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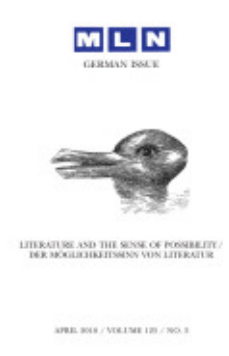
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Small Talk: A New Reading of Marco Polo's *Il milione*



Gang Zhou¹

In his eloquently written book *Marco Polo and the Discovery of the World*, John Larner examines various interpretations of Marco Polo's book, *Le Divisament Dou Monde* ("The Description of the World," also called *Il milione* by Marco Polo's contemporaries), in terms of different genres in the Western medieval context: travel writing, the merchant's handbook, books of marvels, etc. Dissatisfied with these interpretations of the book's genre, Larner states, "to write the Book, that is to say, a new genre of western literature had to be created" (84). Taking Larner's discussion as the point of departure, I argue in this essay that, while Marco Polo's book pushes the limits of all these medieval Western genres, it demands an alternative perspective that reads "the Book" in light of the Chinese narrative tradition. A close reading of the work shall demonstrate that it bears strong similarities to *small talk*, a genre of minor quasi-historic work in the Chinese narrative tradition.

The term "small talk" (*xiaoshuo*) first appeared in the *Zhuangzi*, an ancient Chinese philosophical work, to signify insignificant topics and ideas.² As a literary genre, *small talk* was first defined by Ban Gu (32–92 CE) in the *Hanshu yiwenzhi* ("treatise on the arts and writing")

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²"If you parade your little theories (small talk), you will be far from the Great Tao." See *Chuang Tzu* 296.

in the *Han Dynasty History*) as “the gossip of the street.” The prototype of a *small talk* writer was a minor officer, who as part of his official role collected the gossip on the street, and in retelling it gained prestige as a storyteller. The figure of Marco Polo as represented in his book was also someone who had gained his training and reputation as a storyteller during his service in Kublai’s court. It is perhaps not that surprising that we find the narrative pattern reflected in *Il milione* conforms nicely to the expectations of the Chinese genre of *small talk*.

Il milione in the West

The enigma of Marco Polo’s life, his journey to Asia as well as the writing of his book, has continued to provoke debate even in recent years.³ Most Marco Polo scholars, however, would agree that Marco Polo was born in Venice around 1254. When he left his homeland, together with his father Nicolo Polo and uncle Maffeo Polo to travel to the Far East, he was almost seventeen. They spent three years traveling to China, where Marco Polo served in Kublai’s court for seventeen years, while traveling extensively in different parts of China and beyond. When the Polos finally returned to Venice in 1295, Marco Polo was forty-one, having spent most of his life between cultures and among foreigners. Around 1298, Marco Polo was taken prisoner, most probably during a protracted war between Venice and Genoa, and happened to share a cell with Rustichello of Pisa, a professional Arthurian romancer. Together, these two produced Marco Polo’s book, *The Description of the World*.

The earliest version of Marco Polo’s book was written in “an uncouth French much mingled with Italian which sometimes puzzled even contemporary interpreters. . . .” (Moule and Pelliot 40). Within the first twenty years of its existence, the book had already been translated into Tuscan, Venetian, German, and Latin, later into Irish, and finally back into Venetian. There were few other medieval vernacular works to be found in so many languages at so early a stage of their existence.

³For a summary of the debates, arguments and counterarguments see Larner 58–63. Most recently, Frances Wood in her provocative book *Did Marco Polo Go to China* questions again whether Marco Polo ever traveled to China. Why didn’t he mention the Great Wall? Why does he say nothing about printing, Chinese script, foot binding, etc.? On the other hand, as Larner convincingly shows in his discussion, it would be hard to imagine how Marco Polo was able to gather the very large amount of verifiably accurate information about the Mongol Empire and China without having traveled there.

The phenomenon attests to the popularity of Marco Polo's book from the moment of its birth. It also made for a book with multiple forms, because "from the first each copier omitted, abridged, paraphrased, made mistakes and mistranslations, as he saw fit, influenced naturally by his own point of view and immediate interests or purpose; and the result with which we have to deal is nearly 120 manuscripts of which, it is little exaggeration to say, no two are exactly alike" (Moule and Pelliot 40). In this sense, the book can be seen as the "collaborative effort of a whole culture" (92), as Mary Campbell observes in her analysis. While the collaboration between Marco Polo and Rustichello rendered the account into a form more familiar to the eyes of its Western readers, all those copiers, translators, commentators and readers seemed likewise to have made their own contributions. One begins to wonder if there is something in the nature of Marco Polo's book that both invites and encourages such on-going emendation.

The conventional way to approach Marco Polo's book was to read it as a travel narrative, a fact that often led to the replacement of its original title, "The Description of the World," with the preferred "Travels of Marco Polo." Basking in the air of the "Age of Discoveries," Europe in the second half of the sixteenth century witnessed a great vogue of collection of travel reports. Among them, the most influential was the *Collection of Voyages and Travels* compiled by Ramusio, Marco Polo's countryman. Including the Venetian's book in his collection, Ramusio enthusiastically praised Marco Polo's achievements as a great traveler: "He was the first traveler to trace a route across the whole longitude of Asia, naming and describing kingdom after kingdom. . . . The first traveler to reveal China in all its wealth and vastness, its mighty rivers, its huge cities . . . to tell us of the nations on its borders with all their eccentricities of manners and worship; of Tibet . . . of Burma . . . of Japan . . ." (Yule 106). Ramusio placed Marco Polo on the same level as famous contemporary Western explorers such as Columbus. Marco Polo's account, at first received as mere "romance and fable" upon its publication at the end of the thirteenth century, was given a new life by Ramusio as a travel book.

Although labeled as a travel narrative, Marco Polo's work pays little attention to actual travels and voyages. Many scholars have since pointed out that the book is not really a story of travels and adventures. Friar John of Plano Carpini and Friar William of Rubruck, both contemporaries of Polo sent by the Church eastward with a mission to analyze the military power of the Mongols as well as to convert them to Christianity, detail the difficulties and dangers they suffered

during their journey to the Mongols.⁴ Marco Polo revealed nothing about the physical or emotional stresses he must have undergone as the “first” adventurer to traverse such a vast geographical space. As a matter of fact, only the prologue of the book gives us any real information about Marco Polo’s itinerary. A true “traveler” returns with stories of hardships and of remote, exotic places to prove that he has traveled. Marco Polo, in contrast, verifies his storytelling by proclaiming himself a traveler. The prologue was clearly written to validate his descriptions of the diverse people and regions of the world that appear in the main text.

Compared to Friar John and Friar William, who traveled to the Far East, spent six months to a year there, and then returned with their reports, Marco Polo was a true “sojourner” in Georg Simmel’s sense, having lived between cultures for the better part of his life before returning to Venice at the age of forty-one. Although not included in the book, legend states that, when the Polos returned home, they were “changed in aspect and had got a certain indescribable touch of the Tartar both in air and accent, having all but forgotten their Venetian tongue” (Yule 4). As a work produced about two or three years after this homecoming, one can’t help but wonder whether the true focus of Marco Polo’s book was the journey to the East, or the return to the West, or both. One critic suggests that we read Marco Polo’s book as a literary work of exile, one of the great themes in Italian literature of this period.⁵ As for Marco Polo, he was always between homes—between Venice and China, between the West and East. But to leave China behind and to be reintegrated into their western world, the Polos threw a now famous banquet in order to show their Venetian relatives the precious stones and golden tablets they brought back from the great Khan of the Tartars. Marco Polo’s book is, in this sense, the most precious gem offered to his western contemporaries.

If, continuing the metaphor, we say that Marco’s western contemporaries actively took part in the banquet by rendering his account—the

⁴See Carpini and Rubruquis, who gave vivid accounts of their journeys: “Upon Easter day, having said our prayers, and taken a slender breakfast, in the company of two Tartars, which were assign unto us by Corensa we departed with many tears, not knowing whether we went to death or to life” (Hakluyt 132); “But every man must be contented with his lot as it fell. Whereupon we were exceedingly troubled: for oftentimes our horses were tired before we could come at any people. And then we were constrained to beat and whip on our horses, and to lay our garments upon other empty horses: yea and sometimes two of us to ride upon one horse” (Hakluyt 224).

⁵One can easily think of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. See also Lerner 86.

“precious stone” from the East—more recognizable or understandable in the Western context, the “stone” nevertheless maintained its thoroughly Eastern origins. Scholars have shown, for instance, that Rustichello’s immediate impact on the book was minimal.⁶ Marco Polo’s unique voice, clearly present throughout the work, points to the influence of that author’s time spent in the East and demands a reading beyond the Western context.

An Alternative Perspective

In his *Marco Polo’s Asia*, Leonardo Olschki tries to group *Il milione* with some medieval Asian literary works. He comments: “Marco Polo underwent his historical initiation in Asia rather than in the West, and more especially in the Mongol and Persian environments that surrounded him for some twenty-five years . . .” (303). The thirteenth century saw an extraordinary flowering of historical interest in the Mongol and Persian world, giving rise to a literary corpus rich in historiographic as well as poetic masterpieces, as we can see from the following example:

There came into the world a blue-gray wolf
 whose destiny was Heaven’s will.
 His wife was a fallow deer.
 They traveled together across the inland sea
 and when they were camped near the source of the Onan River
 in sight of Mount Burkhan Khaldun
 their first son was born, named Batachikhan.

(Kahn 3)⁷

With a mixture of myths, legends and apparent facts, thus opens *The Secret History of the Mongols*, compiled in the Mongolian language in 1240. The book describes the rise of the Mongol people, the early life of Chingis Khan and his breathtaking world conquests. Inspired by the same impulse, contemporary Islamic historians also contributed a

⁶Most scholars agree that Rustichello is responsible for the rhetoric of romance present in the opening of the prologue, in Marco Polo’s accounts of the Tartar wars at the end of the work, as well as in those chapters concerning areas that Marco Polo did not visit. Nevertheless, the structure of the book, the conception of storytelling, and the narrative voice belong solely to Polo.

⁷I choose to use the translation from Paul Kahn’s adaptation of *The Secret History of the Mongols*. Cleaves’ translation is more faithful to the original, although sometimes at the expense of common English syntax. Although the original text was not composed as a poem, Kahn’s adaptation does help convey the spirit of the original work.

series of erudite, official and courtly historiographic works. Although Marco Polo was most likely not directly acquainted with such literary activities, his participation in this overall tradition can be sensed both by the extolling of the power of Kublai and the Mongol Empire and by the important role history plays in his book.

However, while *The Secret History* was meant to serve as a private yet official account of the origins of the Mongol ruling clan, targeting a limited audience of Mongol nobility, Marco Polo's book was certainly intended to please the public, targeting the broadest range of his fellow Western contemporaries. The interest of Marco Polo's account of the Mongols seems to lie in the gossips, legends and opinions held in certain circles, which would never have been recorded in official or erudite historiography.⁸ In one of the most popular chapters of *Il milione*, Marco Polo delves deeply into the secrets of Kublai's bedchamber. After informing the reader that the great Khan has four wives each with the title of empress and a befitting retinue of attendants, Marco Polo reveals his exclusive story: that of Kublai and his many concubines. Evidently, while Marco Polo might have had the same desire to record history as did his Mongolian or Persian contemporaries, he differs in the way he conceives of history, what he chooses to present, and the way in which he presents it. In these respects, *Il milione* bears more affinities with those rather gossipy, minor, quasi-historic works called *baiguan-yeshi* or *small talk* in the Chinese narrative tradition.

When defining *small talk* (*xiaoshuo*) in *Hanshu yiwenzhi*, Ban Gu traced its origin back to the ancient office of the *baiguan*, a minor officer whose responsibility was to channel the gossip of the back alleys and streets into the court: “小说家者流，盖出于稗官。街谈巷语，道听途说者之所造也。” (“The *small talk* writers emerged from amongst those petty officials, the *baiguan*. The writings consist of gossip and street talk, created or compiled by those who engaged in idle talk in the streets and those who heard rumors on the way.”)⁹ Taking the Confucian approach, Ban Gu further states his ambivalent and yet clearly condescending view toward *small talk*:

The *xiaoshuo* writers succeeded those officers of the Zhou dynasty whose task it was to collect the gossip of the streets. Confucius said: “Even byways [*xiaodao*] are worth exploring. But if we go too far we may be bogged down.” Gentlemen do not undertake this themselves, but neither do they dismiss

⁸ Olschki reaches a similar conclusion in his *Marco Polo's Asia*. See Olschki 335.

⁹ For an analysis of the different translations of this key text, see Gu 26. Here the translation is mine.

such talk altogether. They have the sayings of common people collected and kept, as some of them may prove useful. This was at least the opinion of country rustics. (Lu Hsun 3)

Ban Gu mentions in his book fifteen works of *small talk* along with 1,380 individual books demonstrating that, by the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) there must have already existed a large number of *small talk* writings. Virtually all of these texts have been lost, with only a few fragments surviving.

Liu Zhiji (661–721 CE), the Tang historian who wrote China's first systematic theory of historiography, classified all *small talk* writing into ten categories: 偏记 (“special records”), 小录 (“notes on insignificant matters”), 逸事 (“anecdotes”), 琐言 (“trivial talks”), 郡书 (“biographies of local elites”), 家史 (“family histories”), 别传 (“unofficial biographies”), 杂记 (“miscellaneous records”), 地理 (“geographical records”), and 都邑簿 (“records of capitals and cities”). Looking at these categories, one can't help but note that, when Marco Polo set out to write his book, all the genres he required already existed in the *small talk* tradition.

As the reader of Marco Polo knows, his work is full of anecdotes and miscellaneous records. For our purposes, the book might be divided into six parts: Part I, the prologue (chapters 1–19), which describes the itinerary of the Polos as well as Marco's favored position in Kublai's court. Part II (chapters 20–64) covers the vast space between the Middle East and Cathay, beginning with Little Armenia and ending with the great city of Karakorum in the heartland of the Mongols. The narratives resemble geographical records mixed with legends and anecdotes. Part III (chapters 65–104) recounts the history of the Mongols, focusing on the rule of the great Khan called Kublai who governed Cathay at that time. Marco Polo writes with particular knowledge and enthusiasm in this section, and narratives here read like unofficial histories and biographies. Part IV (chapters 105–57) describes the other regions and provinces that Marco Polo visited on government missions for the Khan. These chapters are comprised of geographic records, records of capitals and cities, mixed with anecdotes and legends. The three cities upon which Marco Polo elaborates are Yangzhou, Hangzhou and Fuzhou. Part V (chapters 158–98) is the book of India, in which Marco Polo claims that he visited the land several times in the service of the great Khan, and then revisited it once more on his return trip to Venice. Again, these narratives are more like geographic records mixed with legends and anecdotes. In part VI (chapters 199–232), Marco Polo returns to topics of recent and

contemporary history and the wars of the Mongols. This part serves as a “special records”; that is, incomplete dynastic histories limited to the contemporary period rather than the totality of history.

Of course, Marco Polo had no knowledge of the Chinese language, and he seemed to show very little interest in the Chinese people or in Chinese culture. But an explanation of the nature of Kublai’s court may help us to better understand Marco Polo’s environment in Yuan China. As studies have shown, it was under Kublai that the decisive steps were taken to transform the Mongol ruler into a Chinese emperor (see Frank 25). Kublai adopted a Chinese dynastic name and thereby included the Mongol rulers in the succession of Chinese dynasties. Kublai also cultivated his image as a Confucian emperor (see Rossabi 135). Confucian ideas such as benevolence (*jen*) and righteousness (*i*) were highly valued by his reign. In addition, Kublai established the Chinese state-cult as well as Confucian rites.¹⁰ It was during his reign that Chinese-type court ceremonies were introduced. Kublai might not have been inherently drawn to Chinese culture, but in order to be a “Chinese” emperor he had to communicate with this culture. Thus it was to a court that had undergone a certain amount of acculturation and sinicization that Marco Polo provided his services for many long years. Without feeling a conscious attraction to Chinese culture, Marco was nevertheless immersed in a world that clearly valued and promulgated its structures, precepts and traditions.

Although we are not clear as to the specific title Marco Polo held in the court, his description of his role reminds us of that of a *baiguan*, whose duty was to channel the gossip of the back alleys and street to the emperor. Following patterns similar to those of earlier Chinese dynasties, Kublai built a highly centralized and bureaucratic government. To ensure his Chinese subjects and government officials remained loyal and faithful, he employed non-Chinese individuals such as Marco Polo and sent them off to inspect remote provinces and to collect taxes. Upon their return, they were required to give reports. Marco Polo thus proved himself to be a skilled minor officer-historian whose storytelling was always oriented toward fulfilling the emperor’s curiosity:

¹⁰ Court ceremonial was unknown to the early Mongols, and under the earliest reigns “they had not leisure to build a palace. Whenever there was an occasion for congratulations, the crowd of officials assembled before the tent and there was no distinction between high and low, noble and common” (Chen 58).

So Marc, who knew all this well, when he went on that mission would fix his attention, noting and writing all the novelties and all the strange things which he had heard and seen, so that he might be able to recount them, on his return, to the great khan to satisfy his wish. He also brought with him very many and strange wonders, and this pleased the lord greatly. (Moule and Pelliot 86)¹¹

Ramusio once marveled at how Marco Polo was able to give such an orderly description of all that he had seen without any regular training in the art of composition. I would argue that Marco Polo learned how to observe and make notes in the service of the Khan, and thus became an adept storyteller according to the tradition of the Mongol court.

In the Chinese cultural context, terms such as “narrative,” “history” and “fiction” were conceptualized differently than they were in the West.¹² “History” was a Chinese term that embraced the entire range of narrative writings, comprehensive enough to include diverse types of historical and quasi-historical writings, including *small talk*. The poetics of narrative was also the poetics of historiography in the Chinese context. Historiography taught one the goals, norms and methods of composing narrative, what Ramusio referred to as “the art of composition” (see Lu 3). As studies have shown, Chinese official historiography had been restored to a place of honor in Kublai’s court for at least fifteen years during the time that Marco Polo was in residence (see Chen 58). In other words, it is not too far-fetched to say that Marco Polo was exposed to the Chinese historiography for the better part of two decades while he served at Kublai’s court. His experiences and professional training as a minor officer and reporter very likely helped shape his narrative strategies.

¹¹All but one quotation from Marco Polo’s *Milione* here are quoted from the critical edition of A. C. Moule and Paul Pelliot. I cite one quotation from Yule’s text to avoid redundancy. The Moule and Pelliot translation is based on the F text (the early fourteenth-century Franco-Italian manuscript which most scholars consider closest to the original), but also includes all additions and variations from other manuscripts. It is the most complete edition of Polo’s work, but sometimes it is too wordy to cite.

¹²The approximate equivalent of *small talk* in the West would be “fiction.” In his newly published work *Chinese Theories of Fiction: A Non-Western Narrative System*, Gu Mingdong undertakes a systematic inquiry into the term “fiction” from a Chinese perspective. Other scholars who examine the nature of Chinese narrative in the English language are Andrew Plaks, Patrick Hanan, David Rolston, Victor Mair, Sheldon Lu, and Liangyan Ge.

What Are “Genres”?

In her introduction to “Remapping Genre,” a special issue of *PMLA* published in October 2007, Wai Chee Dimock rightfully asks, “What exactly are genres? Are they a classifying system matching the phenomenal world of objects, a sorting principle that separates oranges from apples? Or are they less than that, a taxonomy that never fully taxonomizes, labels that never quite keep things straight? . . .” (1377). Responding to the challenges posed by theorists such as Benedetto Croce and Jacques Derrida, Dimock suggests a new way to approach the concept of genre. She writes, “Genres have solid names, ontologized names. What these names designate, though, is not taxonomic classes of equal solidity but fields at once emerging and ephemeral, defined over and over again by new entries that are still being produced. They function as a ‘horizon of expectations’ to some extent (Jauss 79), but that horizon becomes real only when there happen to be texts that exemplify it” (1379).

It would be interesting to examine the genre of Marco Polo’s book in light of this new paradigm. When John Larner rejects all existing Western medieval genres and claims that, to write Marco Polo’s book, a new genre of Western literature had to be created, he is correct in the sense that Marco Polo’s book cannot be forced into any existing *Western* genres. The book seems so unique that it demands a category of its own. But if we cease to perceive genre as an enclosed and solid territory with its own border policing laws, and instead imagine it as an incomplete and emerging field as Dimock suggests, we might end up with a very different evaluation. There are certainly elements in Marco Polo’s book that stretch and pull it at once towards and away from the emerging genre of travel literature in the Western medieval context, unsettling the limits and boundaries of a genre that was itself altered by this unusual text. The same arguments could be made for other medieval genres such as the merchant’s handbook, books of marvels etc. If, however, we choose to view Marco Polo’s book not as a work waiting to be enlisted or excluded by these genres, but instead as an instance that both actualizes and destabilizes various genres to various degrees, we can then find all pertinent genres, including *small talk*, in our reading of Marco Polo’s book. It is better, then, to view genre as a possibility that provides specific gateways and paths by which to approach the book.

As Dimock further argues in her essay, “Far from being clear-cut slices of the literary pie, genres have only an on-demand spatial occu-

pancy. They can be brought forth or sent back as the user chooses, switched on or off, scaled up or down" (1379). A unique cross-cultural literary instance such as Marco Polo's work demands multiple gateways of understanding. The Chinese genre of *small talk* may well be the unexplored path that can illuminate aspects of the book thus far obscured by other Western readings.

Il milione: A Small Talk

In his *From Historicity to Fictionality: the Chinese Poetics of Narrative*, Sheldon Lu convincingly points out that *small talk* is "a discourse of limits": "It constitutes the furthest extent to which official historical discourse wished to go and the point from which it must step back" (43).¹³ On the one hand, the storytelling of *small talk* remained history-centered and governed by historiography. The materials were treated with a decidedly historical attitude and expressed in the form of historiographic discourse. The rhetoric and narrative devices of the historian were imitated to evoke an aura of historicity and factuality. On the other hand, *small talk* concerned itself with gossip, fabrications and subject matter unsuitable to high historiography. Catering to a kind of perpetually suppressed, *small talk* disengaged itself from the official historical discourses and eventually caused a "horizontal change" in genre expectations.

A "history grounded" reading of *Il milione* reveals the nature of the genre expectation of Marco Polo's text. Its narrative stance demands belief from the very outset. The narrator of *Il milione* identifies himself as the voice of absolute truth. "*It is true* that there are two Armenies, one is called Armenie the great and one Armenie the little" (Moule and Pelliot 93; emphasis mine); thus opens the main text of Marco Polo's book. By verifying a known commonplace, the narrator not only legitimizes himself and establishes his authority as the guarantor of truth.¹⁴

¹³It is interesting to note that the approximate Western counterpart of *small talk* at Marco Polo's time was romance. Similar to *small talk* in the Chinese context, romance was a marginal genre in the spectrum of Western narrative. Both romance and *small talk* were, as Lu states, "discourses of limits." Marco Polo instinctually realized that romance is the approximate Western counterpart of *small talk*. He therefore felt free to incorporate elements from this genre into his storytelling.

¹⁴Mary Campbell also comments on the extraordinary boldness of Marco Polo's narrative voice: "A voice that can substantively predicate the mere existence of something as vast as a country is a voice with primal responsibilities and which sees itself as such

The narrator's claim, derived from his self-defined function as a source of truth, can be further recognized by the phrase frequently used by Marco Polo: "But yet *I tell you* that it is not a healthy province but mightily unhealthy, nor has it good air" (Moule and Pelliot 94); "And *I tell you* that very good Turcomain horses are bred there and very good mules large and of great value" (95); "And again *I tell you* that . . ." (99; emphases mine). Not every such claim to truth can be included here, but these are enough to capture the general tone of the narrator. The phrase "I tell you" is not merely a formula indicative of the oral presentation of the narrative; it also reflects the self-assumed authority of Marco Polo's narrator.

Accompanied by this clear sense of truth telling, Marco Polo's narrator also assumes the stance of a ubiquitous eyewitness reporter.¹⁵ Since everything related to the reader is supposed to be truthful, Marco Polo's narrator draws no line between that which has been seen and that which has been heard. He recounts both of them with same objective, trustworthy and authoritative voice. Even when he describes an extraordinary event, his tone remains unchanged. In the episode of the moved mountain, for instance, the narrator recounts:

And when all these people, Christians and Saracens, were in that plain, then the shoemaker before the Cross holds his hands towards the sky and prays his Savior Master Jesus Christ that that mountain may be obliged to move and that so many Christians as are there should not die an evil death. And when he has made his prayer, it delays not a moment before the mountain begins to crumble and to move. (Moule and Pelliot 113)

The extraordinary event is recorded in simple, plain, and unadorned language with no intrusion of the narrator, thus evoking an aura of realism and authenticity. Herein lies the link between Marco Polo's writing and Chinese historiography. Chinese historical discourses strive for a language of transparency in an attempt to create a sense of

("In the beginning God created heaven, and earth . . .'). . . What textbook of adults begins by announcing the existence of anything the size of Armenia? And in the heyday of scholasticism, what private secular man would undertake to so essentially declare the truth of things?" (94). Campbell goes on to state that Marco Polo exists in a mythic-heroic sphere as the first man to see the whole world. In response, I would suggest that a *small talk* writer would not have hesitated to declare the truth of things.

¹⁵The advantage of adopting such a point of view in the Chinese narrative context is explained by John Wang in his essay on *Zuo-zhuan*, a classical Chinese historic work: "it enables the author to present vivid and dramatic accounts of events without forfeiting the reader's sense of their credibility. The narrator has full authority over his version of the story because he is telling what he has 'witnessed' in person" (12).

authenticity and factuality. In his *Shi Tong* (“Generalities on History”), Liu Zhiji, the Tang historian, highlights “*shi-lu*” (direct recording of events as they really are) as the central principle of Chinese historiography. Like many other *small talk* writers, who imitate the historic mode of rhetoric, Marco Polo also strives to use a “straightforward style” (“*zhibi*”) to give a faithful and objective account.

Another feature of *Il milione* that can be found in the Chinese narrative tradition is its episodic structure.¹⁶ The way in which Marco Polo structures his story has long been regarded as evidence of his uneducated status and his unsophisticated narrative strategy. A Western reader must have first been overwhelmed by the vast amount of information provided by Marco Polo, and then disappointed by the lack of unity of the data. The whole book is episodically constructed with no obvious link between most of the sections. In each unit, Marco Polo gives the name of the region or town, its size, its customs, its religious practices, its subordination to Mongol rule and, on occasion, legends about the place. A typical segue from one region to the next would be: “And now let us leave Tauris and begin with Persie” (Moule and Pelliot 112). When digression occurs, the narrator starts with a statement such as “And we wish to tell you also a great wonder that happened between Baudac and Mosul” (105), and ends with “Now then we will come back to our matter” (109). Using these formulaic statements, Marco Polo succeeds in tying somewhat irrelevant episodes to the main body of the text.

While the lack of structure in Marco Polo’s book might be disappointing for his modern reader, it is more understandable in light of the Chinese narrative tradition.¹⁷ A Chinese *small talk* corresponds

¹⁶It might be helpful at this point to mention Stephen Greenblatt’s *Marvelous Possessions*. In his work, Greenblatt considers anecdotes to be the best representational practice at the borders of cross-cultural encounter, where all culturally defined significations are called into question by an unresolved and irresolvable hybridity. While Greenblatt’s discussion touches upon a universal phenomenon, I believe that Marco Polo’s specific representational practice concerning his encounter with the East and his (re)encounter with the West will be better understood through the lens of his experience as a seventeen-year sojourner in China as well as his training as a minor historian at Kublai’s court.

¹⁷Some quotations from *The Classic of Mountain and Seas* (Shan Hai Jing), a typical ancient *small talk* text, will help the reader to understand the episodic nature of the genre: “西山经华山之首，曰钱来之山。．．．西四十五里，曰松果之山。．．．又西六十里，曰太华之山。．．．又西八十里。．．．” (“In the classic of the Western Mountains, the first peak of the Hua Mountain is called Mount Qianlai. . . . Forty-five miles to the west is a mountain called Mount Songguo. . . . Sixty miles further to the west is a mountain called Mount Taihua. . . . Eighty miles further west . . .”) Yuan 19.

to a certain set of expectation and works toward a particular effect. “The Chinese historian does not work up his historical sources, he does not combine the facts he has found in successive chains, he does not fictionalize them, but arranges them into certain categories. He does not strive at creating some sort of artistic picture of the past, but in presenting the material that has been preserved in the most accessible form to the reader” (Prusek 24). Just like the prototypical Chinese historian, what Marco Polo attempts to achieve is to make his material seem unprocessed, “unworked up,” and thus to possess a highly authentic, objective quality.

How an author sets up his story and how he structures his narration are ultimately related to the meaning he intends convey through his text. Hayden White once asked, “Has any historical narrative ever been written that was not informed not only by moral awareness but specifically by the moral authority of the narrator?” (21). Despite its claim to truth, factuality and objectivity, Chinese historical discourse has always been a highly political activity. It naturalizes and perpetuates the dominant ideology and the existing order; “it legitimizes the ‘legitimate’ rulers and subjects, sanctions and genealogical succession of reigns, and opposes the transgression of established social positions” (Lu 82). To a large degree, Chinese historiography is an extension of Confucius’s dictum: “Let the ruler be a ruler, the subject a subject, the father a father, the son a son.”

It is no coincidence that Marco Polo sets the tone for this ruler-subject pattern from the very beginning of his text. When he describes Little Armenia, he announces that it “is subject to the Tartar” (Moule and Pelliot 94). Later in the text, he gives many descriptions of countries in relation to Mongol power. Indeed, if we must find a central thread of Marco Polo’s narration, it is by all means the power of the Mongol Empire. All information is organized around what Marco Polo considers most essential: Kublai’s court. As for himself, Marco Polo never felt embarrassed to establish himself as the subject of Kublai. The existing social order in which names and ranks are properly regulated is strongly sustained by Marco Polo. He even touches upon what is at the core of Chinese tradition—the rectification of names:

Now I wish to begin to tell you of all the very great doings and all the very great marvels of the great Khan who now reigns, who is called Cublai Khan—Khan meaning in our language the great lord of lords—*indeed he really has this name by right* because everyone knows truly that this great Khan

is the most powerful man in people and in lands and in treasure that ever was in the world. . . . (Moule and Pelliot 192; emphasis mine)

Marco Polo raises not only the issue of political legitimacy but also its more philosophical dimension, the correspondence of name and reality. He continues, "Now you may know quite truly that [Kublai] descends directly from the imperial line of Cinghis Khan; for the lord of all the Tartars is required to be directly of that lineage. . . . And you may know that he had that rule by his valor and by his prowess and by his great knowledge. . . . And you may know that the rule came to him directly by right" (193). Considering the fact that the aura of illegitimacy continued to haunt Kublai throughout his reign, and multiple attempts were made by several Chinese and Mongol leaders to depose him as the Great Khan and the Emperor of China, we can well understand Marco Polo's painful laboring on this particular issue.

While the framework of *Il milione* was in many ways shaped by Chinese historiography, like any other *small talk*, the work also reflects its internal disengagement from "grand" historical discourse. As a writer of *small talk*, Marco Polo probably had in his mind the voice of a respectful grand historian. Although he might not have been consciously aware of it, his writing functions as a dialogue with the dominant Chinese historiography. On the one hand, he takes pains to imitate its declarative mode and realistic tone. He even picks up some patterns of the established ideology. On the other hand, he concerns himself with things that are unsuitable for the dominant system of representation. This other voice proclaimed by Marco Polo eventually undermines the grand official discourse and calls upon a world of diversity and heteroglossia.

The episode of the great Kublai Khan constitutes the main story of *Il milione*. As the most powerful figure, Kublai is present throughout the book. "His figure rises up from every land and every sea, as the historical, yet ideal, manifestation of a universal sovereign" (Olschki 398). In the Chinese narrative tradition, there are two ways to approach the "Emperor," a topic both important and enigmatic. One way is through the forum of official dynastic history (*zhengshi*), indisputably the master narrative discourse. Incorporating portions of "unprocessed" primary materials, such as a diary of the emperor's activities (*qiju zhu*), this system of representation provides a seemingly authentic picture in compliance with the sanctioned, official world view. Compared to this high approach, the unofficial history (*yeshi*),

or *small talk*, may be called a “low” approach. To amuse the common people, who desire to know what happens in and around the Forbidden City, the minor historian-officials mix their real experiences with a fertile imagination and draw a vivid and entertaining picture of the Emperor’s world.

While the biography of Kublai included in the *Yuan Dynasty History* (*Yuanshi*) of the fourteenth century shows us how this emperor is treated in the official history, Marco Polo’s Kublai, in contrast, aims to satisfy the curiosity of ordinary people. The *Yuan Dynasty History* offers a dry, clean and purposeful vision. In the light of Chinese ethical code with values such as benevolence and filial piety, the biography mentions Kublai’s humanity and intelligence, his devotion to his mother, and his benign rule. What Marco Polo sets out to explore and articulate are indeed the quotidian realities that the official historian is neither willing nor able to present.

It is well known that Marco Polo successfully relates to his readers many details of Kublai’s private and public life which cannot be found elsewhere. As a *small talk* writer, Marco Polo held a privileged position that none of his Chinese colleagues could inhabit. Thanks to his special circumstances as a foreigner, he was able to witness firsthand and even to participate to some degree in court affairs. Since he composed his work after having returned to his own country, he felt no fear of censorship for relating his experiences in a direct manner. His account would have been, in this sense, impossible for an author living and writing from inside China.

The most frequently quoted story about the emperor in Marco Polo’s *Il milione* is, of course, the story of Kublai and his concubines. With considerable expertise, Marco Polo tells us how the great Khan each year recruits one hundred beautiful maidens from Ungrat and has “them kept by the ladies of the palace, and makes them lie with each of them in one bed to know if she has good breath, to know if she is a virgin and quite sound in all things” (Moule and Pelliot 205). Marco Polo also tells us how these concubines take turns, six for each successive period of three days and nights, to attend to Kublai’s every desire. The story is narrated in a trustworthy manner and with such obvious delight that it filled Marco Polo’s contemporary readers with wonder and amazement.

In terms of Kublai’s public life, Marco Polo selects two principle types of events—feasts and hunts—to represent his hero. Giving a detailed realistic portrayal of those activities, Marco Polo highlights his sovereign’s magnificence, his fabulous riches and unparalleled

power. Kublai, through the filter of Marco Polo, has been transformed into an emperor distracted from the cares of office. The meaning of Marco Polo's portrait is, therefore, twofold. First, by signifying that which is otherwise excluded by the official historical mode, it expands its narrow framework and consequently enlarges the extent of the signifiable. Secondly, by introducing the subject from a completely different angle, it subverts official ideology even as the narration ostensibly reinforces that ideology.

Incorporating tales of marvel is another way in which *Il milione* disengages itself from grand historical discourses. The Old Man of the Mountain, the Grand Master of a Muslim sect of assassins, is both an historical and legendary hero. He intrigued Marco Polo's Western contemporaries because of the murderous activities of his followers and their unconditional devotion and obedience to him. The three chapters in which Marco Polo speaks of him are, nevertheless, focused on something else. "Now I shall tell you of [the Old Man's] doings as I Master Marco heard it told by several men" (Moule and Pelliot 129). The narrator first sets the tone so that the story can be read in the historical mode. But, as the narrative unfolds, the reader is bound to feel a sense of indeterminacy and ambiguity towards this "staged" world view. The story starts with a vivid description of the largest and most beautiful garden created by the Old Man:

In [the garden] were erected pavilions and palaces the most elegant that can be imagined, all covered with gilding and exquisite painting. And there were runnels too, flowing freely with wine and milk and honey and water; and numbers of ladies and of the most beautiful damsels in the world, who could play on all manner of instruments, and sung most sweetly, and danced in a manner that it was charming to behold. (Yule 139–40)

Then, the narrator says, "the Old Man desired to make his people believe that this was actually Paradise" (Moule and Pelliot 129). Although the narrator wants to negate the garden as Paradise in his statement, the mysterious aura evoked by his portrayal of the garden seems to cancel out this very negation. The reader's uncertainty at this paradox is further reinforced when the narrator encourages us to identify with the Saracen youth, who truly believed that the garden is Paradise. His story centers on their experience and sincere belief. We are told that those Saracen youths were placed in the garden while in a drug-induced sleep. When they awakened to find themselves in the garden, "they believed that they were most truly in Paradise" (129). Even after the youths were once again removed from the garden while

asleep, they awakened and claimed “that they came from Paradise. And they said that in truth that is Paradise. And the others who heard this and had not been there had a great desire to go to Paradise, and had a wish to die that they may go there” (131).

For those Saracens, the fantastic world is the real world and yet is much more substantial than the real world. Following them, we enter into the marvels of Paradise. And yet, we are again brought back to reality by the narrator’s detached voice and his rational explanation. So shall we believe the narrator, or the Saracens? Are the perceptions of the characters any less truthful than the report of the narrator? Does the narrator really want to negate the garden’s status as Paradise? As Todorov comments, a fantastic text “must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of a living person and to hesitate between a natural and supernatural explanation of the events described” (32–33). The kind of “hesitation” provoked by Marco Polo’s version of the Old Man of the Mountain belongs precisely to this category.

Dating back to the dream of the butterfly in *Zhuangzi*, the problem of perception and the interplay of reality and fantasy has remained a fascination of Chinese *small talk* writers. For them, dream adventures and transformations (or disorientations) are favorite themes and motifs. Within the structural confines of historical discourse, they probe the limits of human experiences and interrogate the concept of reality endorsed by the convention of historical narrative. Marco Polo not only shares the same concern but also assumes the same task. By evoking a perceptual and conceptual disorientation, Marco Polo ultimately contributes to the decentering of the homogeneous, autonomous official historical world view.

Furthermore, *Il milione* coordinates a conjunction of varied cultural and religious positions. Christian, Saracen and Mongol Tartars all stake their own claims in this heteroglossic text. In contrast to the pure grand historical discourse that represents the subject as a homogeneous, self-contained being, Marco Polo’s book proves itself to be a multi-voiced discourse—indeed, a *small talk*. Marco Polo’s description of the war between Cinghis Khan and Prester John is exemplary of this technique. Cinghis is the first Khan of the Tartars, described by Marco Polo as “a man of great valor and of great wisdom and of great prowess” (Moule and Pelliot 162). Considering the fact that Marco Polo very often identifies himself with the Mongol Empire, Cinghis Khan must have won his sincere admiration. On the other hand, Pre-

ster John represents the Christian Orient for the medieval Western reader. As a legendary hero, Prester John is a supposed Christian ruler of India and the Far East and represented the West's hope to convert the East into a Christian world. Marco Polo must have known all this for he says "this was the Prester John, the great rule of whom all the world speaks" (162).

Upon close scrutiny of Marco Polo's treatment of this war, at least two points deserve mentioning. First, there is a retreat, an internal distancing initiated by the dialogic juxtaposition of clashing ideologies in the text. One method the narrator uses to show his detachment is to present an objective description from each side's viewpoint. We are first told the story from the perspective of Prester John. When he hears that Cinghis Khan asked for his daughter's hand in marriage, Prester John "holds him in great scorn." His answer is "And how has not Cinghis Khan shame to ask for my daughter for wife? Does he not know that he is my man and my slave? . . . And tell him on my part that I send him this message that I ought to put him to death as a traitor, for he was against his lord and disloyal" (Moule and Pelliot 164). We are then told the reaction of Cinghis Khan: "His heart is so inflamed by it that it is by a little that it does not burst within his belly. . . . He speaks after a space so loudly that all who were about him heard it, that he will never keep the rule if he is not avenged of the great insult which Prester John sends him" (164). Later on, the focus again shifts to the side of Prester John and back to Cinghis Khan. Along with this frequent shifting, the narrator gives almost no comments about the event, which further confirms his retreat from taking sides. What constitutes the depiction is, therefore, the two ideological voices clashing with one another.

Secondly, there is an intricate compromise carried out in Marco Polo's narration. To compensate for the failure of the Christian ruler Prester John, an unbearable blow for Christendom, Marco Polo fabricates a victory for the Christian astrologers. It is interesting that he also mentions the Saracen astrologers and portrays them as the losers. According to Polo, when Cinghis Khan ordered those astrologers to predict the result of the battle between him and Prester John, the Saracen "did not know how to tell him the truth of it, but the Christian showed it clearly there" (Moule and Pelliot 165). Because of this fact, he continues, Cinghis Khan "did great honor to the Christians and had them for men of truth, and trustworthy" (165). Although his Western contemporaries might not have agreed, Marco Polo perhaps hoped

in this way to win back the pride of Christendom. In short, whether Marco Polo shows detachment or involvement toward his subject, he makes his *Milione* a semantic field for various ideological voices.

Epilogue

Centuries later, based on his understanding of *Il milione*, Italo Calvino, one of the most brilliant Italian writers of the twentieth century, wrote an intriguing novel entitled *Invisible Cities*. The narrative is structured as a mutual communication between Kublai and Marco Polo. Throughout the book, Marco Polo provides the emperor with tales of cities while Kublai listens and responds. In Calvino's version, Marco Polo's storytelling takes place in the garden of magnolias in which Kublai leisurely strolls, and is primarily aimed at a Mongol-Chinese emperor distracted from the care of office. Doesn't this remind us of the historical mode for *small talk* writing?

What deserves further mentioning is that Calvino's Marco Polo also predicts what will happen to his words once he returns to his own home:

Cublai asks Marco, "When you return to the West, will you repeat to your people the same tales you tell me?"

"I speak and speak," Marco says, "but the listener retains only the words he is expecting. The description of the world to which you lend a benevolent ear is one thing; the description that will go the rounds of the groups of stevedores and gondoliers on the street outside my house the day of my return is another; . . . It is not the voice that commands the story: it is the ear." (Moule and Pelliot 135)

Calvino's Marco Polo predicted the confusions and misunderstandings that would certainly arise in the process of interpreting his words. But it is perhaps only through such confusions and misunderstandings that cross-cultural communication and understanding can eventually be achieved.

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