

Foreign Devils  
in the  
Flowery Kingdom

by  
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With a New Foreword by Paul French

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# I

## Followers of Marco Polo

**“One generation opens the road upon which  
another generation travels.”**

**M**arco polo was a wealthy man when he returned to Venice from China after an absence of twenty-six years. That was the most important fact about his strange and adventurous journey. Had it not been for the jewels and silks and musk that he brought back he would probably have died a forgotten man - just another Venetian adventurer who had wandered off to some distant part of the earth and returned home penniless to die in poverty and obscurity. His neighbors would not have started off to make their fortunes in China. The need for a shorter route to that country would not have developed. Columbus would have lacked incentive for his historic voyage which was not made to prove that the world was round but to provide a better trade route to the rich countries of the Orient.

Messer Marco had many stories to tell when he returned home in the summer of 1295. He told of many cities he had seen with suburbs larger than the whole city of Venice or its hated rival Genoa; of massive walls surmounting mountaintops, stretching away as far as the eye could reach; of canals which were hundreds of miles long and as straight as the flight of an arrow. He told of pieces of printed paper which circulated throughout the country in the place of money and were as valuable as coins of gold; of a people so refined and cultured that they might settle serious differences of opinion without sticking each other in the back with daggers.

Nothing like this had ever been heard of in Europe. Most of

the things he told about were unbelievable because they were far beyond the imagination of the Europeans of that period. Everyone thought he was a liar who did not have wit enough to be plausible. The story about printed money was entirely unbelievable because no one in Europe had ever seen a piece of printing of any kind. Equally absurd was his insistence that he had seen with his own eyes a curious black rock which the Chinese dug from the ground and burned, producing flames hotter than that from well-seasoned wood. He said there were more people in China than in all the rest of the world, but that even the common people ate off plates and almost everyone had at least one silk gown for holiday wear. His name became a symbol for falsehood. When small boys thought they had caught a playmate in an exaggeration they would taunt him with the provocative sing-song; "and so says Marco Polo." He was in fact one of the most truthful travelers in all history but his reputation as a liar lasted as long as he lived and for generations afterward. Because of his tales he was not even allowed to die in peace. On his death-bed in 1324 he was exhorted to prepare himself for absolution of his sins by retracting some of his lies; but as long as there was any breath in his old body he continued to whisper, "I have not told the half of what I saw."

Although his relatives and neighbors did not believe his stories, there was convincing evidence of the wealth he had brought home with him. In celebration of his return there was a big family dinner party attended by all the Polos in Venice. After the servants had been sent from the room and the doors secured, Marco changed his clothing and theatrically appeared in the threadbare and tattered garments he had worn on his long journey home from China. Then he ripped the seams of his cloak and doublet and quarts of jewels - rubies, diamonds, sapphires, emeralds, pearls and carbuncles - spilled on the floor like wheat from a burst sack. There were enough jewels to make a king envious. His shabby baggage was brought in and every member of the family given a piece of silk, richer than any that had ever been

seen in Venice. This was but a part of the treasure he had brought with him and his riches appeared to be inexhaustible. Twenty years later he was still bringing jewels or small parcels of musk or rolls of silk brocade from some hiding place and selling them. Probably some of the precious stones he brought from China went into the jeweled decorations of the high altar of St. Mark's which was then being completed.

As news of Marco's riches got about, many Venetians started for China. A new continent had been discovered with almost unbelievable opportunities for wealth. They may not have known that Marco had prospered by stealing tax money from the public treasury during the periods when he was an official in the Chinese government. These early followers of Marco Polo discovered many new trade routes but there were as many pirates as honest traders among them. The peaceable Chinese were rich and easily plundered. The Venetians and Genoese did not have the field to themselves very long. Portuguese, Spanish and Dutch adventurers soon were leaders in the profitable business of piracy.

The journey undertaken by the Venetians was not an easy one. Last year I flew over Marco Polo's route and made the trip from Rome to Rangoon in five days. He and the others who followed him traveled wearily for years to cover the same distance. The journey involved dangers so hazardous and hardships so severe that two hundred years later Admiral Columbus unsuccessfully tried to find another and better route and accidentally discovered America. They had to travel more than a third of the way around the world through many countries with strange languages and curious customs and be prepared to defend themselves against pirates and robbers at almost every stage of the journey. They had to depend on queer food and were not even certain of finding that. But they could easily ignore the difficulties when they remembered Marco Polo's jewels and thought of the wealth to be gained at the end of the journey, and of the comforts, honors and luxuries they would enjoy when they returned home. The lure of wealth attracted many. When Columbus set sail for what

he thought were the Eastern shores of China he fully expected to meet many of his countrymen who were living there.

It was not solely the search for wealth and adventure that sent people from the Mediterranean to China. When at the age of seventeen Marco set out with his father and uncle they were accompanied part of the way by two Dominican friars who had been delegated by the Pope to convert the heathen Chinese to Christianity. This companionship of traders and missionaries has continued to the present time. There was wealth to be made and there were souls to be saved and each of these opportunities aroused the enthusiasms of men. The missionaries made a bad start and the two Dominicans were unworthy predecessors of the long line of devout and heroic men who followed them. They were fatigued by the first part of the journey and frightened by the dangers ahead of them. They told the Polos that they were ill and returned home, giving Marco's father some sacred objects to take to the Emperor of China.

But when Marco returned to Venice he told of the surprising existence of churches of Nestorian Christians in China and the Roman priests who then went to this strange country had a new incentive for their work. The heretical sect of Nestorians was an ancient enemy of Rome and the fact that it existed in this remote part of the world was a provocative challenge to the church even more urgent than the existence of millions who were followers of Buddha. This feud between Rome and Syria was the first of many foreign controversies - ecclesiastical, political and commercial - to be fought out on the soil of China with which the Chinese themselves had no interest and no concern. It was also one of the least important. The heretics were not so powerful as they were thought to be and the attention of the Roman priests was devoted to the heathen. No descendants could be found of the Syrians who had formed a colony in China and established Nestorian churches. Nor could any trace be found of the descendants of the Jews who had fled from Babylon to China in the first great flight of that persecuted race. There were synagogues - as

there were Nestorian churches - but the worshipers were Chinese in whom it was impossible to find a faint trace of Jewish or Syrian ancestry. China had absorbed them as she has many other races.

In the centuries that followed thousands of Roman Catholic priests went to China, learned the language, adopted Chinese customs in food and clothing and outwardly appeared to merge into the native population. They ate with chopsticks, shaved their foreheads and grew queues and wore the baggy Chinese trousers and cotton quilted coats and jackets. They built humble chapels, preached their faith and made converts and died obscurely. To their converts they were men of God, but to the great mass of Chinese all foreigners were lumped together as foreign devils and made the target of unruly mobs.

The priests who traveled so far from the Mediterranean were prepared to carry the blessings of civilization as well as of Christianity to a people they assumed would be both heathen and ignorant. But as soon as they reached China they were thrown into contact with a civilization much higher than that of Europe, just as Marco Polo had contended that it was. The first printed book was still to be produced in Europe but the libraries of the Buddhist monasteries were full of them, printed from carved wooden blocks. There were printing presses in all the larger Buddhist establishments. Throughout the country scholars constituted a class honored above all others. It was no place for barefooted bead-telling monks such as had been sent to convert the pagan tribes of Ireland. Only men of the highest intelligence and the greatest learning could escape the scorn of the Chinese literati. That was a difficult lesson for Rome to learn, but stupid policies of the earlier popes were rectified by later ones and the scholarly Jesuits were sent to China to put their scientific knowledge at the service of the Emperor. They corrected Chinese ideas of astronomy and under their direction Chinese workmen constructed an astronomical observatory equal to any in Europe. Father Veribest became the head of the Chinese Bureau of Mathematics while

Schall, Ricci and scores of other priests acted as trusted advisors to emperors or to high officials.

They taught the Chinese and also learned from them. The huge storehouses of Chinese history, philosophy and literature had not even been inventoried but it offered to the foreign scholar riches as enticing as the jewels which fell from the seams of Marco Polo's ragged garments. The work of research and translation of Chinese learning undertaken by the priests has occupied more centuries than the building of any great cathedral in Europe, and it is still going on. The Catholic church could rest its reputation for scholarship solely on the work of its priests in China. Protestant missionaries who followed much later ably carried on this tradition. It was through the missionaries that China learned of Christianity and also through them that the West learned of the philosophy of Confucius and of the many other Chinese sages.

Priests and traders arrived together but once they were on the soil of China they traveled different routes. The methods of the earlier traders were not those of the peaceful Chinese merchant. They carried little or no cargo with them but came back with a great deal of wealth. The Chinese called them pirates and built watch towers along the coast to look out for their approach and warn the people to flee. At one time they were so troublesome that, by order of the Emperor, all inhabitants along the seacoast moved several miles inland and all houses were destroyed so that when the pirates arrived there was no booty for them to take and they sailed away empty-handed. It was the same "scorched earth" policy that Chinese used many centuries later in effectively hampering the Japanese invasion starting in 1937. The priests who had come to China so peacefully finally became as troublesome as the pirates, though for entirely different reasons. Jesuits, Franciscans and Dominicans bickered with each other over the semi-religious reverence of Chinese children for parents and of Chinese scholars for Confucius and then quarreled violently over which Chinese character should be used in translating the word God. Either in a spirit of helpfulness or in the pride of his

scholarship, the Emperor attempted to solve the latter problem but the priests were not content to accept his decision and the whole question was referred to the Pope who didn't know one Chinese character from another. He decided against the Emperor and the exasperated Son of Heaven promptly dissolved all the Catholic establishments in his empire and sent the priests home. The traders went with them, for the righteous indignation of the Emperor was all-embracing. Only the Portuguese remained in Macao, a tiny colony which had been leased in 1557 and made immense wealth through trade with Japan as well as China. If it had not been for this unfortunate controversy and if the priests had been a little less unbending in the matter of old Chinese rites and ceremonies, Christianity might at that time have replaced Buddhism in China.

By the time trade with China was resumed on any kind of recognized and legalized basis, the relative positions of the foreigners concerned had changed. Spain, Holland and Portugal were no longer great maritime powers for a series of events had made Britain the successor of them all and it was at the insistence of Britain that Chinese exclusion was broken down. The right to trade at Canton was granted under severe and humiliating restrictions. Little by little ports were opened, almost invariably as the result of military pressure and more privileges granted to traders and missionaries. The era of foreign trade and the development of modern China began in 1842 when a British fleet sailed up the Yangtze and after a few minor battles the Treaty of Nanking was signed. Americans shared in the privileges gained by British military and diplomatic victories. An ancient taunt that while we never went to war with China we benefited by all of Britain's wars has just enough truth in it to sting.

While they competed fiercely with each other in trade the British and Americans worked together on many matters of common interest and during the greater part of the past hundred years there has been an effective if unofficial Anglo-American alliance in the Far East. Official circles in London and Washington may

have had no official knowledge of this alliance, nor did it necessarily involve any definite agreements or collusion between the diplomatic and consular officials of the two countries. It came about because British and Americans thought in the same way about a lot of old-fashioned things such as justice and right. The International Settlement of Shanghai was the result of joint efforts by representatives of the two nations. Between them they made English the commercial language of the country. The British came to China by way of India, bringing with them their ideas of caste and color prejudice and the necessity for maintaining the prestige of the white man. They were the leaders in trade and the organizers of clubs and the Americans adopted or absorbed British ideas and manners to an extent they never realized until they returned home and often found that they were mistaken for Englishmen.

The tempo of commerce was set by the restricted speed and infrequent arrivals of the sailing ships. Competition seeped in very slowly and profits were huge though sometimes offset by equally huge losses. Some of the early firms became so wealthy, maintained such luxurious establishments and gained such a reputation for generosity that they became known as "the princely houses." They set a high standard of conduct as well as of living for all the other business houses and had much beside their wealth to justify the classification that had been given them. The piratical element of trade survived in the persons of adventurers who came from many countries with picturesque schemes to make fortunes quickly. While the pattern of the schemes presented different pictures, the design was almost invariably the same - to part some Chinese from his money. A great many succeeded and a few went to jail.

Diplomats also came. Before the Treaty of Nanking was signed they were treated by the haughty Chinese officials as "tribute bearers from barbarian tribes" who were exhorted to "tremble and obey" and warned not to disturb the tranquility of the Son of Heaven. The diplomats struggled for more than a century to