

# Tracing Marco Polo's China Route

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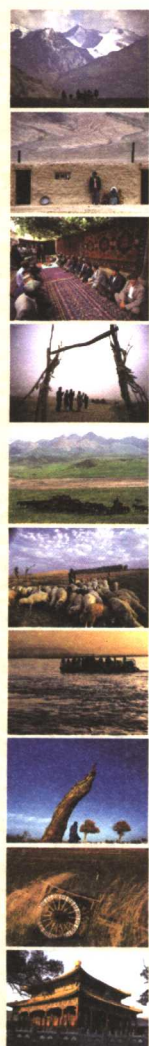
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## Preface

**T**he story of Marco Polo's journey across the vast land of China has entertained and informed generations of people all over the world since it was first published nearly 700 years ago. Being exploration enthusiasts, we had long indulged in the romantic dream of one day identifying and tracing Marco Polo's route through northern China.

Marco Polo chose the most perilous route possible from Venice to China, a country still shrouded in mystery and myth in the Western world. His incredible adventures in Asia and the book he wrote made this Italian merchant world-famous. Upon its publication, *The Travels of Marco Polo* created a furore throughout Europe, and is still widely consulted today.

In the sections related to China, Marco Polo described in vivid detail the society, people, customs, local products and important events existing in China during the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368). However, not being a guidebook, it does not give any account of the specific route the traveller took, measuring distances by how many days it took to go from one place to the next. This deficiency was exactly what we so desperately needed in order to plan our journey.

Thanks to Prof. Li Han of Wuhan University, who provided us with many useful materials, and Prof. Yang Zhijiu, an expert on Marco Polo at Nankai University





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in Tianjin, we managed to piece together enough information to follow his route.

Nevertheless, today it is physically impossible to completely follow in the steps of Marco Polo, because over the past 700 years the topography in this part of the world has changed a great deal. Due to the southerly movement of the deserts and the fact that many rivers have changed course, his original route has long since disappeared and a new one has come into existence.

For these reasons, we could only approximately trace Marco Polo's route, a route which he traversed by horse and camel, while we had the modern comfort of a car. On a mid-summer day we began our journey by jeep from Kunjirap Pass in the Pamir Highland.





## Preface

left: A Qing-Dynasty scroll "The Snow-Covered Tianshan".

top: A Yuan-Dynasty blue and white porcelain vase.

bottom: The Tang-Dynasty tri-coloured glazed pottery figurine with the motif of the camel carrying the musicians shows the prosperous and merry scene on the then Silk Road.

Travelling eastward we passed through Xinjiang, Qinghai, Gansu, Ningxia, Inner Mongolia and Hebei. When we arrived at our final destination of Beijing, it was autumn and yellow leaves carpeted the ground.

Our 12,000-kilometre route started from a



plateau over 4,000 metres above sea level and ended in the North China Plain at an altitude of less than 100 metres. Along the way we met Tajiks, Uigurs, Yugurs, Tus, Huis, Mongols and Hans, observed their life styles, and saw the different scenery each region has to offer.

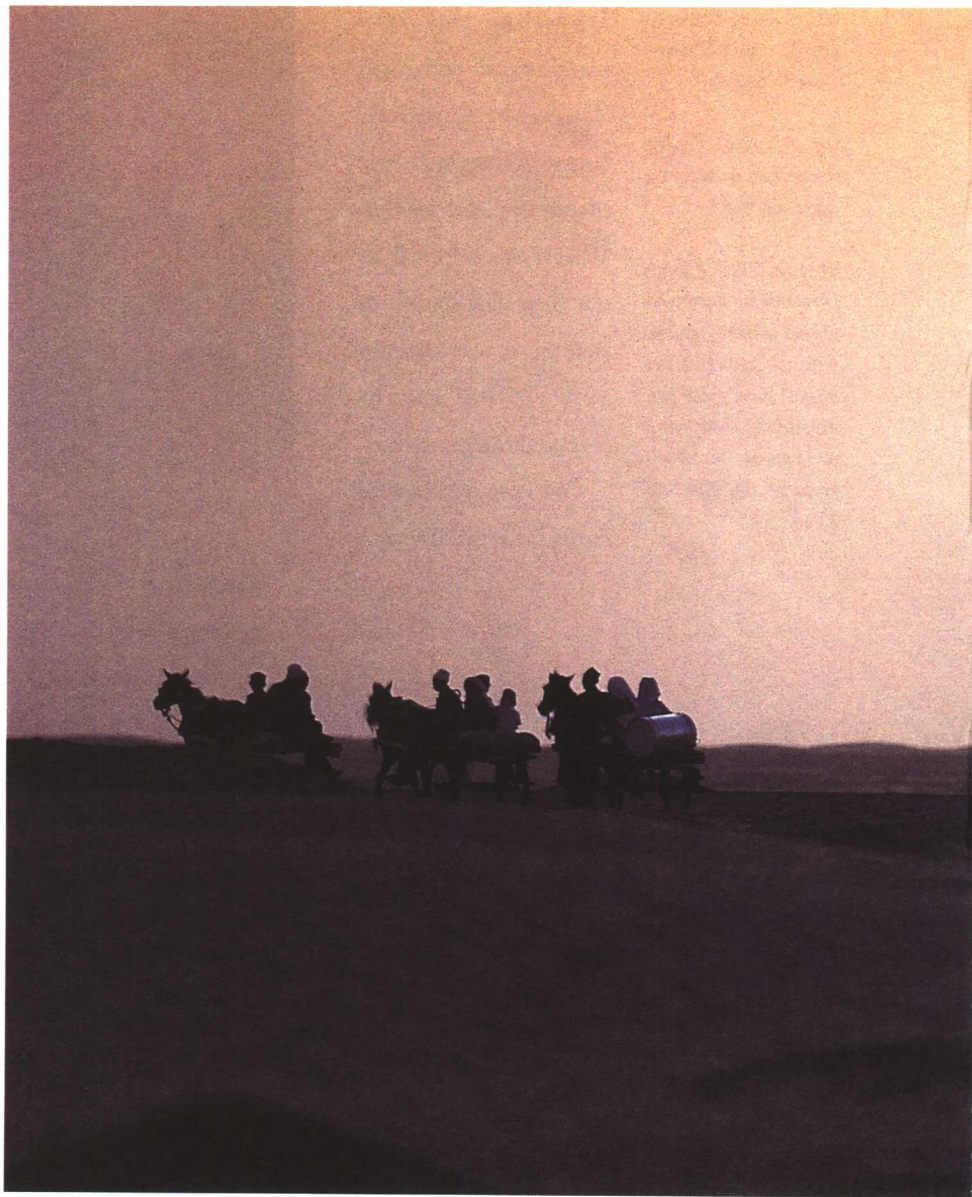
Covering such a long distance in only 80 days was no easy task, even with today's excellent







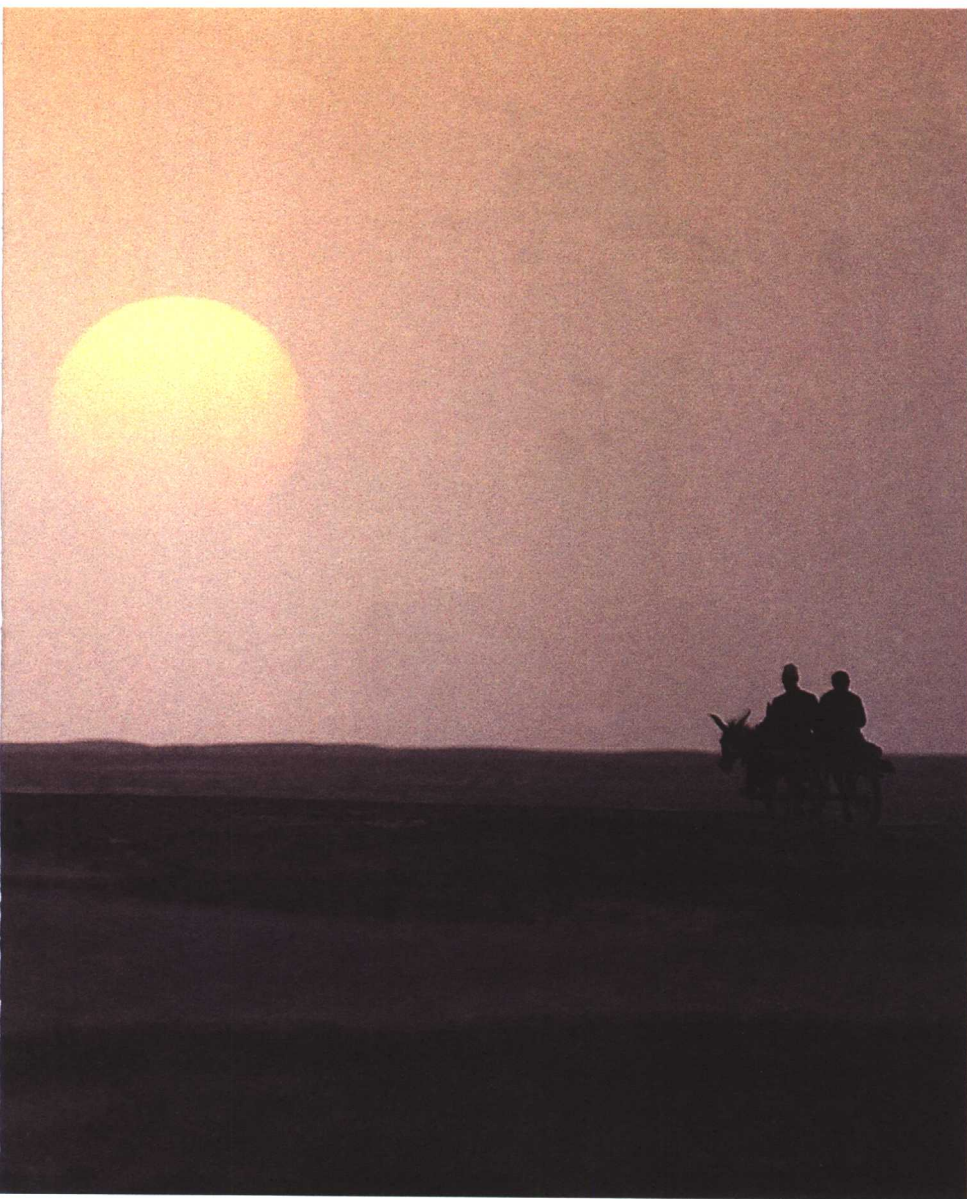
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communication and travel facilities. It is hard to imagine the difficulties Marco Polo faced 700 years ago making a journey of over 5,000 kilometres without the modern conveniences that we now all



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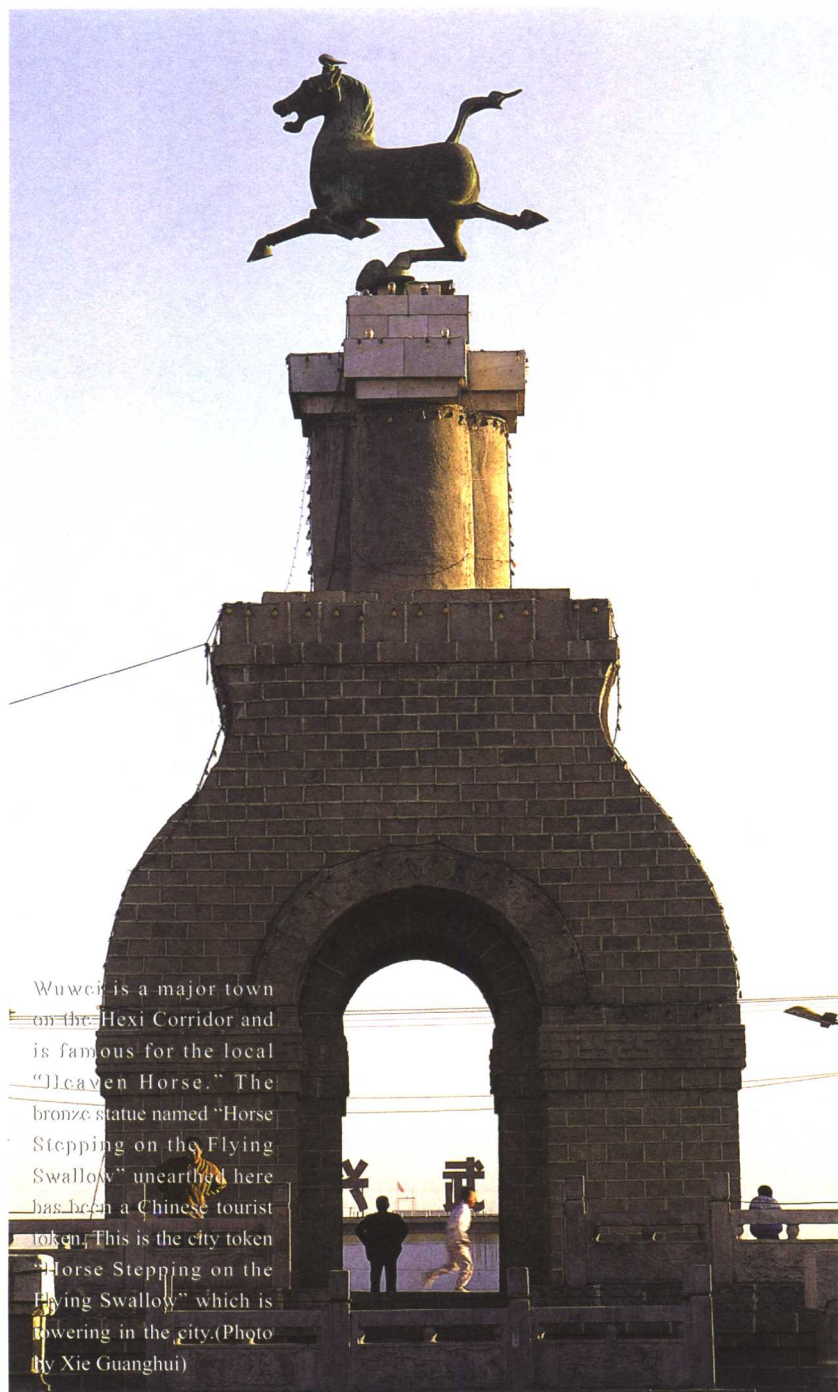
Today, the people living in Xinjiang still travelling on the ancient Silk Road on the antique means of transportation.

take for granted. However, through his book we are afforded a glimpse into what it must have been like in those days, and his travelogue remains an important and unique historical document. More than that, it





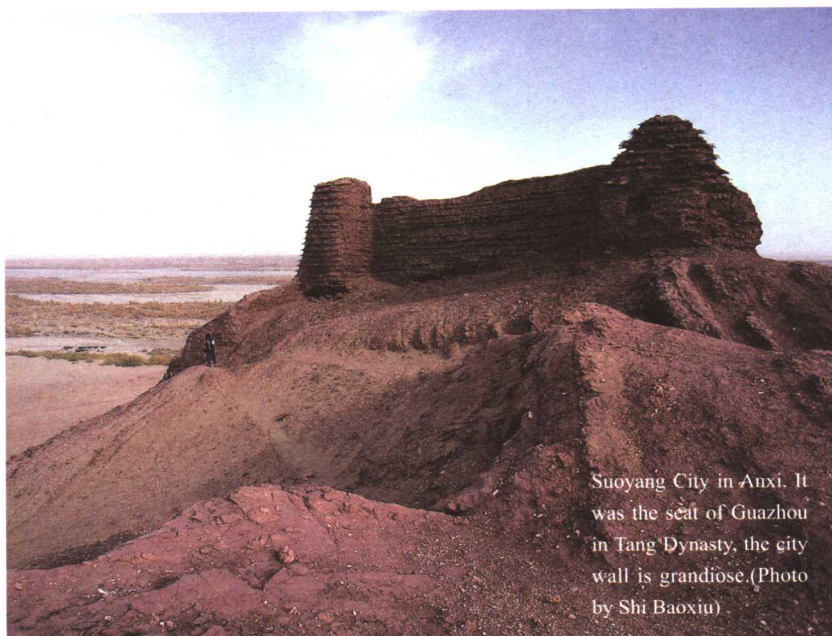
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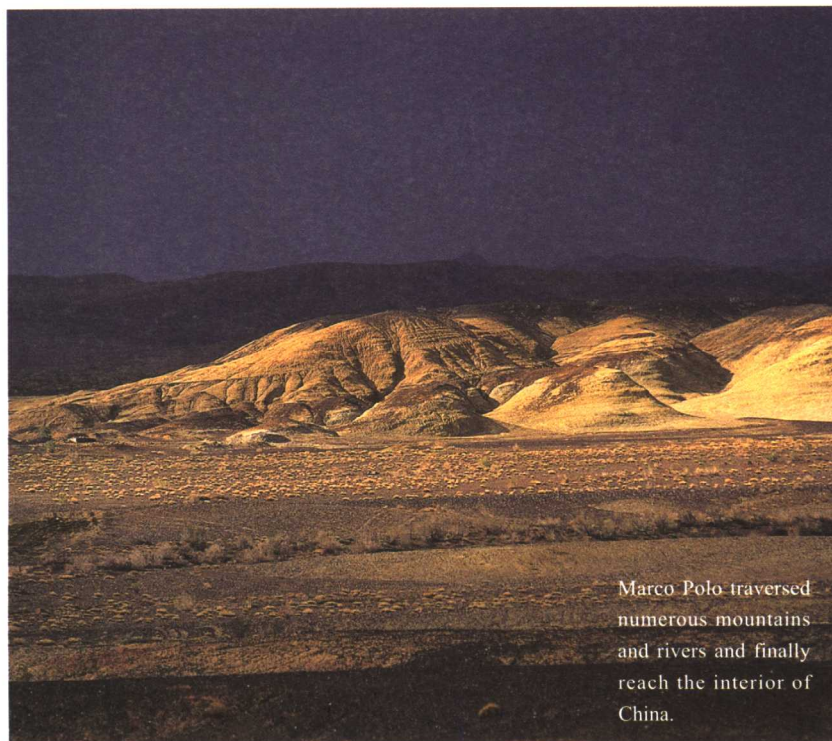
Wuwu is a major town on the Hexi Corridor and is famous for the local "Heaven Horse." The bronze statue named "Horse Stepping on the Flying Swallow" unearthed here has been a Chinese tourist token. This is the city token "Horse Stepping on the Flying Swallow" which is towering in the city. (Photo by Xie Guanghui)



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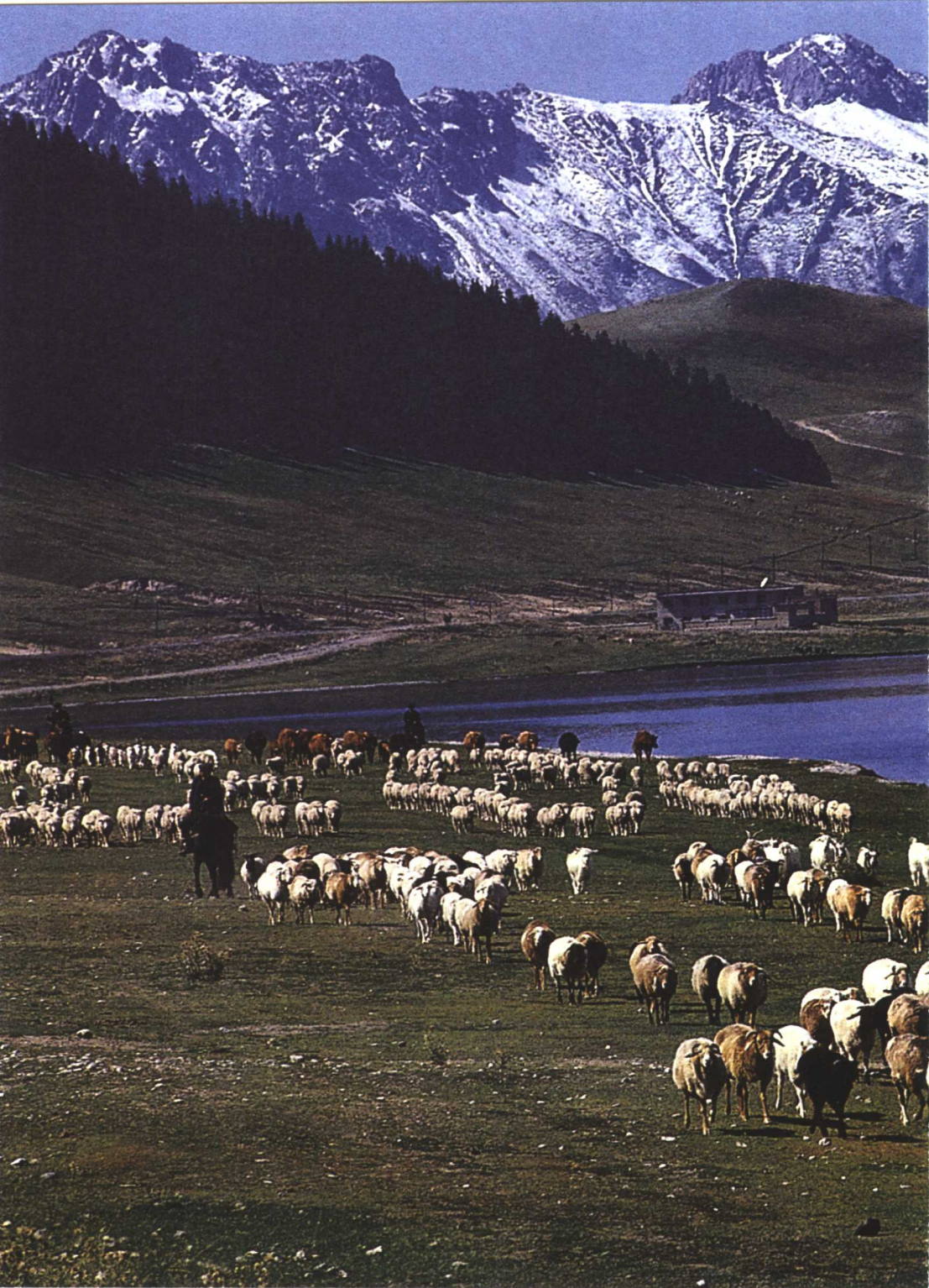


Suoyang City in Anxi. It was the seat of Guazhou in Tang Dynasty, the city wall is grandiose. (Photo by Shi Baoxiu)



Marco Polo traversed numerous mountains and rivers and finally reach the interior of China.









The enchanting scenery of  
Selim Lake.



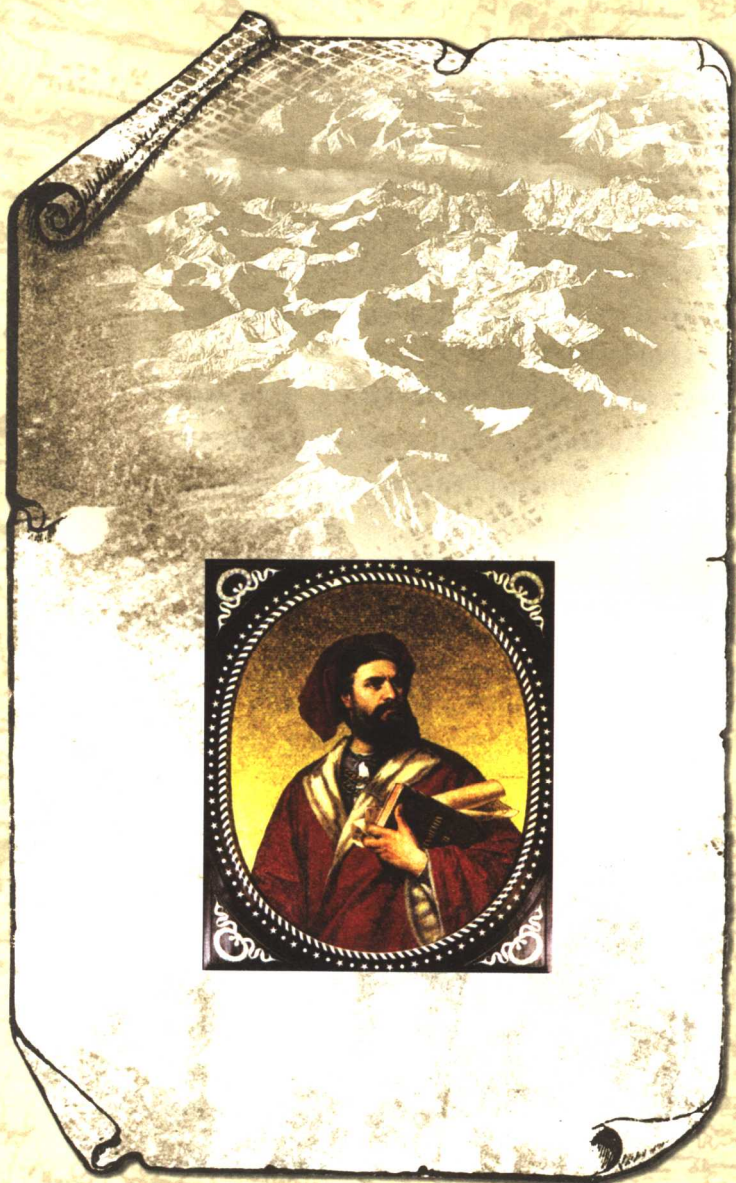


provides would-be adventurers like ourselves with inspiration and motivation to continue the task that he began.

A abandoned antique castle on the Masar-tagh Mountain which is abrupt in the Taklimakan Dersert.



# DID MARCO POLO REALLY VISIT CHINA?







In human history, 700 years is not a great length of time, however an enormous amount of changes can occur over seven centuries. In the 13th century when Marco Polo made his historic trip to China, both communications and transportation were extremely basic, with none of today's technology, and contact between nations was minimal. People in the West had heard wild stories about Orientals – a race of short people with “yellow” skin. And to people in the East, Westerners were known only as being “barbarians” with red hair and green eyes. It was in this climate of ignorance and misunderstanding that the three Polos set out for the East.

There can be no doubt that Marco Polo was an extraordinary man. Not only did he travel beyond the conventional boundaries for European travellers of that time, he also lived as a foreigner in China for 17 years under the protection of the Great Kublai Khan. As if this were not remarkable enough, upon his return to his own country he was promptly put into prison, where he wrote *The Travels*, a book that would change the course of history forever.

### **Three and a Half Years *En Route* to the Yuan Capital**

Let us first take a brief look at Marco Polo himself before we follow his travel route into China. Marco Polo was born into a merchant family in Venice in 1254. His father Nicolo Polo and uncle Mafo Polo were both merchants, doing trade as far



## Did Marco Polo Really Visit China?

as the Volga River in Russia. It was said the two brothers had once been to China.

In 1271, 17-year-old Marco Polo joined his father and uncle on their voyage to the east to look for broader trade markets. This time their destination was the prosperous and powerful Mongol Empire ruled by Kublai Khan. The Polos first took a merchant ship from Venice and landed at Acre on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean. Then by horse, camel and sometimes on foot, they went through Syria, Mesopotamia, Iran, the vast desert in Central Asia, crossed over Pamirs and entered what is today China.

The three travelled by way of Kashi, made a detour at the southern fringe of the Taklimakan Desert, passed through the Hexi Corridor, went through Ningxia and Inner Mongolia, and in 1275 finally arrived at Shang-tu, the Yuan capital, where they paid their respects to the Yuan emperor Kublai Khan. It took them three and a half years to make

The mural painting "Official Document Deliverer" in an ancient tomb in Gansu shows the official document deliverer moving on a horse on the Silk Road.





the entire journey, with stops and detours along the way.

During his 17 years in China, Marco Polo was appointed an official of the imperial government, according to *The Travels*. With this capacity, he travelled all over China and was sent on diplomatic missions to Japan, Burma, Vietnam, Siam, Java, Sumatra and India. If this is all true, Marco Polo was one of the few Europeans to extensively travel throughout China and other Asian countries and leave a written record of his experiences.

### **An Unexpected Battle Gave Birth to *the Travels***

In 1291, the Polos were at last on their way home when Kublai Khan asked them to join an escort party in charge of delivering a Mongolian princess who was to marry the Persian king. This was their last mission for the Yuan emperor. They boarded at Quanzhou port, sailed via Persia and returned to Venice in 1295, after an absence of more than 20

元 代 客 卿 馬  
哥 博 羅 遊 記

梁 啟 超 題

The first Chinese translation of *The Travels of Marco Polo* was published in 1913.