

A stunning new discovery now threatens to undermine the assumptions and beliefs behind one of the greatest heroes of Western civilization, the fabled Italian traveler Marco Polo who is said to have been the first European to travel to China, and forged the link between East and West. Dr Frances Wood, Head of the Chinese Department of the British Library, explores the contention in her book, *Did Marco Polo go to China?* Dr Wood argues that all the evidence available suggests that Marco Polo never traveled to China, and that most of his claims about the Far East were in fact derived from Arab and Persian sources. So great has been the impact of her claim that the Times, contended that it 'is likely to rock the foundations of a basic tenet of European civilization.

Dr Wood noted that 'the reaction to her book so far has been a divided one. It has stirred up a lot of discussion not only in England but also in France, Germany, Italy and America. *"I wrote the book because I wanted to get people to think and question some of their most basic assumptions about Marco Polo and the history of the West. But unfortunately, this was not the response that I received all of the time. In some cases, the academic response has been quite vicious and reactionary, and some people simply do not want to think or question the claim that Marco Polo went to China, even if it is patently obvious that he did not do so."* In her book, Dr Wood

contends that there exists an overwhelming store of evidence which shows that Marco Polo did not go to China after all. She even suggests that much of what is claimed to be the testimony of Marco Polo is in reality a collection of stolen material, secondary accounts, and amendments as well as additions to the original text itself. No doubt to the dismay of Marco Polo's fans, Dr Wood also maintains that there is ample evidence to show that much of Polo's claims about China were not even of European origin; they were taken from Arab, Persian and Asian sources.

The strength of Dr Wood's argument lies in her scrupulous and detailed attempt to debunk many of the claims and omissions made by Marco Polo in his narrative. As an itinerary or a work of geography, Polo's narrative is useless, according to her. Marco Polo's directions and locations are confused and inaccurate; what comes across more clearly is that the narration written from a more literary point of view. (A fact supported by the revelation that the work was really written by a 'ghost-writer', the writer of romances, Messer Rustichello of Pisa. This also explains why the narrative of Marco Polo seems designed more to titillate the reader than inform him.)



The lack of concrete information in Marco Polo's narrative is clear when we note that some of his mistakes and omissions are too obvious to be ignored. For someone who was meant to have traveled all the way to the interior of China, there is the curious omission of any reference to the Great Wall of China itself. The popular pastimes and cultural practices of the Chinese are also left out of the narrative. Marco Polo does not mention the Chinese love of tea, something that struck all the other observers who went there. Incredibly, other cultural practices, such as women's bound feet and the use of chopsticks for eating, seem to have escaped his attention as well. Judging by the original records of the Chinese and Mongols, there is certainly no evidence whatsoever that Marco Polo actually traveled to China and reached the court of the great Mongol ruler Qublai Khan. There is even less evidence of him ever being asked to serve at the court of the Mongol ruler, or ever being appointed to the post of governor of Yangzhou. It is an honor which Marco Polo claims to have been bestowed upon him by the Khan for three years. Dr Wood notes that despite Marco Polo's claims, *"one of the most puzzling aspects of his story, given his self-stated position of importance and closeness with the Mongol court, is the lack of reference to the Polos in Chinese sources, or Mongol sources for that matter"*.

For one who was supposed to have lived in China for 17 years, Marco Polo never picked up even a few Chinese and Mongol words or names of places; he seems to have relied almost exclusively on Arab and Persian sources for place-names. Such a glaring omission dents his credibility enormously as a traveler to China. On his dependence on Arab and Persian sources, Dr Wood says: *"The widespread use of Persian, Arabic or Turkish proper names is one of the major puzzles of Marco Polo's book. This is apparent, for example, in the use of a Persian term to designate the Emperor of China when you might expect Marco Polo to have used a Mongol or Chinese term instead."*

That Polo might have secretly plagiarized from Arab sources is quite likely, for as Dr Wood notes, *"Persian and Arab travelers had a longer tradition of knowledge about the Far East"*. Most of the names used by Marco Polo correspond to those used by the Persian historian Rashid al-Din (1247-1317), who was Polo's contemporary. Unlike Marco Polo, though, Rashid al-Din never claimed to have traveled to China when he wrote his *History of the World*: he merely compiled all the sources available to him, including those which were inaccurate and unreliable.

Marco Polo, on the other hand, was not content with plagiarizing from the works of other non-Europeans. He

even claims credit for events and discoveries in China that had been made by Arabs and Persians. For instance, he asserts that he was responsible for teaching the Mongols how to build and use catapults during the siege of Xiangyang. Dr Wood reveals that the actual knowledge of building catapults was given by the Persian engineers, Ismail and Ala al-Din, who took part in the siege of Xiangyang, which had ended even before Polo had allegedly arrived in China.

The arguments of Dr Wood have therefore gone a long way to refute the claim that European civilization was self-generated and that Europeans were responsible for 'educating' the other non-western civilizations. Dr Wood points out that she would like people in the west to see how important and developed the Arab and Persian Muslim world was at the time of Polo, and to appreciate just how great the Arab and Persian contribution was to the development of knowledge in the west. In this regard, the Arabs and the Persians were not the only sources: the west also learnt from China, the Far East, India, Africa and other parts of the world. There is, however, the tremendously strong desire to take history and use it for narrow and nationalistic ends, and to make these unfounded claims that the west somehow emerged from nowhere without borrowing any ideas from other civilizations. *"What I have tried to do in my work is to encourage people to go beyond their own tiny worlds and for people in the west to see more and learn more about the cultures and civilizations of the world both in the past as well as in the present. The best way to do this is by going beyond personalities and prejudices"*.

The false claims apart, far more significant is the question: What were Polo's true intentions, and did he really go to China? And why did Marco Polo write a fictional account if he never really got that far? Here Dr Wood's assessment of the Polo brothers is most relevant to the needs of our times.

She argues that the missions from Europe to China were part of a larger political strategy to out-manuever the powers of the Arab and Asian worlds which stood between Europe and the Far East. The Polos were, in her opinion, politically-motivated missionaries; they were part of a larger movement to bring European power and influence to bear on the Far East. To propel this eastward movement of Europe, there had to be an attempt to promote the idea of travel, and to lure European adventurers further eastwards, towards the fabled lands of spices and riches. The myth of China as the land of an exotic oriental people was thus an instrumental fiction necessary to justify and encourage political, military and economic expansionism into Asia. Even though Dr Wood herself contends that Marco Polo probably *"never traveled much further than his family's trading posts on the Black*

*Sea and in Constantinople"*, the legacy of the myths and fabrications which he drew still remain with us. Half a millennium later, after centuries of warfare and conquest, Asia is laboring under the simplified stereotypes and demonic images drawn by Marco Polo, who was perhaps one of the first European Orientalists.

Today, at a time when the global situation after the cold war is being described by some as a potential powder-keg about to be ignited by a clash of civilizations', there is the pressing need to eliminate such a potential for conflict, stemming from misunderstanding and distortions inherited from the past. Europe and the US have yet to overcome their own self-induced nightmares of 'Islamic fundamentalism' and the 'threat from the East'. As Dr Wood puts it: *"The exotic image of the East which Polo drew attracted the West to the Oriental world, but these images also distorted the reality of the Far East and has left behind a legacy of fictions and stereotypes instead. Conversely, the relationship between our cultures and civilizations today should really be based on mutual respect and truthful claims, not fictions, fables, stereotypes and lies"* These demonic images of the non-western world have a long history going back to the earliest encounters between Europe and the non-European world, and Marco Polo is one of those responsible for many of the lopsided and jaundiced images of Asia that we see until today.

Another myth that needs challenging seriously is the notion of a self-generated and fully constituted west European civilization. What has upset many of Dr Wood's critics is the claim that Marco Polo could have relied on non-European - Arab and Persian - sources in writing his narrative, thus seriously blunting the claim that the narrative is yet another work of European genius. Dr Wood's thesis has instead reminded us all that cultures and civilizations are never water-tight compartments. They are independent of each other. Indeed, the great civilizations of the world are the result of centuries of cross-cultural exchange and borrowing, and Marco Polo was himself one of those who borrowed extensively from his Arab and Persian neighbors.

By challenging many of the claims made by and for Marco Polo, Dr Frances Wood has gone a long way to dislodging one of the key obstacles in the path to peaceful and productive inter-civilization dialogue and exchange. Yet there are as many thinkers and ideologues who will continue to hold on to the myths, fictions and stereotypes drawn by Marco Polo for their own political ends. Only time will tell if the thinkers of the Muslim world and others are willing, and able, to engage in an equally serious overhaul of their histories, and challenge Europe and America to rid themselves of their legacy of prejudices, fears and misconceptions.