

**MARCO POLO, CHINESE CULTURAL IDENTITY, AND AN
ALTERNATIVE MODEL OF EAST-WEST ENCOUNTER**

SUMMARY

Long before the nineteenth-century expansion of European colonialism, Marco Polo offered an account of China and the East from a perspective very different from that of European explorers several centuries later, and his narration was motivated by the desire to know and understand, not to conquer and colonize. Thus his book offers an alternative model of East-West encounter to European colonialism. Because Marco associated himself mostly with the Mongolian nobility and other foreigners at the court of Kublai Khan, however, he did not come to know the majority of Han Chinese and their culture. Had Marco known the Chinese cultural tradition, he might have found it compatible with his desire to integrate into a different culture and society, because in the Chinese tradition, there are two contradictory views of the idea of Chineseness, one of which defines the concept of identity in terms of kinship and ethnicity, while the other understands Chineseness as culturally defined and potentially all-embracing. It is this concept of a cultural identity that may go beyond ethnocentrism and, like Marco's book, offer the possibility of an alternative model of East-West encounter for better understanding between different cultures and traditions.

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When Marco Polo returned to Venice from the East with his father and uncle in 1295 after a long absence of twenty-four years, they were not recognized by their own family members until they ripped open the seams and linings of their well-worn coats cut in the exotic fashion of the Tartars and pulled out a large quantity of rubies, sapphires and other kinds of precious stones that they had brought back from China. This legend, told by the geographer Giambattista Ramusio (1485-1557) in his *Navigazioni e viaggi*, situates the return of the Polos in the age-old framework of narrative conventions, of which the recognition of Odysseus by the old nurse Euryclea in Book XIX of the Homeric epic provides the archetype in what Northrop Frye called “the theme of the *nostos* or return home in the *Odyssey*” (319). The establishment of credibility, which is the whole point of this legend, has often been a problem with Marco Polo’s remarkable story. Many of his contemporaries regarded him as a “braggart,” and throughout the centuries the account of his adventurous journey to the East has not gone unchallenged by skeptic scholars who either denied him the experience of having actually gone to China or questioned the veracity of his extraordinary tale.¹ In perhaps the most comprehensive study of Marco Polo’s book

so far, John Larner has rigorously defended Marco against his detractors, dismissing their skeptic charges as “nothing outside fantasies of ‘jiggery-pokery’ and a wholly imaginary hostility between Maffeo and Marco, compounded in a mass of unbridled conjecture” (63). Insofar as the presence of the Polos in China is concerned, however, Larner has no choice but to acknowledge with regret that “No Chinese source can be used to gain evidence of them” (41).

It is true that Chinese documents of the Mongol-ruled Yuan dynasty have no records either of Marco Polo, or of his father Niccolò and uncle Maffeo, but the absence of record cannot be taken as proof that the Polos never went to China. As Francis Woodman Cleaves remarks, “If we were to draw up a list of historical figures who are not mentioned in sources in which we might justifiably expect to encounter their names, it would be excessively long” (192). Yang Zhijiu, a Chinese historian and expert on the Mongol dynasty, also observes that of those other Western travelers to the East before and after Marco Polo, such as Giovanni di Pian di Carpini, William of Rubruck, Prince Hetoum of Little Armenia, and Odorico da Pordenone, there is no Chinese record, either (Yang, 157). “If we judge by whether their names appear in Chinese records,” says Yang, “should we conclude then that none of these people had gone to China, and that their writings were all hearsay or plagiarism? If not, why should we single out Marco Polo for such harsh treatment?” (158). Among Chinese

scholars, Yang Zhijiu is indeed the most eloquent of Marco's defenders.

In 1941, while researching on the history of the Muslims in the Yuan dynasty, Yang Zhijiu came upon a brief and banal piece of official document, preserved in *juan* (literally a scroll, hence a chapter or volume) 19,418 of the *Yongle dadian* or *Great Compendium Composed during the Yongle Reign*, a multi-volume fourteenth-century encyclopedia. The document is a report sent from Quanzhou (Marco's Zaiton) through the postal relay system under the Mongol rule, in which an official named Sha-bu-ding (Persian or Arabic Sahāb al-Dīn) stated that in the 3rd month of the 27th year of the Zhiyuan reign (1290), an imperial decree was issued "to dispatch Wu-lu-dai, A-bi-shi-ke and Huo-zhe to the court of the Great Prince A-lu-hun via Ma-ba-er" (*Yongle dadian*, 8:7211). Yang Zhijiu immediately realized that these foreign-sounding names corresponded perfectly with what Marco Polo mentioned in an important passage of his book: Wu-lu-tai is Marco's Ulatai, A-bi-shi-ke is Abushka, and Huo-zhe is Koja, the Great Prince A-lu-hun is Arghun, lord of the Levant, and Ma-ba-er is Maabar, the Coromandel Coast of India. According to Marco, lord Arghun's wife Bulagan died, and in her will she stipulated that no lady other than from her own family clan in Cathay should be her successor. Lord Arghun thus sent Ulatai, Abushka and Koja to Kubilai the Great Khan, and Kubilai chose a young lady named Kokachin of the lineage of Arghun's late wife for his marriage. When Arghun's

Persian emissaries were ready to return to their country with lady Kokachin, they requested the company of the three Polos, who were experienced in sea voyage. “The Great Khan, who was very fond of the three,” according to Marco, “granted this favour with some reluctance and gave leave to the three Latins to travel with the three lords and the lady” (Polo, *Travels*, 29). That was how, according to Marco, the Polos were able to take leave of the Great Khan and finally returned to Venice. Short of naming Marco Polo directly, this piece of a Yuan dynasty official document offers the best corroborative evidence in Chinese source to support Marco’s claims and thus goes a long way towards establishing the credibility of Marco’s narrative about his life in China under Kubilai’s rule. Although F. W. Cleaves already discussed Yang Zhijiu’s discovery of the Chinese document as supporting evidence of Marco’s departure from China in an article published in the *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* in 1976, Yang’s work seems still largely unknown in the West, and therefore it is necessary to emphasize the importance of his discovery of the hidden relationship between Marco’s book and that short piece of official document buried in the huge amount of materials preserved in the Chinese encyclopedic *Yongle dadian*. I believe that Yang’s work deserves much wider circulation and better appreciation in the field of Marco Polo scholarship.²

Insofar as his contemporaries were concerned, Marco’s story was unbelievable

not because it was too extravagant in speaking of fabulous creatures or supernatural beings, but because it presented such a plausible picture of China under the rule of Kubilai Khan as a civilized and prosperous society beyond the boundaries of medieval Christendom. Of Kubilai Marco says: “all the emperors of the world and all the kings of Christians and of Saracens combined would not possess such power or be able to accomplish so much as this same Kubilai, the Great Khan” (Polo, *Travels*, 78). It is statements like this that would sound incredible to European readers at the time. As Martin Gosman observes, Marco Polo “was considered a liar mainly because he contradicted the traditional image of the Mongols. People just could not believe that those barbarians who had threatened to destroy Europe in 1240-41, had reached the level of civilization and organization Marco described in his book” (76-77). That does not mean, however, that Marco’s book was not popular at the time, because many manuscripts in various European languages survive to testify to Marco’s “contemporary fame,” “an unparalleled record in the Middle Ages for translations effected during the life of the author” (Larner, 44).

For modern readers with expectations of adventures and medieval legends or fantasies, Marco’s book may prove to be disappointing. Despite some strange episodes like Prester John, the Old Man of the Mountains, a few other legends and tales, and despite the French title *Le Livre des Merveilles* of a manuscript that includes

a version of it, Marco's book is not one of marvels or adventures, but its narrative is very often matter-of-fact in tone, particularly in comparison with texts of medieval travel literature such as the immensely popular *Book of Sir John Mandeville*. Nor is it a guide to trade in the East or a detailed account of the various regions for missionary purposes. In delineating the itineraries of his journey, Marco or his collaborator Rustichello often glossed over details of various places in schematic and formulaic ways, but when he described some of the places in the north, especially Kubilai's palaces in Beijing (the Mongolian Khanbalikh), or the famous city of Hangzhou (Marco's Quinsai) in the south, his accounts suddenly gained momentum and became quite vivid and detailed, bearing the marks of lived experience and eyewitness narration. Indeed, there is often a clear sense of genuine admiration, even identification. Marco Polo, as John Larner argues, "is not an adventurer, a merchant, or a Christian missionary; he is rather a minor Mongolian civil servant who during his years in the East has been an observer or student of the topography and human geography of Asia, of its customs and folklore, of, above all, the authority and court of the Great Khan, all seen from a Mongol point of view" (85). Putting him in contrast with the French friar, Jourdain of Serverac, who returned from India in the 1330s to declare that the best place on earth, after all his travels and journeys, was still home "in our own Christendom," Larner shows how different Marco Polo was in his stance

and perspective:

The splendours of Khubilai's court, the magnificence of his autocratic rule (in such contrast to the spirit of Venetian republicanism), the great cities of Khanbalikh and 'the paradise' of Quinsai, seem, as we read of them, to surpass anything in the western world. This is not simply because the cities of thirteenth-century China outshone Venice and Pisa, but because 'East-West, home's best', and for Marco home was China.

(86)

This is a striking statement, particularly in view of the currently predominant model of East-West encounter based on the opposition between West as colonizer and East as the colonized, an unequal relationship that obtained in more recent times, above all the nineteenth century, when European colonialism was at the height of its expansion. Given the prevailing force of that oppositional model, however, it is only predictable that Marco Polo's book would come to be read, sooner or later, in the theoretical framework of Edward Said's notion of Orientalism regardless of whatever historical gaps there might be in social reality and political outlook between the thirteenth and the nineteenth centuries. That is exactly what Syed Manzurul Islam did when he read Marco's book as an exemplary text that "registers the full range of the tropes of othering that shaped the Western sense of identity and difference" (123), a

text that “exudes a sense of specialist knowledge about other cultures that would be the hallmark of Orientalism in its institutional phase, which Edward Said has so scrupulously mapped” (124). But Said’s *Orientalism* deals largely with European discourse on the Arabic world in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, and its argument cannot be extended to cover all time and all space as a sort of catchall universal theory. Comparing Syed Islam’s claims with the actual text of Marco’s book, I find it difficult to support those claims. For example, Islam maintains that “Marco Polo travelled to tell a fantastic story. He is singularly obsessed with difference and the desire to represent it. The world that sprouts from Marco Polo’s pen is as strange as the dreamscape of old fables” (123). That is surely a gross exaggeration! If anything, Marco’s text is, as I mentioned above, mostly descriptive in a matter-of-fact tone, with very little sensational stuff typical of medieval fables of the marvelous and the fantastic. Larner observes that “in comparison with the time-hallowed portrait which for so long constituted the agreed popular and general knowledge of the subject, Marco’s Asia is strikingly deprived of wonders” (107-08). Yang Zhijiu, himself a Chinese Muslim and a specialist in the Mongol-ruled Yuan dynasty, never takes Marco’s book for a dreamscape or idle fantasies. “Marco Polo’s book,” says Yang, “has recorded a large amount of information about the political, economic and social conditions of China, about its people and customs, of which much can be verified in

Chinese documents and books, and will continued to be verified as scholarship develops further. It does have some inevitable defects of overstatements and factual errors, but by and large it can be said to provide a true account” (116). The point is that Marco’s book was written at a time and from a perspective remarkably different from that of colonialist explorers of later times, and it is Marco’s different outlook on Asia that has made his book so very valuable to us today in rethinking the possibilities of understanding and interactions between the East and the West.

Difficult as it may be for us to imagine in a post-colonial time, it was indeed possible for Marco the Venetian in the thirteenth century to adopt a Mongol’s point of view and identify himself with Kubilai’s court. Marco was genuinely impressed by the vast Mongol empire, the magnificence of Kubilai’s palaces, the wealth of China, both the northern Cathay and the southern Mangi, and he thought of himself as at the Great Khan’s service, though his claim to have governed the city of Yangzhou for three years was groundless and has been dismissed by almost all commentators. The Yuan dynasty in China was ruled by the Mongols as conquerors, who employed in their government what the Han Chinese called “people with colored eyes” (*semuren*)—Muslims, Nestorian Christians, and other foreigners from regions to the west of China. That peculiar situation in Chinese history made it rather easy for people like Marco to integrate into the system, and that may also explain why he was ignorant of

the Chinese language and did not mention such well-known facts about Chinese culture and customs as the Great Wall, tea, women's bound feet, fishing with cormorants, Confucianism, Chinese writing and so on. As Henry Yule argued long ago, Marco gave readers the impression "that his associations in China were chiefly with foreigners" (intro. to Polo, *Book*, 1:111). Such associations made it possible for Marco to culturally adopt a Mongolian perspective and present to his European readers a picture of China and the East blessed with incredible wealth, sophisticated culture and social organization, thus offering an alternative model of East-West encounter very different from the Orientalist model of conflict and domination. If Marco had some knowledge of the Han majority, of their language and culture, particularly the idea of Chineseness defined in cultural terms, with which I shall be concerned later in this essay, he might have found it compatible with his own desire and effort to integrate into a different culture and society, and to adopt a different perspective.

As for the marvelous or the fantastic in his book, it is often not Marco himself but his early illustrators who are chiefly responsible for depicting scenes and creatures more grotesque and stranger than Marco described. In a recently published French version based on a fifteenth-century manuscript, *Le Livre des Merveilles*, we find some imaginary pictures that take a hint from Marco's text and push it to the limits of credibility. To be sure, Marco had his own prejudices, stereotypes, and wild

imagination largely shaped by his time and his background. In describing the inhabitants of Andaman in the Bay of Bengal, for example, he said that those people “vivent comme des bêtes, sans être gouvernés par un roi” (“live like beasts, without being governed by a king”), and that “Tous les hommes de cette île ont une méchante tête de chien, avec des yeux et des dents de chien aussi” (“all the men of this island have ugly heads of dogs, and eyes and teeth of dogs as well.” [Polo, *Livre*, 158]). In the French illustration (Folio 76v, fig. 1), the metaphorical expression in Marco’s text (“comme des bêtes”) was taken literally and turned into a surreal picture of several dog-headed figures. These fabulous dog figures are seen engaged in “l’exercice du commerce des fruits et des céréales” (“exercises of trade in fruits and corns.” [Polo, *Livre*, 158]). In another section, Marco speaks of his journey eastward: “Depuis Campitiu, l’on traverse cinq jours durant, en direction du Levant, une région où maints esprits parlent la nuit” (“From Campitiu, one travels for five days, in the direction from the Levant, across a region where many spirits are heard talking during the night.” [Polo, *Livre*, 76]). What we find in the French illustration here (Folio 29v, fig. 2) is again a fantastic picture of wooded hills and three specimens of mythical creatures: a Cyclops holding a cudgel and a shield, a Sciopod with his big foot up in the air, and one of the Blemmyae, the monstrous race famously described by Shakespeare as “men whose heads/Do grow beneath their shoulders” (*Othello*,

I.iii.143).³ These fantastic creatures, as Marie-Thérèse Gousset comments, are hardly warranted by Marco's text ("il n'est guère question dans le texte), but they are nonetheless painted "évoquent la contrée sauvage entre la province de Campicion et le royaume d'Erguiul dans le Gansu, une région où l'on entend 'parler maints esprits de nuit'" ("to evoke the wilderness between the province of Campicion and the kingdom of Erguiul in Gansu, a region where one hears many spirits of the night talking." [Polo, *Livre*, 73]). Obviously, there is a discrepancy between Marco's text and its illustrations in illuminated manuscripts, which shows that Marco's perspective was difficult for the medieval artists to grasp. Miniaturists commissioned to illustrate Marco's book, as Larner argues, "though not finding [those fantastic creatures] in the text, decided none the less to include images of them; a work about the East *must* have such things in it!" (82).

The imagining of the Other as barbarian and monstrous, however, is by no means uniquely European or Western, for every civilization, be it Greek or Chinese, in the East or the West, tends to construct its self-identity in differentiation from what is imagined to be the foreign and the uncivilized. The sense of belonging or the notion of a collective identity is always formed in such conceptual oppositions. Therefore it is not coincidental that those fabulous creatures in French illustrations of Marco's book can find almost exact counterparts in an ancient Chinese book, *Shan hai jing* or

the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*. Most scholars agree that *Shan hai jing* was compiled during the Warring States period (403-221 B.C.E.), but it contains materials that date back to much earlier time. It combines geographical knowledge with mythical lore, and its strange and monstrous creatures may represent different tribes and ethnic groups in fabled forms. This book briefly describes a kingdom where people have “only one eye in the middle of the face,” similar to the Cyclops in Greek mythology (Fig. 3, Ma, 461). To the east of these one-eyed people is another kingdom where the inhabitants “have one arm and one leg, with inverted knees so that the arm and leg can bend upward” (Fig. 4, Ma, 463). This sounds like just the right description of the Sciopod in *Le Livre des Merveilles*. Then we have the figure Xing Tian, which etymologically may mean “the beheaded one.” The book records an ancient legend that “Xing Tian contended with the Yellow Emperor. The Emperor cut off his head and buried him in the Changyang Mountains, but he used his nipples as eyes, his navel as mouth, and continued to hold his weapons and fight,” looking very much like a Blemmye (Fig. 5, Ma, 438). From an anthropological point of view, that ancient myth may symbolically represent the struggle of different tribes and ethnic groups for the control of land, resources, as well as cultural and political authorities.

Like the Greek myth of the war of Titans against Saturn or the Giants against Jupiter, mythological battles finally resulted in the establishment of cosmic order with

the Yellow Emperor as the supreme ruler and the ancestor of Chinese civilization, while his defeated enemies gradually moved from the north and central plains to the south and southwest, and became ancestors of marginalized minority tribes represented in *San hai jing* as half-human, half-animal barbarians. The geographical migration of the defeated thus also marked them as barbaric (*man*), foreign (*yi*), and even nonhuman creatures dwelling in mountainous regions faraway from the civilizing influence of the Central Kingdoms. The word barbaric (*man*) referring to the south was etymologically the origin of what Marco called, perhaps after Mongolian or Persian transliteration, Mangi, but of course by the thirteenth century, the south of China had long developed into a vast and prosperous region, having cities like Quinsai, which Marco declared to be “without doubt the finest and most splendid city in the world” (Polo, *Travels*, 179). In the Confucian classic *Zhou li* or *Rites of Zhou*, we read that men from barbarian tribes were appointed to minor offices in charge of royal horses and cattle, because they were thought to be able to communicate with wild creatures as though they were kindred families, or, as the commentator Zheng Zhong put it succinctly, they were able “to know the language of birds and animals” (Ruan Yuan, 1:884). The difference in language always marks the boundaries of ethnicity and cultural identity, and what identifies the Chinese is first and foremost the powerful social institution of the Chinese language, the language of

the ethnic majority known in modern time as the Han people.⁴ The minorities in the south or southwest, or the nomadic tribes in the north or northeast, would be marked as alien barbarians because they speak languages different from the Han Chinese, known as *Han yu*, the language of the Han majority, or *Hua yu*, the standard or Mandarin Chinese. Let me quote just one example from the works of Ouyang Xiu (1007-1072), a famous eleventh-century literati-official and poet. When he traveled to the south, where the ancient state of Chu was located, he wrote a poem to his friend, the poet Mei Shengyu, trying to describe what he perceived to be a country of the barbarians and their strange rituals and customs. Ouyang Xiu writes:

Without end blue mountains sprawl chaotic all around;

A few houses with fowls and dogs scattered far and near.

It's southern custom to worship diverse ghosts in different seasons,

The barbarian tongue mumbles unintelligible to a Chinese ear.

Ouyang Xiu, 1:75.

To the poet's ear, the language of the south was an unintelligible mumble, failing to communicate, and "diverse ghosts" populated the country of the barbarians at different times of the year in strange rituals. It is precisely the "diverse ghosts" in various parts of Chinese territory that the words and pictures of the *Shan hai jing* try to describe. By mapping different tribes and ethnic groups onto various regions of

mountains and seas, this ancient book thus also tells the story of how ethnic and cultural identities were constructed as imagined communities, how boundaries were drawn between the Chinese and the foreign, the civilized and the barbarian, and how culture played a significant role in such conceptual oppositions.

The differentiation of the Chinese and the barbarian is of course a complicated issue with a long and complicated history. In the *Analects*, in which we find many of Confucius' remarks recorded by his disciples dating back to the fifth-century B.C.E., there is a rather revealing statement: "Barbarian tribes with their rulers are inferior to Chinese states without them" (Confucius, 67). Here the belief in the superiority of the Chinese to the barbarians comes out quite clearly, and the sense of superiority was based on Confucius' understanding of the relative degrees of cultural development. "The Chinese view of other peoples, which evolved over many centuries of extensive contact with foreigners within China, on China's borders, and beyond," as Richard J. Smith observes, "was based on the essentially unchallenged idea of China's cultural superiority to all other states" (137). In a narrower formulation of the idea of Chineseness, racial and ethnic differences become decisive factors as we see articulated, for example, in this famous phrase in a Confucian classic, *Chunqiu zuozhuan* or *Zuo's Commentaries on the Spring and Autumn Annals*: "Whoever is not of our kin must have his heart different from ours" (Ruan Yuan, 2:1901). In the

original context, this refers to people in the southern state of Chu, the same region Ouyang Xiu wrote about in the poem quoted above; the speaker here regarded those southerners as barbaric and having totally different interests from his own state of Lu in the north, for the two states were of different lineage and had no kinship relations with one another. This phrase and its emphasis on kinship and ethnicity were often used later to differentiate the Chinese (*hua*) from the foreign (*yi*), particularly in periods when China was under the reign of non-Han rulers like the Mongols in Marco Polo's time, or the Manchu emperors in China's last imperial dynasty of Qing. When the Han Chinese rose against the Mongolian rulers and established the Ming dynasty in the fourteenth century, or more recently when the Han Chinese tried to overthrow the Manchu emperor in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth, the rhetoric of ethnic and racial distinction often became prominent and widely used to serve political purposes. In the twentieth century, particularly when China was weakened and under the threat of Western colonization, the consciousness of Chinese identity came to be sharply defined in nationalistic, that is, racial and ethnic, terms. This is true in modern times when the Chinese realize that China is a nation among many nations of the world, and as a result, the traditional idea of the Central Kingdoms as inclusive of "All under Heaven" quickly gave way to the ideas of China as a nation-state and Chineseness as a national identity.

In Chinese history and tradition, however, the distinction between the Chinese and the barbarian is not sharply drawn along racial or ethnic lines. In fact, some scholars argue that the idea of Chineseness has always been open, inclusive, and culturally defined. Qian Mu, for example, compares Chinese and Greco-Roman antiquities and, by sorting out the intermarriage and kinship relations among different ancient states in China, he comes to the conclusion that unlike the diversity of races, nations, and ethnicities in Europe, the concept of China has been more or less consistent throughout the centuries as a unifying and inclusive idea, constantly assimilating new elements of various tribes or ethnic groups and their cultural characteristics. Through intermarriage of princely families, many of the ancient states have kinship relations and therefore cannot be differentiated from one another by racial or ethnic criteria. “In ancient conceptualization,” says Qian Mu, “the barbarians in the four directions and the Chinese at the center had in fact a different sort of criterion, and that criterion was not ‘kinship’, but ‘culture’. It is an old saying that ‘when Chinese lords adopt barbarian rituals, one should treat them as barbarians; and when the barbarians bring themselves to behave like the Chinese, one should treat them as Chinese.’ This may serve as clear evidence that culture was the criterion for differentiating the Chinese from the barbarian.” He goes on to specify “culture” in terms of an agrarian mode of life. “China was the general name for all city-states

grounded in agricultural life,” says Qian Mu, “and all others were called barbarians who did not engage in agriculture and had no city-states” (41). Such a cultural understanding of Chinese identity can find support in numerous ancient Chinese books as textual evidence. The important Confucian thinker Mencius (372-289 B.C.E.), for example, mentioned a man by the name of Chen Liang from the kingdom of Chu—the same southern barbarian country that Ouyang Xiu wrote about in his poem,—and praised that man as a better follower of the Confucian way than many northern scholars. “Chen Liang was a native of Chu,” says Mencius. “Being delighted with the way of the Duke of Chou and Confucius, he came north to study in the Central Kingdoms. Even the scholars in the north could not surpass him in any way. He was what one would call an outstanding scholar” (*Mencius*, 103). Perhaps the strongest and most famous evidence of the cultural concept of Chinese identity beyond racial or ethnic denominations comes from another passage of the *Mencius*, in which we read:

Mencius said, “Shun was an Eastern barbarian; he was born in Chu Feng, moved to Fu Hsia, and died in Ming T’iao. King Wen was a Western barbarian; he was born in Ch’i Chou and died in Pi Ying. Their native places were over a thousand *li* apart, and there were a thousand years between them. Yet when they had their way in the Central Kingdoms, their actions matched like the two halves of a tally. The standards of the two sages, one earlier and one later, were identical.”

(128)

By identifying their native birthplaces, Mencius pointed out that Shun and King Wen were originally barbarians from the East and the West, outside the Central Kingdoms, which in Mencius' original is *Zhongguo*, what we now translate as China. It would be of some interest to speculate: Why did Mencius make such a remark? Why did he think it necessary to reveal the origins of Shun and King Wen as natives of barbarian countries? Now Shun and King Wen are all legendary sage kings at the beginning of Chinese civilization, whose presence in the Confucian classics and the commentary tradition is ubiquitous, particularly admired by Confucius himself as models of moral virtue and humane rule. That is to say, they are ancient cultural heroes at the very core of Chinese civilization, the very source of many basic ideas and values about Chinese culture and tradition. In effect, they largely define what is Chinese culture and tradition, and therefore it would be utterly unthinkable to have any sense of a Chinese identity that excludes Shun and King Wen. Apparently, even in the time of Mencius, they were already so closely identified with the culture and tradition of the Central Kingdoms that their origin as natives from a barbarian country had become an obscure fact that few people knew about or took notice of. By reminding us that Shun and King Wen were non-Chinese barbarians in origin, Mencius drove home the important idea that Chineseness has nothing to do with one's

ethnic origin, that Chinese identity is culturally defined rather than racially or ethnically determined, and that culture is not an inborn essence, but something one adopts, assimilates, and cultivates, something we may perhaps call a sort of *Bildung*. For this edificatory idea of cultural identity, Mencius points to Shun and King Wen as shining examples. According to Mencius, then, no matter who we are or where we originally come from, even if from some barbarian region outside the Central Kingdoms, we can be unequivocally Chinese if our actions measure up to the moral standards “like the two halves of a tally.”

This concept of Chineseness is distinctly cultural, and its boundaries are so porous that the Chinese and the foreign, the civilized and the barbarian, do not form a mutually exclusive opposition. After all, even Confucius once expressed his desire to go abroad and “to settle amongst the Nine Barbarian Tribes of the east” (Confucius, 98). The assimilation of Buddhism in China may serve as a successful example of cultural transformation and enrichment. When the Buddhist monks first came from India and the other regions to the west of China, the encounter was a fruitful process of exchange and adaptation. The Sanskrit language was definitely foreign to the Chinese, but it was not considered barbaric. An interesting poem by the Tang Emperor Xuanzong (reigned 712-756) on the difficulty of Sanskrit may express a sense of amused marveling rather than any kind of xenophobic rejection:

Like standing cranes and twirling snakes, this writing

Baffles ghosts from all spheres, or even a god.

No Confucian scholar finds it easy to decipher;

The green-eyed foreign monk smiles with a nod.

Wang Chongmin et al., 1:6.

Since the Tang, many Buddhist sutras have been translated into Chinese and many special Sanskrit terms have found their way into the Chinese language. Though it takes generations to integrate, the spread of Buddhism in China shows the receptiveness of the Chinese tradition in cultural terms. In a discussion of the concepts of nation-state and national consciousness, Yu Ying-shih also argues that “insofar as Chinese conceptualization is concerned, culture far exceeds nation. Whether we are speaking of ‘All under Heaven’ or ‘Central Kingdoms,’ these were all inclusive cultural notions in antiquity, far transcending purely political or ethnic boundaries” (18). It is indeed a widely accepted view among most China specialists that there was very little self-consciousness of China as a nation in pre-modern time, that is, before the end of the dynastic history in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. In traditional understanding of the situation, the emperor of China ruled over “All under Heaven,” and Chinese culture was the only culture worth having. It was taken for granted that barbarians outside the Central Kingdoms would benefit from

acculturation and could become Chinese when they adopted Chinese cultural values and habits, particularly the teachings of Confucianism. But at the same time, Chinese culture itself constantly assimilated elements of non-Chinese cultures and became an all-embracing umbrella of universal cultural values.

For the Chinese, the realization of China as a nation among other nations was not only relatively recent and modern, but also a painful experience thrust upon them in the encounter with Western powers, the defeat suffered in the Opium Wars, the signing of unequal treaties, in a strong and acute sense of crisis, and the desire for survival and rejuvenation as a nation. Therefore, to understand the concept of nation was for China to accept the geopolitical reality of the world, which was not the traditional notion of “All under Heaven” ruled or influenced by the Central Kingdoms, but an unfamiliar and unfriendly sphere of competitive political, economic, and military powers with conflicting interests and claims. Just as the late Qing diplomat Xue Fucheng realized in 1880, China could not afford to shun change and reformation any longer, because “the ‘All under Heaven’ in which the Chinese were insulated from the barbarian has turned into an ‘All under Heaven’ in which China and the other countries are all connected” (88). The encounter with the West marked the beginning of modern Chinese history, in which the tension between tradition and modernity, the transformation of an ancient culture and civilization for continuous

presence and prosperity in a very different global environment become vital and perennial questions. In much of the twentieth century, traditional culture, particularly Confucianism, went through a radical critique by Chinese intellectuals with the strong sense of crisis and the urgent need for national salvation. The prevailing idea in thinking about China and the world is no longer the claim to cultural universalism as articulated in Mencius' remark about Shun and King Wen, but the consciousness of national identities racially defined, the awareness of the difference between China and the outside world.

Given such a historical background, it is possible that the distinction between tradition and modernity, the past and the present, tends to be overemphasized with the result of reducing the complex historical process of social and cultural transformation to a simplistic thesis. With regard to Chineseness, this may lead to a clear-cut distinction between cultural understanding and ethnic denominations. It is therefore important, while acknowledging the cultural concept of Chinese identity, to pay proper attention to the ethnic dimension of the idea of Chineseness despite Mencius' exemplary sage kings as cultural heroes. Some scholars, notably Torbjörn Lodén, have called into question the argument that traditional Chinese identity was all cultural and only in modern time the Chinese have adopted the concept of nationality and the consciousness of race, nation, and ethnicity from the outside. Lodén calls this

“culturalism-to-nationalism thesis” and considers it misleading insofar as the thesis “leaves out the ethnic dimension under culturalism” (275). He points out the paradox and tension between “the view of cultural commonality as more important than ethnic affinity” on the one hand, and on the other the Confucian emphasis on “the family as a microcosm of the world” (273). Not only does the focus on family lead to close attention to lineage and genealogy, thus to kinship relations and ethnocentric concerns, but the family as a model for social structure also leads to unequal relationships: the father and the son, the king and the subjects, the superior and the subordinates, etc.

“The relationship between the Han Chinese and the so-called national minorities,” he argues, “is to this day perceived as a relationship between different cultures; too often it is seen as a relationship between a superior Han culture and inferior minority cultures” (285). This is certainly true of the understanding of cultural development in a value-laden hierarchy, as we see in Confucius’ remark that even without a ruler, China was superior to the barbarian country under the rule of a king. Ultimately, however, Lodén does not deny the importance of culture in understanding Chineseness, but he calls our attention to the ominous implications of the assumption of cultural superiority, and particularly the danger of narrow-minded nationalism in modern China. He is certainly right to remind us that “Statements regarding identity were ideological and designed to serve social and political interests” (276), but he also

points to a more positive side of contemporary Chinese culture—“the pursuit of authenticity, truth, freedom and human dignity,”—and believes that such a positive side “gives us reason to hope for increasing and mutually enriching contacts between Chinese and other cultures in a global context” (296).

It is indeed with this more optimistic note that I would like to bring my discussion to a close. What I see as positive in the cultural concept of identity beyond race, nation and ethnicity are its openness and flexibility, its ability to make differentiations on the basis of cultivation or *Bildung*, which is something one can acquire and accumulate, rather than something inborn and fixed, about which one can do nothing to change or remedy. To be sure, the concept of identity has always contained an element of ethnicity; that is true even with the traditional differentiation between the Chinese and the barbarian, and certainly true of the distinction between the Han majority and ethnic minorities in China. However, compared with collective identities completely defined in racial and ethnic terms or on the basis of exclusive religious claims, the cultural concept of identity does tend to be more tolerant of differences and to admit of elements that are new, alien, and outside the sphere of the very culture that accepts them. Mencius’ example of Shun and King Wen as successful transformation from the barbarian to the civilized remains intriguing and inspiring; the relatively peaceful co-existence of different religious beliefs in Chinese

history, the almost effortless switch for the Chinese literati from Confucian to Taoist and Buddhist ideas and ideologies, and the traditional emphasis on learning, self-discipline and moral behavior can all offer a hopeful alternative to the many violent clashes in our world today that are racial, ethnic, and religious in nature. Identity defined in cultural terms is much less likely to be confrontational than ethnic and religious denominations. Although in China, a sense of cultural superiority was indeed often assumed in the past, and perhaps still is in some cases, the transformation of Chinese culture in modern time offers clear evidence that by and large the Chinese are open to ideas and values from the outside and are working hard to adopt them for the continuous growth of their cultural heritage and tradition. This may have a particular relevance today to the interrelations of the world's different nations, especially to the encounter of the East and the West in the form of dialogue and exchange rather than antagonism and confrontation.

Let us finally return to the return of the Polos to Venice in 1295. Despite the many difficulties and dangerous adventures, Marco Polo believed that "it was God's will that we should return, so that men might know the things that are in the world" (Polo, *Travels*, 295). The motivation for telling the story for Marco was the desire to know and to understand, the curiosity to learn about the world and its different peoples and great wonders. Unlike the colonial explorers a few centuries later, the

desire was not to conquer or to take possession of the land and treasures in the same regions that Marco had set his foot on. In our time today, colonialism has become a thing of the past and has been recognized as a terrible mistake that it was; we can now revisit Marco Polo's remarkable story and appreciate that desire to know and to understand. For our time, as for Marco's, the encounter of the East and the West should first be cultural and culturally enriching, and in that cultural and intercultural experience, we shall all have a better sense of who we are and how we can contribute to the mutual understanding of the East and the West.

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ENDNOTES

¹ For the most representative skeptic view, see Frances Wood, *Did Marco Polo Go to China?* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1995). Wood's argument and similar arguments made by several other scholars have met with strong refutations. Yang Zhijiu, a senior Chinese scholar, has been a staunch defender of Marco's credibility. Based on textual analysis of Chinese historical records, he has made an eloquent rebuttal of Marco's detractors and argued for the fundamental reliability of Marco's account. See Yang Zhijiu, *Make Boluo zai Zhongguo [Marco Polo in China]* (Tianjin: Nankai daxue chubanshe, 1999).

² John Larner mentioned F. W. Cleaves' article in a note (201, n. 34), but the reference is wrongly given as *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 15 (1952), 419-506. The correct reference should be to volume 36 (1976): 181-203. With regard to Marco's story about the Great Khan dispatching a Mongol princess as bride to Arghun of Persia, Larner remarks on the basis of Cleaves' article that "Both Chinese and Persian sources mention the marriage and embassy, though without referring either to the Polos or the supposed disasters upon their voyage" (43). This is of course true, but it seems to me that the significance of Yang Zhijiu's work deserves better recognition than it has so far received from scholars outside China.

³ In *Tempest*, Shakespeare has a similar reference to "such men/Whose heads stood in their breasts" (*The Tempest*, III.iii.46). Critics have identified more than one source for the fables in *Othello*. One is *Mandeville's Travels*: "And in another Yle, toward the Southe duellen folk of foule Stature and of cursed kynde, than have no Hedes; and here Eyen ben in here Scholdres" [Halliwell (ed.), 203]. Another source is Sir Walter Raleigh's *Discoverie of Gviana* (1596): "Next vnto *Arui* there are two riuers *Atoica* and *Caora*, and on that braunch which is called *Caora* are a nation of people, whose

heades appeare not aboue their shoulders, which though it may be thought a meere fable, yet for mine owne parte I am resolued it is true, because euery child in the prouinces of *Arromaia* and *Canuri* affirme the same: they are called *Ewaipanoma*: they are reported to haue their eyes in their shoulders, and their mouths in the middle of their breasts, and that a long train of haire groweth backward between their shoulders” [Hakluyt Soc. (ed.), 85]. See *Othello: A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare*, ed. Horace Howard Furness (New York: Dover Publications, 1963), 56.

⁴ For a discussion of the construct of Han race, see Kai-wing Chow, “Imagining Boundaries of Blood: Zhang Binglin and the Invention of the Han ‘Race’ in Modern China,” in Frank Dikötter (ed.), *The Construction of Racial Identities in China and Japan: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*. London: Hurst, 1997, 34-52.