

MARCO POLO'S WORLD

TEA, CHOPSTICKS AND CHINESE CHARACTERS

Marco Polo doesn't mention tea, which is a bit strange, because by now tea was already a highly widespread drinking habit. Marco is very interested in drinking habits, both in China and all over the Middle East, but only if they entail wine.

The Khan clearly favored alcoholic beverages, and Marco's text has something of an enological tour around Eurasia. Even so, Kubilai Khan was well aware of the importance of tea. As early as 1265 he had established a monopoly over the tea trade of Sichuan, and everywhere tea was subject to very specific taxes.

Maybe Marco Polo talked about it and Rusticello or later copyists and translators dropped it, not seeing the interest of an herbal infusion. In any case, tea was not as visible as it would be some decades later, because **teapots didn't** come into use until the Yuan, when tea began to be prepared from loose tea leaves and not from pressed tea cakes as was the use before.

What is even stranger is the lack of comment about the Chinese eating habits. It would have been impossible not to notice how very different they were from European habits and how deeply engrained they were in Chinese culture. There were inns everywhere, as Marco notes, and as we saw in previous lectures in the Qingming Shanghe tu.

Menus were, for a westerner, astonishingly varied, everything was presented in small cuts and pasta was omnipresent in all kinds of different forms. Moreover, they ate with chopsticks, and never touched the food with their hands. Even accepting that Mongols never took to Chinese food, the differences were so striking that it is strange that Marco didn't comment on them. But the most surprising of all Marco Polo's omissions has to do with writing.

The book says that he mastered four languages with their modes of writing. Let's take first the languages, because there is no doubt that they certainly interested Marco: while travelling in the Middle East or in China he never fails to notice and to mention the languages that the different peoples speak.

On his way, he must have learned Persian, which was the lingua franca of those traveling to the East and was also quite in use among the foreigners working in China at that time.

This was also the case of the Uyghur language, highly in use among Central Asians who worked in Mongol service. Mongolian must also have been a useful language for him, because it enabled him to talk directly to the Khan and to the Mongolian officials without the need for an interpreter.

The fourth language could have been Turkish, or maybe the book also took account of his native Italian. The languages don't pose a real problem: he was young, he was witty, and whatever he did he spent seventeen years in China and he surely had to work, so he needed the usual languages.

He might even have learned some Chinese. Most of the Chinese place names are given in Persian, but there are also some names, like Japan, that come in Chinese spelling: Cipango, for instance, is a direct transcription of its Chinese name, Ribenguo. Something very different and much more intriguing happens with writing.

He comments that there is only one written form to all Chinese languages, but he never shows any interest in this writing although he must have seen it everywhere. In former lectures, talking about the Song dynasty, we have seen the streets full of written labels advertising services and shops.

Even the panniers of the village peddler displayed strings of written words. **Marco's lack of interest** has been attributed to the fact that he lived in Mongol circles and that what happened in the Chinese world was of no concern to him. But writing was important for the Mongols too, who by then already had two different scripts, the Uyghur and the 'Phags-pa, that was being taught in schools especially created for the purpose.

Furthermore, throughout his travels through the Middle East and Central Asia, Marco had already encountered a great variety of scripts, **and he doesn't** comment on any of these either. His education back in Venice had been much more centered on numbers than on letters.

He could probably read enough to get through the practical arithmetic problems that constituted the bulk of his education. And he also must have needed a certain written support to master the conversion of foreign weights, measures and money, something for which he shows a clear interest and capacity.

But as for letters and writing, they didn't interest him in the least. Marco Polo gives a wealth of detail that only an insider could have gathered.

And the enthusiasm with which he describes the wealth and plenty of the country, and the loyalty that he feels for Kubilai Khan hang together as truthful, and even point to a certain nostalgia for having parted from it.

Nevertheless, two things that today spring immediately to mind as setting Chinese people apart from Europeans are the fact that they eat with chopsticks and write with characters. And it remains peculiar that Marco Polo didn't mention either of them.