

# MARCO POLO IN CHINA

▲ The sun rises at Jiayuguan, where a 14th-century tower on the Great Wall marks a traditional entryway to China. Marco Polo traveled eastward through these lands on his way to meet the Mongol lord Kublai Khan.

1 The Polos—Marco, his father Niccolò, and his uncle Maffeo—had been traveling for three and a half years when they finally achieved their **objective**—a long-awaited meeting with the powerful Mongol leader Kublai Khan. The historic event took place in 1275 at the Khan’s luxurious summer capital<sup>1</sup> in Shangdu, in  
5 what is now northern China. As he greeted his tired guests, Kublai Khan was surprisingly informal: “Welcome, gentlemen! Please stand up. How’ve you been? How was the trip?”

Marco Polo’s trip had, in fact, started more than 9,000 kilometers (5,600 miles) away in Venice when he was just a teenager. His father and  
10 uncle already knew Kublai Khan from a previous visit five years earlier, when they had spent a short time in Shangdu. On this second trip the Polos would stay for 17 years, making themselves useful to the Khan and **undertaking** various missions<sup>2</sup> and tasks for him. It is likely that the Khan considered it an honor<sup>3</sup> that Europeans, who were rare in China, had  
15 made the extremely difficult journey, and he made good use of their skills and knowledge.

In the service of Kublai Khan, “the most powerful man in people and in lands and in treasure that ever was in the world,” Marco was able to learn and experience many things that were new to Europeans. In his travel **journal**,  
20 he described Kublai Khan’s **palace** as the greatest he had ever seen. He **admired** the Khan’s recently completed new capital, Daidu, whose streets were “so straight and so broad.” The city was located in what is now the center of Beijing, and Kublai Khan’s city planning can still be **perceived** in the straight, broad streets of China’s modern capital.



▲ Marco Polo’s 24-year trip opened up a world that had never before been described by any European.

<sup>1</sup> The **capital** of a country is the city where its government meets.

<sup>2</sup> A **mission** is an important task that people are given to do, especially one that involves traveling.

<sup>3</sup> Something that is an **honor** is special and desirable.



◀ Boats crowd an entrance to the Grand Canal near the Chinese port of Yangzhou. Marco wrote that he saw 15,000 boats a day sailing on the nearby Yangtze River. He also claims that he served for three years as governor of Yangzhou, the busiest and richest of all the regions he visited.



▲ “Each day there come [to Daidu] . . . more than a thousand carts loaded with silk,” wrote Marco. In some villages today, silk is still made the traditional way, by heating silkworm cocoons until they are soft enough to produce threads.

25 We learn from Marco Polo that, in the **administration** of his empire, Kublai Khan made use of a fast and simple message system. Horse riders spaced every 40 kilometers allowed messages to cover 500 kilometers a day. Marco also learned the secret of asbestos cloth, which is made from a  
30 **mineral** and doesn’t catch fire. Paper money also took him by surprise, as it was not yet in use in the West at that time. Homes were heated with “black stones . . . which burn like logs.” Those stones were coal—unknown in most of Europe—and they were so plentiful that many people had a hot bath  
35 three times a week.

Although the Khan did not want his visitors to leave, the Polos finally received permission to return home in 1292. Marco continued his observations on the ocean **voyage** by way of Sumatra and India. Upon his return, he completed  
40 a book about his trip, full of details about his amazing cultural experiences. It was probably the greatest **contribution** of geographic information ever made to the West about the East.

Marco Polo completed ▶ his journal for “all people who wish to know . . . the different regions of the world.” This valuable copy of his *Description of the World* is now kept in a library in Seville, Spain.

