

**EXCERPTS FROM THE BOOK OF SER MARCO POLO: THE VENETIAN
CONCERNING KINGDOMS AND MARVELS OF THE EAST**

Introduction

Marco Polo (1254-1324) was born in Venice, an Italian city-state, to a powerful merchant family with extensive trade contacts. Marco Polo had the standard education for a young gentleman of his time—knowledge of classical authors and the basic beliefs of the Catholic church, a good grasp of French and Italian, and skills in accounting.

In 1260, Marco Polo's father and uncle traveled through the Mongol empire, all the way to its capital in China. There they requested trade and missionary contacts. Tradition has it that on a second trip, taken in 1271, on which they carried messages from the Pope, the elder Polos took along young Marco, who was then seventeen. Many years later, Marco Polo, with the assistance of a romance novel writer, composed a book entitled *The Travels of Marco Polo, or, A Description of the World*. If the book is to be believed, Marco Polo spent seventeen years in China, during which time he not only conducted business, but also was hired by the Mongol Yuan emperor to serve as the governor of Yangzhou, a large southern Chinese port city.

The veracity of Marco Polo's account is hotly debated among scholars. Some uphold Polo's claim to have been to China, while others argue that he simply picked up tales of China from Arab traders and compiled them into a book. None dispute, however, that the book does contain descriptions of Yuan-dynasty China, albeit with the embellishments and inaccuracies that one would expect from text that has been copied and recopied since the thirteenth century.

In the excerpts that follow, Marco Polo (or his Arab sources) describes the cities and urban life of Yuan-dynasty China.

Selected Document Excerpts with Questions

From *The Book of Ser Marco Polo: The Venetian Concerning Kingdoms and Marvels of the East*, Volumes I and II, translated and edited by Colonel Sir Henry Yule (London: John Murray, 1903).

Excerpts from The Book of Ser Marco Polo:
The Venetian Concerning Kingdoms and Marvels of the East

BOOK SECOND. PART I.

CHAPTER X. CONCERNING THE PALACE OF THE GREAT KAAH

You must know that it is the greatest palace that ever was. ... 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 idols, and sundry 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.]

Primary Source Document with Questions (DBQs) on

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The Hall of the Palace is so large that it could easily dine 6000 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. ...

BOOK SECOND. PART I.

**CHAPTER XXX. CONCERNING THE BLACK STONES THAT ARE DUG IN CATHAY,
AND ARE BURNT FOR FUEL**

It is a fact that all over the country of Cathay there is a kind of black stone existing in beds in the mountains, which they dig out and burn like firewood. If you supply the fire with them at night, and see that they are well kindled, you will find them still alight in the morning; and they make such fine fuel that no other is used throughout the country. It is true that they have plenty of wood also, but they do not burn it, because those stones burn better and cost less.

[Moreover with the vast number of people and the number of baths they maintain—for every one has such a bath at least three times a week, and in winter if possible every day, whilst every nobleman and man of wealth has a private bath for his own use—the wood would not suffice for the purpose.]

BOOK SECOND. PART III.

CHAPTER LXXV. OF THE NOBLE CITY OF SUJU¹

Suju is a very great and noble city. The people are Idolaters, subjects of the Great Kaan, and have paper money. They possess silk in great quantities, from which they make gold brocade and other stuffs, and they live by their manufactures and trade.

The city is passing great, and has a circuit of some 60 miles; it hath merchants of great wealth and an incalculable number of people. Indeed, if the men of this city and of the rest of Manzi² had but the spirit of soldiers they would conquer the world; but they are no soldiers at all, only accomplished traders and most skillful craftsmen. There are also in this city many great philosophers and leeches, diligent students of nature.

BOOK SECOND. PART III.

**CHAPTER LXXVI. DESCRIPTION OF THE GREAT CITY OF KINSAY,³ WHICH IS THE
CAPITAL OF THE WHOLE COUNTRY OF MANZI⁴**

When you have left the city of Changan and have travelled for three days through a splendid country, passing a number of towns and villages, you arrive at the most noble city of Kinsay, a name which is as much as to say in our tongue "The City of Heaven," as I told you before.

¹ Suzhou

² South China

³ Hangzhou

⁴ See footnote 2.

Primary Source Document with Questions (DBQs) on

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And since we have got thither I will enter into particulars about its magnificence; and these are well worth telling, for the city is beyond dispute the finest and the noblest in the world. In this we shall speak according to the written statement which the Queen of this Realm sent to Bayan the conqueror of the country for transmission to the Great Kaan, in order that he might be aware of the surpassing grandeur of the city and might be moved to save it from destruction or injury. ...

First and foremost, then, the document stated the city Kinsay to be so great that it hath an hundred miles of compass. And there are in it twelve thousand bridges of stone, for the most part so lofty that a great fleet could pass beneath them. ...

The document aforesaid also went on to state that there were in this city twelve guilds of the different crafts, and that each guild had 12,000 houses in the occupation of its workmen. ...

The document aforesaid also stated that the number and wealth of the merchants, and the amount of goods that passed through their hands, was so enormous that no man could form a just estimate thereof. ...

Inside the city there is a Lake which has a compass of some 30 miles: and all around it are erected beautiful palaces and mansions, of the riches and most exquisite structures that you can imagine, belonging to the nobles of the city. There are also on its shores many abbeys and churches of the Idolaters. In the middle of the Lake are two Islands, on each of which stands a rich, beautiful and spacious edifice, furnished in such style as to seem fit for the palace of an Emperor. And when any one of the citizens desired to hold a marriage feast, or to give any other entertainment, it used to be done at one of these palaces. And everything would be found there ready to order, such as silver plate, trenchers, and dishes [napkins and table-cloths], and whatever else was needful. The King made this provision for the gratification of his people, and the place was open to every one who desired to give an entertainment. [Sometimes there would be at these palaces an hundred different parties; some holding a banquet, others celebrating a wedding; and yet all would find good accommodation in the different apartments and pavilions, and that in so well ordered a manner that one party was never in the way of another.]

Questions:

1. As you read these descriptions, what can you conclude about the degree of sophistication and wealth of the author and his native land as compared to the sophistication and wealth of the land that he describes?
2. What seems most impressive to the author? Why?
3. Compare Marco Polo's descriptions of urban life in China (including his description of "The Great City of Kinsay," i.e. Hangzhou) with a Chinese author's description of Hangzhou written somewhat earlier, during the Song dynasty (*The Attractions of the Capital*: This primary source document can be found under the Economy section of main page listing resources on China, 1000-1450). What similarities and differences do you find? How does the Chinese description differ from that of the foreigner (be it Marco Polo or an Arab source that Polo drew on)?