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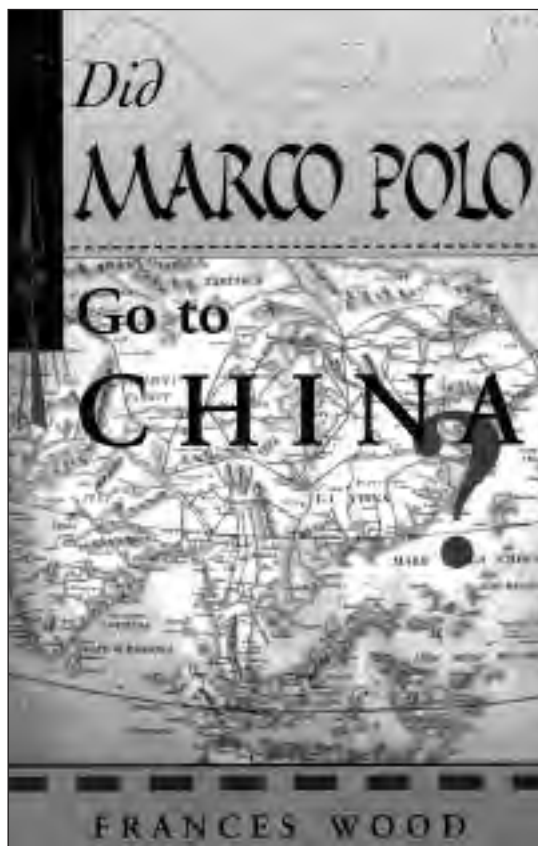
Debunking the Myth

By Laxman D. Satya

An Essay Review of Frances Wood's Book

Did Marco Polo Go to China?

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Frances Wood has produced this fascinating book which basically debunks the myth surrounding Marco Polo and his *Description of the World*. Providing more than twenty pages of documentary evidence in the form of notes and bibliography, Wood argues that Marco Polo was the biggest fraud in world history and that he never went to China.

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Polos were small-time merchants who did not make any mark on the city of Venice. Marco Polo's claim of being associated with the family of rich traders was dubious and suspect. Little is known of Marco Polo's ancestry beyond the generation of his father and uncles.

Polo claimed to have lived in Qublai Khan's court (1260–94 C.E.) as a guest for seventeen years and also to have been commissioned by the Khan to travel all over China before being appointed as the Governor of the City of Yangzhou. But there is “absolutely no record of Marco Polo in the Yangzhou gazetteers” (p. 15) of the period. Polo's credentials are not corroborated with historical documents. His claim of being a messenger of Khan to the Roman Catholic Pope also is dubious. There is no documentary reference, either in Chinese sources or Papal archives, to the fact that anyone by the name of Marco Polo ever acted as an intermediary between the two.

Wood points to serious discrepancies in Marco Polo's book, *Description of the World*, suggesting that Polo never actually went to the places described in his book. When closely scrutinized, it is not “possible to follow Marco Polo step by step beyond Persia” (p.29). Polo's book moves back and forth in time and space without provid-

ing an itinerary of the journey. His description of the cities, distances, and directions are also often inaccurate. His book contains remarkably few references to himself or his family and reads more like a geographical or historical work rather than a personal account of things seen. The places which Polo describes do not fall in a logical sequence but are placed haphazardly in “a rough geographical grouping” (p. 37).

Wood finds a lot of false information in the texts of Polo's *Description of the World*. The book is not written in first person and reads as if dictated by Polo to a ghostwriter. Polo's book is supposed to have been written between 1295 and 1300 C.E. when he was in prison in Italy. It is supposed to have been dictated by Polo to a fellow prisoner by the name of Rustichello whose identity is also dubious. The original version of the *Description* has been lost to history. What survives is the later version to which many new things were added to make the narrative more interesting. This process has led to the loss of the document's historical accuracy in addition to the authenticity of its author and the ghostwriter. Polo's book therefore is only an inaccurate geographical description rather than a travelogue of the time.

A linguistic analysis of Polo's book suggests that the

work may have been written by a series of ghostwriters, “each bringing his own favorite verbal endings to the task” (p. 50). The language and the place-names used by Polo raise many doubts of accuracy. Polo’s failure to accurately note Chinese and Mongol place-names despite his seventeen-year sojourn has cast many puzzling doubts. He has also failed to record many significant articles and commodities of popular use.

The most famous item in China during the thirteenth century was porcelain. Wood observed that Polo was unable to provide a convincing description of this commodity from China. Polo not only fails to locate the origin of porcelain in the Fujian province but also sites its production in the mysterious town of Tingui (p. 65) which does not exist.

Paper money was one of the greatest inventions of the Song (960–1279 C.E.) and Yuan (1279–1368 C.E.) China. Paper had been in use in China for thousands of years before Marco Polo’s arrival. Most offi-

cial documents, domestic letters and books were written on paper. It is rather puzzling that Polo did not show any interest in either the Chinese or Mongolian writing system even though he claims to have served in imperial bureaucracy. Wood even suspects that Polo had no knowledge of these two languages.

The widespread use of woodblock printing in China was unknown in Europe and was not even mentioned by Polo in his *Description*. Polo claims to have lived in Fujian. Alongside porcelain manufacturing, Fujian was the center of China’s book production business. Both these important items somehow do not figure in Polo’s description of the Fujian province. It would be hard for any foreigner to be living in Fujian and not make note of the printed books and porcelain so widely sold in its local markets.

Tea was another item commonly consumed, displayed and sold in all the markets of China including Hangzhou. Tea had been in popular use in China

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since the time of the Han dynasty (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.). Many different varieties of tea were grown and sold all over China. Polo claims to have visited Longjing in Hangzhou province, Wulong in Fujian province, and several places in Suzhou province which were full of teahouses specializing in teas prepared with local spring water. Polo totally fails to mention these very noticeable teahouses. Wood points out that Polo’s claim of being well-connected with the imperial bureaucracy and government is false because he would certainly have been entertained in the teahouses, “for the Chinese did not entertain at home” (p. 71). How could Marco Polo have missed street-side teahouses unless he actually never went there? It is therefore “difficult to imagine a

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sojourn of seventeen years in China without noticing the popularity of the drink" (p. 72).

Foot binding had been a popular practice among the upper classes during the Song dynasty (960–1279 C.E.). The Mongols never adopted this practice. Marco Polo's association with the Mongol and Chinese ruling class would have certainly brought him face-to-face with this practice. As a Christian he would have definitely noticed it. But Polo again fails to record foot binding in the China of his times. Other

important symbols of Chinese culture like the use of chopsticks and cormorant fishing in the rivers near Guilin are also not mentioned by Polo. These lapses are significant considering the love of food and drink commonly found in China and Italy. Unless Polo was not interested in food at all, how could he have failed to register a comparison of Italian pasta and ravioli with Chinese noodles and dumplings?


Ice cream had been in China since the Tang dynasty (618–907 C.E.) and antedated Marco Polo by more than 300 years. The widespread belief in Europe that Marco Polo was the first to bring ice cream from China and introduce it in Europe is a myth created in the nineteenth century, according to Wood. Polo never mentions having seen or eaten ice cream in China. Furthermore, it was not Polo but the Arabs who first brought ice cream from China and introduced it in Europe in the thirteenth century.

Many monumental structures described by Polo are also full of inaccuracies. For example, the bridge in Beijing which Marco Polo claims to have seen situated sixteen kilometers to the west never had more than eleven to thirteen arches in its history. Polo records having seen this bridge and counted its arches to be twenty-four in number. Similarly, Suzhou in Jiangzu province was one of the most beautiful cities in all of China. It was full of elegant houses, gardens, bridges and

temples alongside fertile rice fields sprawling in all directions. As a center of silk production, Suzhou was "the favored place of residence for retired government officials and scholars" who lived in the prettiest of houses (p. 89). Polo not only does not mention anything about Suzhou's beauty, but instead states that it was a market for ginger and rhubarb grown in the nearby mountains. In reality, though, Suzhou lies in the flat, wet Yangtze delta region with no mountains nearby. Far from being the market center, Suzhou had never been known either for ginger or rhubarb, suggesting that Marco Polo had never been to Suzhou.

The biggest of the monumental structures which no visitor would miss recording since Han times was the Great Wall of China. More a symbol than a physical barrier, the Wall had one of the most spectacular runways for providing communication lines and shelter for border guards and the garrison. Marco Polo claims to have taken the land route to China via the Silk Road going through Central Asia. If he had really taken that route, he could not have missed passing through the Great Wall. But Polo's *Description of the World* fails to record the Great Wall of China. Wood presents this as the most glaring example of Marco Polo's falsification of history—claiming to be in China without having visited it.

Polo's claim that he, his father, and his uncle were the first Europeans ever seen by Qubilai Khan was also misleading. Mongols had a long tradition of association with outsiders, including Europeans. This fact is very well documented. Being a pastoral people, they acquired their weapons and metal utensils from outsiders. In order to



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strengthen their hold over China, the Mongols during the Yuan period utilized the services of people from all over the world. Korean boat-builders, Persian siege engineers, medical doctors from India, writers and calligraphers from Tibet, Arab civil servants and merchants, and Turkish translators and military commanders were just a few of the many who served the Khan.

Wood dismisses Polo's claim of having provided the Mongol army with *mangonels* (stone-hurling machines) and huge catapults for the siege of the Xiangyang, the last stronghold of the Song dynasty in 1273. The siege machines were actually brought by Persian military engineers much before Polo's arrival in China. In fact, the siege of Xiangyang was broken a full year before the arrival of Polo in China. Therefore, Marco Polo's claim of witnessing the siege of Xiangyang was completely false. He was never there, writes Wood, and his information is erroneous and unreliable. Furthermore, Polo was neither a siege engineer nor the first European to meet the Mongol Khan. His *Description* is thus "filled with inaccuracies and discrepancies" (p. 111).

Wood suggests that a detailed inventory of Marco Polo's belongings at the time of his death (1324 C.E.) bears little connection to China. A detailed scrutiny of Polo's book turns out to be neither materialistic nor mercantile, but religious in nature. The second-hand nature of Polo's book and a lack of coherent itinerary suggests that Polo told fantastic tales to Rustichello, his ghostwriter, to pass time in the dungeon between 1295–1307 C.E. Marco Polo's name is also absent from the massive documentation avail-

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able on the Mongol period of Chinese history. Therefore, Wood concludes, Marco Polo never went to China. Instead, he relied on Persian and Arabic guidebooks as his major source material to narrate his concocted stories and tales. "Reliance on other people's work to fill out the *Description of the World* might account for some of the most glaring omissions," in Polo's narrative, suggests Wood.

China aside, Marco Polo did not see even the Mongol capital of Karakorum. Worse still, he actually did not go beyond Persia, yet a major part of the book is a description of China. Wood's book suggests that family stories and familiarity with the Near East and beyond could have provided Marco with the required material for his book. Polo himself never traveled beyond the family's outposts on the Black Sea and Constantinople. In that Marco Polo was like Herodotus (484 B.C.E. to 425 B.C.E.) "who did not travel to all the places he described and who mixed facts with fantastic tales" (p. 150). Wood argues that far from being an original eyewitness account, Polo's book was actually based on second-hand information and knowledge.

If Marco Polo was not in China, then where was he between 1271 and 1295 C.E.? There is no evidence, other than the *Description of the World*, to suggest that he was in China, so according to Wood, it turns out that Marco Polo was the biggest

fraud in world history, and his book can be clearly seen as a case of concocted historical document.

Frances Wood's book is an excellent teaching tool. The students just loved it. I had an entire class period of seventy-five minutes devoted to discussing this book. The students also wrote excellent reviews of the book. It is a good, colorful and analytical work written from a non-Eurocentric perspective. It tears down the myth and reveals the real identity of Marco Polo. As an eye-opener, this book provides an excellent learning opportunity to students. The book also fits in well as a supplementary reading for both sections of world history and could be used as a teaching tool in the basic history of China course. Even though this is a history book, it nevertheless deals extensively with China's rich tradition and culture. The book is short (only 154 pages of text) and very easy to read. It is available in paperback and affordable. I used it with great success and would recommend it to others. ■

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