Marco Polo: International Marketing Pioneer

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Marco Polo’s Travels is an account of a journey he made with his father and uncle to the court of Mongol emperor Kublai Khan. As such it has long been recognized as one of the world’s great travelogues, and an important source for historians of the medieval period. In addition, however, it is a seminal work for the study of marketing history. After reviewing some textual concerns related to the Travels, this paper examines the environment for international trade in the late thirteenth century, and then analyses the categories of marketing information that Marco presents. In conclusion it offers an assessment of the Travels as a treatise on international marketing, and as an important stimulus to the development of international trade in the centuries that followed its first appearance.

At the end of the thirteenth century, the Italian city-states of Venice and Genoa were vying for control of the eastern Mediterranean Sea, and the important trade routes to which it gave access. Although Venice was in a strong position by virtue of its participation in the earlier capture of Constantinople, the Genoese had been successful in Syria and Acre, and were developing a galley fleet that was blocking Venetian access to the trade routes (Komroff 2001/1926, p. 310). War became inevitable after the Venetians seized three Genoese vessels off the coast of Greece, and in 1298 a major naval battle ensued in which the Genoese defeated their rivals. In the process they took many Venetian prisoners, among them a sopracomito (gentleman-commander). While languishing in a Genoese prison, the commander found himself in the company of a well-known author of the period, and began to pass the time by dictating an account of a journey he had made with his father and uncle to the court of the Mongol emperor Kublai Khan. The officer in question was Marco Polo, whose Travels was destined to become one of the most celebrated works of its type ever written.

The Polos’ outward journey had begun in 1271 and lasted three and a half years. It took them through Persia, across the Pamir Mountains, along the southern branch of the Silk Road, and across the Gobi Desert into Northern China. They then spent the next seventeen years at the Mongol court, during which time Marco claims to have undertaken a number of missions and other duties on the emperor’s behalf. They eventually returned to Venice in 1295, after an absence of twenty-four years.

The work owes much of its fame to its value as a travelogue, and a source of information on the court of Kublai Khan. In addition, however, Marco was a member of a Venetian merchant family, and as such had an expert eye for the kind of details relevant to the trader of that period. The marketing historian should not be surprised, therefore, that the Travels represents a veritable goldmine of extremely practical information on how to do business with the Mongol empire. The extent of that marketing-related content has led the author of this paper to propose that Marco’s opus probably was intended for a merchant audience, and that as such it constitutes a remarkable - and perhaps the first - treatise on international marketing.

EUROPE AND THE MONGOLS

In less than fifty years, the Mongols had succeeded in establishing the largest empire the world had ever seen, extending from the Korean peninsula to the Danube. In 1241 they overran Russia, Poland, Silesia and Hungary, and in the process subjected the western world to rape, pillage and plunder on an unprecedented scale. Four years later Pope Innocent IV optimistically sent a Franciscan friar, John of Plano Carpini, as his ambassador to the Mongol khan, in an unsuccessful attempt to convert the Mongols to Christianity, and enlist their support in the holy war against Islam. In the same year, the pope also sent a group of Dominicans led by Ascelin of Cremona with a similar purpose, but their mission also failed, apparently because they failed to take presents for the Mongol courtiers, and because Ascelin refused to genuflect three times to the khan (Schwertner 1907). Louis IX of France also had hopes of building an alliance against the Saracens, and in 1253 dispatched another Franciscan, William of Rubruck, who spent two years traveling through the Mongol empire (Schlager n.d.).

Although Ascelin and his companions were fortunate to escape with their lives, John and William were received cordially, and were able to take back to Europe the first accurate accounts of the Mongols. Their missions, combined with the Mongols’ receptiveness to foreigners, helped bring stability to relations between East and West,
which in turn gave an impetus to trade. Unlike the Confucian Chinese who were disdainful of trade and merchants, the Mongols actively fostered trade, and introduced a number of measures aimed at promoting it.

The Romance of Marketing History

Trade was also being fostered actively in Europe in the later Middle Ages. As Ohler (1989) points out, merchants were not simply suppliers of much-coveted luxury goods; they also could speak foreign languages, and were a valuable source of intelligence about potential enemies and allies. For these reasons merchants were generally welcomed by medieval rulers and church leaders, and often received preferential treatment in terms of the commutation of taxes and the provision of safe conducts. (Ohler 1989, p. 59).

By the end of the thirteenth century, therefore, this increasingly favorable marketing environment was generating an expansion of trade between Europe and the Far East. “Though many merchants and traders long had plied their wares along the Silk Road, never had so many traveled so far as during the Mongol era” (Brooks n.d., p. 3). The greatest need of those merchants and traders was for specific information about the types of merchandise they would be able to buy and sell, and the conditions under which they would have to operate. As will be shown, this is the precisely the kind of information that Marco provides.

THE TRAVELS AS TEXT

Before examining the content of the Travels, it is necessary to consider certain textual uncertainties and controversies. The first of these concerns the extent of Marco’s own contribution, which is by no means clear. The work is generally considered to have been the result of cooperation between Marco and his fellow prisoner Rustigilo of Pisa, described as “...a man who had experience of writing chivalric-epic prose stories” Larner (1999, p. 3). Larner wonders what kinds of compromises might have been involved during the writing process, and to what extent Rustigilo might have tailored the account to the tastes of contemporary readers. To complicate matters further, the original manuscript no longer survives, and of the 150 or so versions still in existence, no two appear to be exactly the same. This can be explained in part by the usual errors in copying and vagaries of translation found during the medieval period. In addition to these normal textual discrepancies, however, there are differences in the length of the various manuscripts, suggesting either that the original was a lengthy work that was abridged later to suit particular readers’ tastes, or that it was a briefer document that was expanded and added to without acknowledgement by copyists and translators as new information became available.

A second point of contention among scholars concerns the veracity of Marco’s account. Wood (1996), building on the earlier work of German Mongolists, has proposed that he never actually reached China, and that the information in the Travels was actually gleaned from merchants at a Persian caravan stop. Her case rests largely on omissions—features of life in China that a visitor must surely have seen, but which Marco does not mention—though in an Afternote to the American edition of her book, she admits this aspect has been somewhat overstated (Wood 1996, p. 154-5). Larner (1999) presents convincing counterarguments as part of a detailed study of Marco’s account and its influence, which is reviewed by Birchwood, Broton and Dimmock (2001). Goodwin (2001) observes that if the Polos had indeed spent so long a period at a caravan stop, they certainly would have been seen by other Italian merchants who would have exposed Marco as a fraud, while according to Critchley (1992, p. xii). “...Even Polo’s proven lies are the sort which only someone who knew what he was talking about could have told.”

In the final analysis, the reader of the Travels is surely entitled to trust his/her instincts, and when reading Marco’s vivid and detailed descriptions, it is difficult to conceive of their being anything other than eyewitness accounts. His work is ostensibly a travelogue, a common literary form of the period (Classen 2001), and like William of Rubruck, he describes the places he visited, the customs of the people he met, and the sights he encountered. However, the Travels also contains a great deal of detailed and very specific information that would have been of considerable value to the international trader, but of little interest to the general reader. This suggests that it must have been written with a merchant audience in mind, and the extent to which such material is integrated into Marco’s account implies that it was part of the Untext rather than the random result of later accretions.

SOURCES OF SUPPLY

Wood (1996) asks rhetorically “Why go [to China] at all?” and answers: “One of the most significant reasons was the growing importance of the trade in exotic products from China. The mercantile interest in such rarities that Marco Polo demonstrates throughout his book is hardly surprising given his background as the son and nephew of traders” (Wood 1996, p. 9). Marco was constantly searching out new sources of supply for items that would yield a good return in Europe, and sometimes at other places along the trade route. “His quick eye is ever roving about, wherever he finds himself, to seek markets for buying and selling and making a profit” (Hart 1967, p. 235). For the most part, this meant identifying goods that would appeal to the affluent minority that consisted of royalty, nobility, prelates, and the upper echelon of the merchant class.

The economic importance of the Far East and Southeast Asia in the later Middle Ages lies above all in the fact that these were the world’s spice-producing areas. Before the advent of refrigeration, spices helped add a strong flavor to food that had been badly preserved (Wood 1996, p. 9). Traders from many parts of the world were attracted to Java, which produced pepper, nutmeg, cloves, and other spices – in Marco’s words, “the greatest part of the spices
that are distributed throughout the world.” These were traded for merchandise at a rate that “yields to the [ships'] owners considerable profit” (p. 225-6). In the Chinese city of Fu-giu it was possible to buy 80 pounds of fresh ginger for a Venetian silver groat (p. 209-10), while ginger bought in Manji also could make a good profit for the merchant (p. 155). Pepper and ginger could be found at the Indian kingdom of Dely, though the difficulties of gaining access by land or sea seem not to have made this an attractive source (p. 252). Merchants from India traveled to Bengal to buy local ginger and sugar, as well as cotton and other crops (p. 174).

Silk had great prestige value, since only the richest could afford to wear it. In Georgia Marco found a type of silk called ghellie, though, as he noted, the rival Genoese were already active there (p. 25). At the city of Tauris in Iraq he found expensive high-quality silks, some of them interwoven with gold, as well as precious stones and pearls. Not surprisingly, the city attracted merchants from India, Europe, and other parts of the world (p. 32). The women of the Kirman region of Persia produced silk and gold embroidery that was greatly admired (p. 37), as did those of the Chinese city of Ken-Zan-Fu (p. 154). Sin-gui was also an important center for manufacturing silk, with a large export trade (p. 192).

Precious stones and metals were other items of conspicuous consumption, and would have been particularly attractive to the merchant because they constituted a high-value low-bulk cargo. In Kirman Marco found local mining of turquoise (p. 37), while in parts of Turkistan he reported that chalcedony and jasper were to be found in some of the large streams, and formed “a considerable article of commerce” with Cathay (p. 61). He also learned that gold dust was extracted from some of the rivers of Thebeth (p. 160), and that gold was a major Javanese export (p. 226).

Marco constantly displays a keen eye for marketing opportunities. He reports that Persia was notable for its excellent horses, many of which were exported to India, and for its asses, which sold for higher prices than the horses because they could carry heavier loads, travel further, and required the merchants who used them to carry a smaller allowance of food (p. 35). In the Kirman region he found a thriving industry in what he calls “warlike equipment” – saddles, spurs, bridles, swords, bows, quivers, and various sorts of arms, which must have offered considerable opportunities for export to Europe at this period (p. 37). Bengal, in addition to being a producer of spices and cotton, offered a plentiful supply of eunuchs. Indian merchants not only sold them in their own country, but also carried on a profitable export trade to other markets where the eunuchs were highly prized as slaves (p. 174-5).

Although Marco sometimes describes curious products or local oddities, his main concern is with goods likely to yield a good return for the merchant. He notes, for example, that silks and brocades could be traded profitably in Madagascar for local spices (p. 259), and that merchants became rich by selling horses to the Indian prince of Maabar and his three brothers, who were reputed to import 5,000 at a time and pay the equivalent of 100 silver marks for each one (p. 239). Similarly, grain, piece-goods and spices could be traded at the Arab port of Dulfar for horses that could be sold profitably in India (p. 267).

When Marco mentions sources for the supply of salt, it should be remembered that Venice at this period had managed to impose a salt monopoly on Northern Italy and the Adriatic. Although the Polo family were not involved in the salt trade themselves, the information Marco provides would have been of great interest to other Venetian merchants (Larner 1999, p. 65).

**TRANSPORTATION MODES**

The Travels would have been an invaluable guide for merchants on the hazards they might face on a journey to the East, and the types of transportation they were likely to encounter. An important consideration was the kind of terrain traversed by the trade routes, which was often very different from anything found in Europe. For desert journeys in Persia, for example, Marco recommends asses rather than the customary horses or mules, because the ass could operate more effectively on rough ground, would not tire as quickly, and would require less food. Camels were an alternative, but were generally slower (p. 35).

Marco provides useful details about transportation by water. At the city of Sin-gui he saw local single-masted vessels that could carry up to 500 tons of cargo, and were pulled along the region’s rivers by teams of ten or twelve horses. So common were these vessels that Marco claimed to have seen 15,000 of them (p. 189-90). Sea travel, however, had its hazards. Marco asserts, for example, that “The vessels built atOrmuz are of the worst kind, and dangerous for navigation, exposing the merchants and others who make use of them to great hazards.” He follows this with a description of the unsatisfactory methods employed by local shipbuilders (p. 42). Merchants also had to contend with pirates, particularly off the Indian coast (p. 252).

In many cases it seems likely that the merchant’s choices of transportation mode were limited, which meant it was particularly important to know any local customs and practices that might affect costs. A good example of the value of such information is Marco’s description of the great port of Zai-tun, where merchants had to take account not only of freight costs, which varied with the type of cargo, but also an *ad valorem* tax levied by the Mongol authorities:

“The Great Khan derives a vast revenue from this place as every merchant is obliged to pay ten per cent upon the amount of his investment. The ships are freighted by them at the rate of thirty per cent for fine goods, forty four for pepper, and for sandalwood, and other drugs, as well as articles of trade in general, forty per cent. It is computed by the merchants that their charges, including customs and
freight, amount to half the value of the cargo; and yet upon that half that remains to them their profit is so considerable, that they are always disposed to return to the same market with a further stock of merchandise” (p. 212).

**CONDITIONS EN ROUTE**

Ohler (1989) argues that the physical state of the trade routes was not an important factor in the development of trade with the East, because initially merchants were carrying low-volume high-value goods such as silk, spices and precious stones. According to this view, physical conditions only became of importance when volume increased and loads became heavier, as merchants began to carry such items as wine and barrels of fish (Ohler 1989, p. 62-3). These comments notwithstanding, the Travels contains a great deal of information, much of it quite detailed, about conditions that merchants could encounter on their journeys to the East. The sections dealing with potential hazards would have been particularly valuable, and it is not difficult to imagine that Marco’s warnings may have saved the lives of some of those who were to follow in his footsteps. The following examples will serve to illustrate the quality of the information he provides.

The traveler might be caught unawares by sudden changes in climate, so that it was important to take sufficient warm clothing:

“Upon leaving Kierman, you travel for seven days along a plain, by a pleasant road, and rendered still more delightful by the abundances of partridge and other game. You also meet frequently with towns and castles, as well as scattered habitations, until at length you arrive at a mountain, whence there is a considerable descent, which occupies two days...In that part of the country which you pass before you reach the descent, the cold is so severe that a man can with difficulty defend himself against it by wearing many garments and pelisses” (p. 37-8).

It obviously would be essential for the traveler to know the location and quality of water supplies, so that Marco’s advice to anyone crossing the desert to Kobiam would have been crucial:

“The first three days but little water is to be met with, and that little impregnated with salt, green as grass, and so nauseous that none can use it as a drink. Should even a drop of it be swallowed, frequent calls of nature will be occasioned... In consequence of this, persons who travel across the desert are obliged to carry a provision of water along with them”(p. 44).

Travelers planning to cross the Pamir Plateau are given this caution:

“For twelve days the route is along this elevated plain... and as during all that time you do not meet with any habitations, it is necessary to make provision at the outset accordingly. So great is the height of the mountains...it was affirmed that from the keenness of the air, fires when lighted do not give the same heat as in lower situations, nor produce the same effect in cooking food...After having performed this journey of twelve days, you still have forty days to travel in the same direction... Every article of provision must therefore be carried with you” (p. 57).

On the other hand, conditions in the domain of Kublai Khan were rather more conducive to the safety and comfort of merchants:

“At both sides of the public roads he causes trees to be planted, of a kind that become large and tall, and being only two paces asunder, they serve besides the advantage of their shade in summer—to point out the road—when the ground is covered with snow. And this is of great assistance and affords much comfort to travelers” (p. 142).

Merchants with their valuable cargoes were an obvious target for robbers. It therefore would have been vital for European merchants to be aware of a Mongol regulation that obliged local inhabitants to provide them with guides and guards upon request, and laid down a scale of charges based on the number of animals in the merchant caravan (p. 36). Nevertheless, dangers still existed, as is apparent from some of the strong warnings that Marco provides. For example, he writes of the Kurds that “They are all an unprincipled people, whose occupation it is to rob the merchants” (p. 26), and describes the inhabitants of some regions of Persia as “savage and bloodthirsty,” noting that “They would not refrain from doing injury to the merchants and travelers were they not in terror of the Eastern Tartars...” (p. 36). The twenty-mile descent from the high plain to the city of Ormus was also a place for travelers to be on their guard, since it was by “a road that is extremely dangerous, from the multitude of robbers by whom travelers are continually assaulted and plundered”(p. 40).

Justice in territories under Mongol control seems to have been implemented in such a way as to deter the would-be robber, and thereby to protect the merchant:

“When a person is convicted of robbery not meriting the punishment of death, he is condemned to receive a certain number of strokes with the cane...Many die under this chastisement. When for stealing a horse or other article that subjects the offender to capital punishment, he is condemned to suffer death, the sentence is executed by cutting his body in two with a sword. But if the thief has the means of paying nine times the value of the property stolen, he escapes all further punishment.” An editor’s note in the Modern Library edition states “This method of escaping punishment is said by the Chinese to be practiced today in Europe and America on a grand scale” (p. 81).

Sometimes robbers claimed divine intervention as justification for their acts. If a vessel found itself in the mouth of the river leading to Dely, but had not intended to call there, the inhabitants would seize and confiscate all the goods on board, claiming that their gods had been responsible for bringing the cargo to them (p. 252).

Wild animals were another hazard that merchants might well have to face. Marco notes that large tigers existed in such numbers in the Chinese kingdom of Kon-cha that travel there was dangerous unless merchants banded
together (p. 209-10). Many wild animals (unspecified) also threatened the safety of merchants traveling through Thebeth. The animals could be scared away by lighting a fire around green bamboo branches so that the joints exploded loudly, but this meant that the merchant had to carry iron shackles to fasten the legs of his horses so that they would not run away when frightened by the noise (p. 158).

**MONEY AND EXCHANGE RATES**

Much of the trade described in the Travels consisted of barter, and there are a number of instances where Marco includes helpful information about what goods could be bartered for what others, and the kind of exchange ratios a merchant could expect. In other cases, however, merchants were expected to accept local currency for their goods, and perhaps to use that currency to make purchases. Marco’s information on money forms and exchange rates is therefore of great interest.

In a celebrated passage, he describes paper money made from the bark of mulberry trees that was used in the empire of Kublai Khan, different sizes of paper being worth specific amounts of gold and silver coin. These “bills” were accepted throughout the Great Khan’s dominions, and were used by the Khan himself to pay his army and to make purchases from foreign merchants. The merchants in turn could use them to purchase articles suited for their particular markets (p. 134-5). This information would have been a considerable surprise to readers of the Travels, because at the time Marco was writing, paper had only recently been introduced into Europe. Although it had been invented in China some time in the Han dynasty (206 B.C. - 220 A.D.), it remained unknown in the West until brought to Spain by the Arabs early in the twelfth century. In contrast to the Chinese product, European paper was of such poor quality that in some places it was banned for use for official documents (Wood 1996, p. 67-8).

In Thebeth the money consisted of gold rods and cakes of salt. The value of these salt cakes varied between 40 and 60 saggios of gold, depending on local needs, and the distance of the purchaser from the nearest town (p. 161). The inhabitants of Karazan used sea shells, 80 of which were equal to a saggio of silver (p. 163), while the neighboring province of Karandan used shells and gold by weight, an ounce of gold being worth five ounces of silver (p. 166).

**BUSINESS CUSTOMS AND PRACTICES**

Marco’s account contains many observations and insights that must have been of great practical value to contemporaries — and indeed to subsequent generations — seeking to break into eastern markets. In particular he alerts traders to instances of business practices that are different from those commonly found in Europe, so giving some idea of the kinds of areas in which problems might arise.

It is clear that superstition could have an important influence on the way business was conducted. In the Indian province of Lac, for example:

“The people are all gross idolaters, and pay great attention to signs and omens. When they are about to make a purchase of goods, they immediately observe the shadow cast by their own bodies in the sunshine, and if the shadow be as large as it should be, they make the purchase that day.

“Moreover, when they are in any shop for the purpose of buying anything, if they see a tarantula, of which there are many, they take notice from which side it comes, and regulate their business accordingly” (p. 248).

At the same time, Marco was full of praise for the Brahmin merchants of Lac, whom he describes as “...the best and most honorable merchants that can be found”. The following information could have been valuable for a stranger in that district:

“When any foreign merchant, unacquainted with the usages of the country, introduces himself to one of these [Brahmins], and commits to his hands the care of his merchandise, this Brahmin undertakes the management of it, disposes of the goods, and renders a faithful account of the proceeds, attending scrupulously to the interests of the stranger, and not demanding any recompense for his trouble.” It was customary, nevertheless, to make him some payment from the profits (p. 247).

The problem of collecting payment from an unwilling debtor is probably as old as trade itself, and certainly universal. In the Indian province of Mahaar, a custom existed which gave the trader at least some degree of protection:

“If application shall have been repeatedly made by a creditor, and the debtor puts him off from time to time with false promises, the former may attach his person by drawing a circle around him, from which he dare not depart until he has satisfied his creditor, either by payment, or by giving adequate security. Should he attempt to make his escape, he renders himself liable to the punishment of death, as a violator of the rules of justice” (p. 241).

Marco describes an incident that took place while he was in the country, in which a foreign merchant who was owed money by the king drew a circle around the king and his horse. The monarch at once halted and would go no further until the merchant’s demands had been met (p. 241).

Other regions had different methods of keeping track of debts. In the province of Kardandan, “Their chief takes a square piece of wood, and divides it in two. Notches are then cut on it, denoting the sum in question, and each party receives one of the corresponding pieces, as is practiced with respect to our tallies. Upon the expiration of the term, and payment made by the debtor, the creditor delivers up his counterpart, and both remain satisfied” (p. 167-8).

It is clear that merchants from different countries and cultures must have become involved in commercial disputes, since Kublai Khan set up a mechanism for resolving them. In the city of Kin-sai, there were officers appointed by Kublai himself, who were to be found in two large buildings on opposite sides of each market square. In
the case of a dispute involving foreign merchants, the parties concerned could apply to these officers for adjudication (p. 197).

The prospect of death must have been constantly in the thoughts of the intrepid marketers of Marco's period. Since much of their personal wealth would have been invested in the merchandise they carried, it would have been a major concern to them what would happen to that merchandise in the event of their demise. To anyone unfortunate enough to expire within the domain of the king of Kierman, the answer was clear: "When any foreign merchant happens to die within his jurisdiction, he confiscates the property, and deposits the amount in his treasury" (p. 41).

REST AND RELAXATION

Not all the customs affecting merchants in Marco's account are directly related to business. He clearly took a pragmatic view of the needs of travelers on the great trade routes who might be deprived of female company for weeks and possibly months at a time. Sometimes the traveler might be favored by local custom, as for example in Thebath where a man would not consider marriage with a woman unless she "had previous commerce with many of the other sex...."

"Accordingly, upon the arrival of a caravan of merchants, and as soon as they have set up their tents for the night, those mothers who have marriageable daughters conduct them to the place, and entreat the strangers to accept of their daughters and enjoy their society so long as they remain in the neighbourhood." It was expected that in return the merchants would give presents of rings or trinkets for the young women to wear. Those with the greatest number were considered to have attracted the greatest number of men, and therefore were held in higher esteem by young men seeking wives (p. 158-9).

Similarly in the Kamul district of Kamuth, "When strangers arrive, and desire to have lodging and accommodation at their houses, it affords them [the local men] the highest gratification. They give positive orders to their wives, daughters, sisters, and other female relations, to indulge their guests in every wish, whilst they themselves leave their homes and retire into the city, and the stranger lives in the house with the females as if they were his own wives." The inhabitants, according to Marco, saw this practice as "...the hospitable reception of strangers, who after the perils and fatigue of a long journey, stand in need of relaxation" (p. 67). In the city of Kain-du, too, when a merchant caravan arrived, each household would try to take one of the strangers home with him. "Here he gives all the females of the family to him, leaves him in the situation of master of the house, and takes his departure." The stranger placed a signal such as a hat in the window, and as long as it was there, the husband stayed away (p. 161).

Where the locals were not so forthcoming, merchants could seek the company of ladies of the town, who seem to have frequented caravan stops in much the same way that their counterparts today frequent truck stops. Marco's description of the courtesans of Kin-sai, in particular, verges on the rhapsodic: "These women are accomplished, and are perfect in the arts of caressing and fondling which they accompany with expressions adapted to every description of person. Strangers who have once tasted of their charms, remain in a state of fascination, and become so enchanted by their wonton arts, that they can never forget the impression. Thus intoxicated with sensual pleasures, when they return to their homes they report they have been to Kin-sai, or the Celestial City, and look forward to the time when they may be enabled to revisit this paradise" (p. 196). It is not hard to imagine Marco wistfully dictating this passage as he sat languishing in a Genoese dungeon.

MARCO POLO'S ACHIEVEMENT

In spite of the uncertainties that surround it, the Travels stands as a truly unique work. Firstly, as this paper has argued, it constitutes a prototypical treatise on international marketing. Marco was a member of a prominent merchant family, so "It is therefore not surprising to hear him constantly speak of trade, money risks, and profits. His eye was trained to appraise in these directions and examples of this type of observation may be found throughout the entire narrative" (Komroff 1926/2001, p. 318). Marco describes the products and types of produce to be found in the towns and the country along the route. He describes visual characteristics of the local people such as tattoos or filed teeth, as well as the way they dress, and what they eat. He notes their religion. He gives accounts of the recent history of various regions through which he passes, which provides an understanding of the political and cultural dynamic. And he has a ready eye for unfamiliar items such as rice wine and coal. He provides, in fact, what has been described as a "tremendous mass of exact knowledge" (Power 1930, p 136).

Yet the contribution of the Travels as a seminal marketing oeuvre can only be appreciated fully when it is set in historical context. Venice and Genoa, the two leading maritime powers in the Mediterranean, were at war over access to the trade routes to the East. At this period, merchants from various countries along these routes would typically cover certain stretches of them, disposing of their cargoes at entrepot centers such as Aden or Baghdad to other merchants who would then travel the next stage. Marco notes that the Genoese had penetrated as far east as Georgia, which would have been bad news for the Venetians. His book may therefore be seen as a Venetian response to the perceived threat of Genoese dominance. It presents the concept that it was possible for Venetian merchants to tap the riches of the orient, possibly by trading with intermediate sources, but also by exploiting the potential of direct trade with the empire of Kublai Khan. But it does more then this; it presents the aspiring trader with a detailed account of what routes are feasible, what
preparations are necessary, what kinds of conditions are likely to be encountered, and what measures to take to deal with the problems likely to arise along the way.

Seven centuries later, it is impossible to say how many copies of the manuscript were made during Marco’s lifetime (or later), or the extent to which such copies circulated among his merchant contemporaries, though it is known that by the time of his death in 1324 the Travels already had been translated into five languages (Goodwin 2001, p. xii). To judge it only by its immediate impact, however, would be to overlook the significance of the author’s intentions and accomplishments, and its remarkably long-lasting influence. Ironically, given the political climate in which it was written, the Genoese Columbus became an avid reader of the Travels two centuries later, having sent to London for a copy. As his marginal notes show, he was particularly interested in those passages dealing with sources of eastern products (Wood 1996, p. 10).

Secondly, Marco’s book remains one of the world’s great travelogues, and has inspired poets from Coleridge -

“In Xanadu did Kubla Khan

A stately pleasure dome decree…”

- to John Masefield, who waxed lyrical about the Travels in

an introduction he wrote to a 1926 edition:

“One feels the presence of Kublai all through the narrative, as the red wine, dropped into the water cup, suffuses all, or as the string supports the jewels on a trinket. The imagination is only healthy when it broods upon the kingly and the saintly. In Kublai, the reader will find enough images of splendour to make glorious the temples of his mind. When we think of Marco Polo, it is of Kublai that we think…” (Masefield, 1926, p. xii).

Muenkler (2001), in a study of medieval travelogues, treats Marco as a special case. She argues that the Travels is not the usual kind of merchant account, but rather a collection of operative information – a kind of writing that would be more typical of Christian missionaries, who wanted knowledge that could be used to convert the pagan and extend the authority of the Church. Her analysis, which goes beyond the scope of the present paper, is conveniently summarized by Classen (2001).

Thirdly, the Travels is a wonderful source for the social historian by virtue of the sheer amount of detail that Marco presents. According to Eileen Power, “Marco Polo was incomparably the greatest traveler and the most magnificent observer of the whole Middle Ages” (Power 1930, p. 132). Hart, too, notes that Marco was “...A rapid, acute, and judicious observer of facts, particularly those having a practical application” (Hart 1969, p. 241). There is some disagreement among historians as to the uniqueness of the information presented in the Travels, Critchley for example arguing that “...It does not tell us a lot about thirteenth century Asia that we would not otherwise know” (Crichtley 1992, p. xi). Larner, however, seems to speak for the majority when he writes of “...A careful, common-sense and well-organized transmission of what in its heyday was hitherto unknown information” (Larner 1999, p. 180).

The Travels certainly invites comparison with other travel accounts of the period, notably those of William of Rubruck and John of Plano Carpini who had been earlier visitors to the Mongol court. The purpose of the Franciscans’ reports, however, was to provide information that would be useful to the Church, and that could be easily copied and translated for European dissemination. Further, as Boorstin points out, “The Franciscans went to Mongolia and back in less than three years, and stayed in their role as missionary-diplomats. Marco Polo’s journey lasted twenty-four years. He reached farther than his predecessors, beyond Mongolia to the heart of Cathay. He traversed the whole of China all the way to the ocean, and he played a variety of roles, becoming the confidant of Kublai Khan and governor of a great Chinese city. He was at home in the culture, and immersed himself in the daily life and culture of Cathay. For generations of Europe, his copious, vivid and factual account of Eastern ways was the discovery of Asia” (quoted in Goodwin 2001, p. vi). Another account, the recently published City of Light, purports to have been written by a Jewish merchant named Jacob d’Ancona, who reached China four years before the Polos and spent six months in the port city of Zaitun. It seems likely, however, that this work is a hoax. Distinguished scholars at Harvard, Yale, Columbia, and UCLA have all cast doubts on its authenticity, pointing to anachronisms, inaccuracies in the use of names and terms, and to thought more typical of the twelfth century. Newsweek suggested the book was “A Kublai Con Job” (Chang 1997), while London University’s prestigious School of Oriental and African Studies took the unprecedented step of holding a public meeting in Fall 1998 to denounce what was called “The Faking of the City of Light.”

According to Goodwin (2001), the Travels was an instant success. A French nobleman requested a copy from Marco, referring to him as “A very honorable person, of high character and respect in many countries” (Komroff 1926/2001, p. 312). At the same time, however, it became known as the Million Lies (Il Milione), and seems to have been regarded popularly as a work of romantic fiction rather than a serious account. This surely is a reflection of the credibility gap that must have opened when Marco asked readers to accept that China could boast cities that were richer in goods, services, and technology than any in Europe. It was not until the nineteenth century that European explorers, following in Marco’s footsteps, were able to establish the general credibility of his account, by confirming that his description of the route he followed and the distances involved was indeed remarkably accurate.

**EPILOGUE**

The direct influence of the Travels was to last for several centuries. Fifteenth century mapmakers still used the work as the basis for the Asian sections of their world maps. In addition, it contained the first known mention of Japan in
Central Asia, Western Asia or Europe before the sixteenth century (Birchwood, Brotton and Dimmock 2001; Larner 1999, p. 63). It seems, in fact, to have stimulated Europeans to search out the riches of the East, and by implication to find new trade routes (Boorstin 1983; Larner 1999; Power 1937, 1930; Sherwood and Mantz 1924; Zhang 1994). In Larner’s words, “He [Marco] opened vast horizons for the West, and gave to Europe a work which was to be a powerful element in its discovery of the world in the centuries that followed” (Larner 1999, p. 183). Boorstin even wonders whether there would have been a Columbus without Marco Polo (Boorstin 1983, p. 125-6). It seems entirely appropriate, therefore, that seven centuries later his native city should name its international airport in his honor.

NOTE

To preserve the flavor and authenticity of the original, and to avoid possible confusion, the place names used in this paper are those appearing in the Marsden translation of the Travels on which the Goodwin/Komroff edition is based.

REFERENCES


