids at recess debating the existence of Santa — fall somewhere on the spectrum between skeptical scoffers and true believers. But whether Polo made the trip or not, his account of the civilizations, cultures and states of Asia is one of the most influential books ever published in a European language.

*The Travels of Marco Polo* first circulated in the late 13th century under the title *A Description of the World* (*Devisement du Monde* or *Livre des Merveilles du Monde* in Franco-Venetian). But it was not strictly written by Polo. After returning from his travels, he was incarcerated in Genoa, a rival of Venice, after being captured at sea. In prison he recounted his adventures and observations from the journey to Rustichello da Pisa, a fellow inmate and writer who was famous for reworking legends, including that of King Arthur, and who wrote up Polo’s account. Myriad versions, translations, editions, adaptations, expansions and abridgments have been in circulation ever since.





Despite its most popular English title being *The Travels of Marco Polo*, the book is not a travelogue.

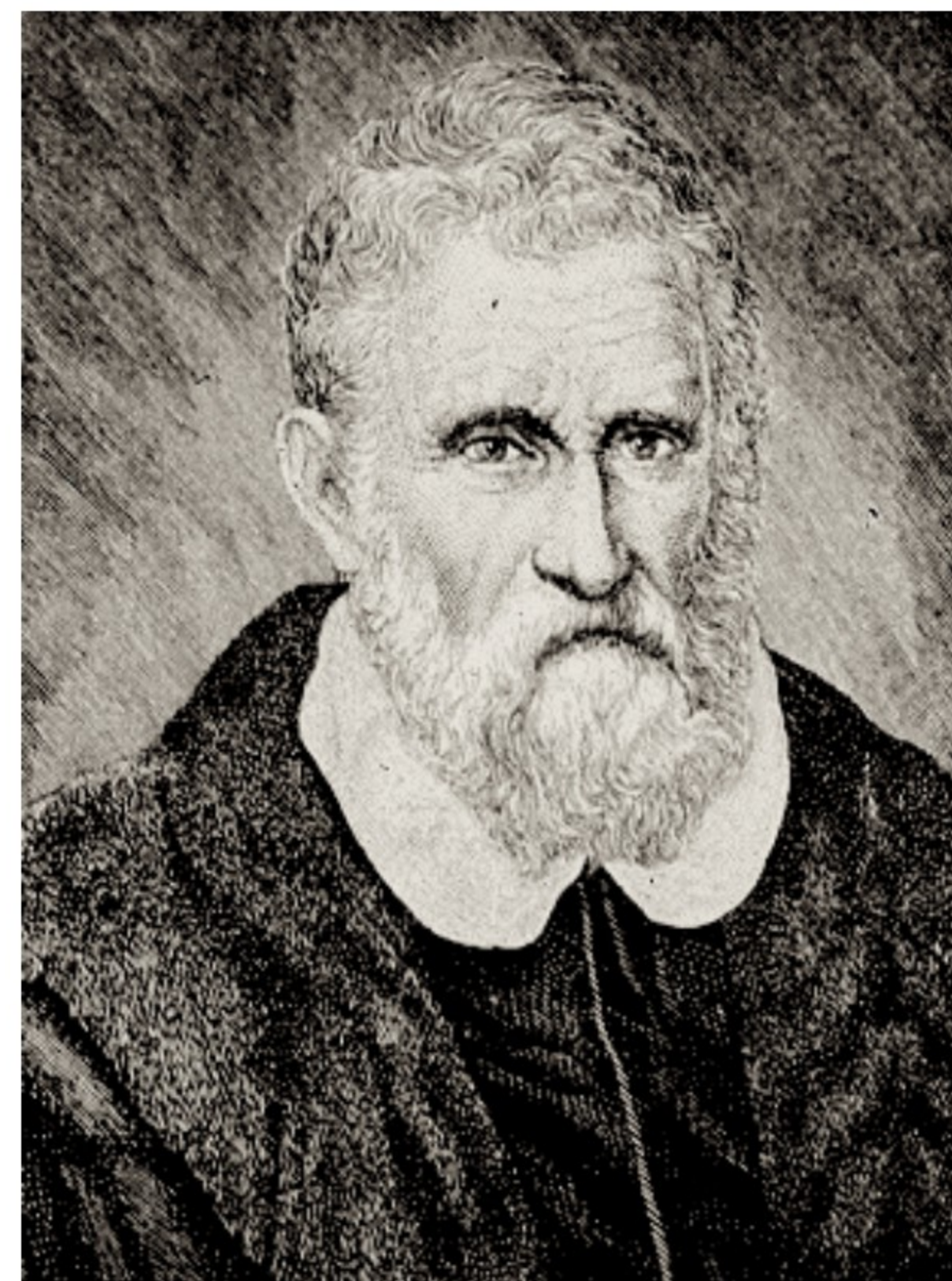
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It's more of a late medieval guidebook to the Mongolian realms. Travelogues reflect their authors' actual destinations and journeys; writers of guidebooks are more likely to take shortcuts, or leaps of imagination. As one author of travel guides for Asia told me: "You develop a good instinct for how things are and, like Polo, listen to a lot of people talking about their travels."

Perhaps a more interesting question than if Marco Polo went on his travels is: How widely did his tales travel? Christopher Columbus had a copy, and unwisely based some of his plans for a circumnavigation of the world on Polo's much-maligned geographic skills (he thought Japan was 1500 miles further east than it is, for one). Lord Macartney read it while preparing for his infamous 1793 tête-a-tête with the Qianlong Emperor, at which he received a cooler reception than the warm greeting Polo claimed to have got from Kublai Khan five centuries earlier. Kings, nobles, merchants and armchair travelers all enjoyed reading about the wonders of the East, and much of Polo's descriptions, whether accurate or not, became the standard for Western writing about Asia.

“ Marco Polo set the template for expat authors eager to regale audiences with their insights. He's the original White-Guy-in-Asia cliché ”

Indeed, Marco Polo set the template for expat authors eager to regale audiences with their insights. He's the original White-Guy-in-Asia travel cliché. From not-so-casual racism ("They have such big mouths and such flat noses and such large lips and eyes that they are a very horrible sight") to misidentifying the local fauna ("The unicorn [rhinoceros] has the hair of a buffalo and feet like an elephant's") while wildly exaggerating his insider connections ("The Great Khan was so well satisfied with Messer Marco's handling of his affairs that he held him in high esteem, showed him great favour, and kept him close by his side"), his tales veer from the entertaining to the implausible, and would require a heavy dose of fact-checking if published today.



A posthumous portrait of Marco Polo, c.1600  
(Gallery of Monsignor Badia/PD)

He was also — like many future expat [authors](#) in Asia — especially interested in sex. Who is having it, how they are doing it, and who will have it with him. In a part of Asia that Polo describes as Tibet, he recounts:

“

Whenever foreigners pass through this region and pitch their tents to make camp, the old women from the villages and hamlets turn up with their daughters, twenty or forty at a time, and thrust them at the men, begging them to have their way with them and sleep with them.

”



He is surprised by this unique form of tent-pitching hospitality, especially since the families ask only in return for “a jewel or other token.” And so Marco Polo, sexologist, unironically records the exotic custom — in his eyes utterly unique to the remoter parts of Asia — of trading sex for objects of value. He chooses to believe that the proffered jewels are used by the young woman to “prove she has had a lover when she comes to marry.” He also suggests that “for young gentlemen between sixteen and twenty-four years of age a visit to this country is highly recommended.”

Tibet is not the only part of Asia where Polo observes women willing to give themselves (or be handed over by their families) to the lonely traveler. In Hami, part of modern-day Xinjiang, he is amazed at the eagerness of local merchants to pimp out their wives:

“

I can tell you that if a stranger approaches a house seeking a place to stay, the man of the house is perfectly delighted. He orders his wife to grant the guest’s every wish, then leaves his house and goes about his business, staying away for two or three days.

”



A frontispiece for an early 15th century edition of *Livre des Merveilles du Monde* (Gallica Digital Library)

Polo also informs us that Khanbaliq has over 20,000 women ready to sleep with men for money. Like a medieval Tom Friedman, he is astounded: how modern and efficient China is! Where else would sex workers be mobilized like an army with “a captain general, and a chief for every hundred and thousand, all reporting to the captain.” Marco also does the math on the many concubines servicing Kublai, and is particularly impressed at how they are chosen (spoiler alert: non-snoring virgins). Their virginity is assured with the “pigeon egg test” (you’ll have to read the book for the details) or by pinching the flesh because, as Polo informs us, virgins have taut skin. At another point, he pauses from listing all the goods available in different Asian cities to tell what amounts to a dirty joke

he heard about a woman from Manchuria being frozen to the ground in the least comfortable way while squatting.

With all of these lurid details, how did Marco Polo miss the Great Wall, the Chinese script, footbinding and chopsticks? Famously these do not appear in the text, omissions which have fueled suspicion by scholars that Polo cribbed his information from other sources. It is also worth considering that his tale comes to us mediated through Rustichello da Pisa, and then a number of translations and alternate versions. Like the children’s game of telephone, elements get minimized, exaggerated, sensationalized, dropped, added and generally garbled with each degree of removal from Marco’s telling.



Whether he went to all the locations he described or not, ultimately Marco Polo focused on the details he cared about most. A lot of that involved the sex and business opportunities available in different cities and regions. The boring stuff — Chinese culture, art, non-military history, philosophy — didn't seem to interest him that much, or his co-author da Pisa. Nevertheless, the myth of Marco Polo has endured, making his account of Asia a fixture on our bookshelves for seven centuries, and arguably the first widely available Western book in the China archive, setting a template for those to follow. ■



Jeremiah Jenne is a writer and historian based in Beijing since 2002. He earned his Ph.D. from the University of California, Davis, and has taught Late Imperial and Modern Chinese History for over 16 years. He is co-host of the podcast [Barbarians at the Gate](#).

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