

## THE EUROPEANS DISCOVERY OF XINA

### POMPEU FABRA UNIVERSITY BARCELONA

#### **MARCO POLO'S WORDL**

##### IBN BATTUTA AND MARCO POLO

Ibn Battuta arrived to the coast of China in the last years of the Yuan dynasty. But Ibn Battuta looked at China with very different eyes than Marco Polo:

Ibn Battuta was an educated man who traveled within a familiar Muslim world, while Marco Polo was a merchant, not formally educated, who traveled through unfamiliar worlds.

His first impression matches those of European travelers: he finds China the most extensive, plentiful and cheap country on earth, and he claims China to be the safest country in the world for the traveler.

The huge population of China and its degree of urbanization astonishes him and the fact that in all big cities there was a quarter for Muslims delights him. As Marco Polo and other travelers had done before, he is fascinated by the innumerable and huge vessels that anchor in the Chinese ports, by the security provided by the Mongol post service, by the Grand Canal and by the Chinese addiction to the comforts and pleasures of life. He describes in detail the productive process of porcelain, silk, charcoal, lacquer, paper money and the burning of the dead. Like Marco Polo, he doesn't mention foot-binding, Chinese characters, tea or chopsticks, but he refers shortly to the Great Wall, even if in quite a blurred way, adding that he had met nobody who had seen it. He is the only late medieval and early modern traveler to notice Chinese painting, affirming that the Chinese talent for this art is something extraordinary, and that in this art no nation can come up to them.

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"China is beautiful, but it did not please me".

The Chinese ate pork and dogs, and they were all heathen. Finally he admits that when he went out of his lodging, he saw so many blameworthy things, that he preferred to stay indoors most of the time and only went out to meet some other Muslims.

Ibn Battuta's book was a text written by a Muslim, centered on Muslim's communities and intended for a Muslim audience, and never gained the universal appeal that Marco Polo's book attained.

Once back in Morocco, the Sultan appointed a local poet to write down in proper literary form the Book of Travels of Ibn Battuta. Like it is the case for Marco Polo and Rusticello, nobody can tell what comes from Ibn Battuta and what from Ibn Juzzay. Certainly, Ibn Battuta's memory couldn't retain everything that he had seen or the names of the innumerable Muslims that he had encountered. There is no doubt that Ibn Juzzay copied from other pre-existing travel narratives.

The Book had not a universal acceptance: even the great ibn Khaldun, a highly prominent 14th century Muslim historian, hardly mentioned ibn Battuta and rather dismissed him saying that many people whispered to each other that he must be a liar.

**In contrast to Marco Polo's book and its impact on Europe, ibn Battuta's book had a small impact on the Muslim world, and it was completely unknown outside it. The book never gained momentum until the mid 19th century.**

The striking contrast between the impact of these two books must be attributed to the fact that Marco Polo's book opened a window to new worlds, while Ibn Battuta's did not.