

THE BOOK OF SER MARCO POLO: THE VENETIAN CONCERNING
KINGDOMS AND MARVELS OF THE EAST, CHAPTER LXXV: OF THE
NOBLE CITY OF SUJU

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 Excerpt

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).

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

**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.

¹ Suzhou

Primary Source Document with Questions (DBQs) on

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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.

And you must know that in this city there are 6,000 bridges, all of stone, and so lofty that a galley, or even two galleys at once, could pass underneath one of them.

In the mountains belonging to this city, rhubarb and ginger grow in great abundance; insomuch that you may get some 40 pounds of excellent fresh ginger for a Venice groat. And the city has sixteen other great trading cities under its rule. The name of the city, Suju, signifies in our tongue, "Earth," and that of another near it, of which we shall speak presently, called Kinsay, signifies "Heaven"; and these names are given because of the great splendour of the two cities.

² South China