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MARCO POLO'S UNSUCCESSFUL ATTEMPTS TO SPREAD CHRISTIANITY IN THE YUAN DYNASTY

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Abstract

Since the start of his journey in 1275, Marco Polo has been one of the most significant figures to promote cultural exchange between the East and the West throughout history. Instead of discussing the authenticity of Marco Polo's experiences in China, this essay focuses on finding the reasons that contributed to Marco Polo's unsuccessful attempts to spread Christianity in China during the Yuan Dynasty by concentrating on "The Travels of Marco Polo" that he wrote. Combining details from this primary source text along with contemporary documents, artwork, and Chinese culture during the Yuan Dynasty, there were many factors that prevented Christianity from spreading. In particular, this essay explores three key factors: the prevalence of Buddhism, the customs of the Chinese people, and the failure in converting emperor Khan to Christianity during the Yuan Dynasty. In conclusion, the convergence of these factors serves as the explanation for the unsuccessful popularization of Christianity during the Yuan Dynasty.

Keywords

Christianity, Yuan Dynasty, Marco Polo, Buddhism, Khan, Tradition

1. Introduction

Due to geographical conditions, human civilization has naturally been divided into East and West from the very beginning. However, geographical obstruction has never diminished the curiosity between the East and the West. In 334 BC, Alexander the Great, with ambition and curiosity for the East, launched the Eastward Expedition but failed to reach the core of Eastern civilization. In the East, the earliest communication with the West was the trade route between Zhang Qian (张骞) and western countries through the Silk Road during the Han Dynasty (1st century BC - 2nd century BC). However, the East and West still had not truly achieved cultural exchange and deeper understanding at that point. Marco Polo, an Italian businessman, and traveler who was born in Venice, successfully brought his knowledge and experiences of China during the Yuan dynasty back to Europe, the center of western civilization.

2. Textual Explication

The Travels of Marco Polo, which was narrated by Marco Polo around 1298, presents his story in China from 1275 to 1292 when he worked as part of Yuan's government. It provides detailed descriptions of China's society, business, government, and people by traveling throughout most parts of the country. The work has been regarded as the first work that helped westerners perceive the mysterious Oriental land. Just as Marco Polo states in the book: “[he] have not told the half of what [he] saw” (Polo, 1953, p. 13). China's vast territory, huge population, and long history are difficult to completely describe in words. Living in the Middle Ages where religion was prevalent, Marco Polo not only helped the West to better understand the East but also, similar to Columbus and other travelers (Columbus, 2007), had the mission to spread Christianity throughout the land of China. However, Marco Polo's propaganda and attempts to spread Christianity in China, requested by the Pope and Khan, were unsuccessful (Polo, 1953). The reasons that contributed to the situation were the prevalence of Buddhism during the Yuan Dynasty and the traditions and customs of the Chinese people, which contradicted Christian values and explained the failure in converting Emperor Khan to Christianity.

During the Yuan Dynasty, China implemented an open-trade policy towards western countries. The hospitality of the Yuan Dynasty to the diplomatic envoys of various countries reflected its respect and open attitude to all countries. There were many “hotels, or caravanserais” in each

suburb in which “the merchants arriving from various parts [took] up their abode.” The government also assigned buildings to different people from different countries: some for Lombards, some for Germans, some for French, and so on (Polo, 1953, p. 85). The ambassadors who came to China were treated extremely well in the most honorable manner. Khan's preferential treatment to outlanders brought more merchants to the Yuan Dynasty, which greatly promoted economic development. Some of the rarest and valuable things in all parts of the world could be found in Yuan Dynasty's city (Polo, 1953). Khan's foreign policy achieved satisfactory results. The Yuan Dynasty was promoted both in economic and cultural aspects. On this basis, Khan ordered the issuance of paper currency, a technology that was very advanced during that time, to pay for goods from foreign merchants who came to China. The merchants had no objections to this since Khan paid them with extra profits. It also “answer[ed] the purpose of their disbursements; and even though they [were] inhabitants of a country where this kind of money [was] not current, they invest[ed] the amount in other articles of merchandise suited to their markets” (Polo, 1953, p. 98). In such an environment where the country was quite open to foreign culture and trade, Marco Polo's propaganda and promotion of Christianity still failed.

During the Yuan Dynasty, China was a centralized dynasty ruled by Khan. Marco Polo failed to persuade Khan to believe in Christianity which caused Christianity to fail to spread in society. Khan and most of the everyday people who lived during the Yuan Dynasty, different from people who lived in the western world, usually did not deeply believe in any religion. Khan said that "there are four great Prophets who are revered and worshipped by the different classes of mankind” and he did “honor and [show] respect to all the four, and invoke to aid whichever amongst them [was] in truth Supreme in Heaven” (Polo, 1953, p. 78). Khan respected those religions - Christianity, Buddhism, Taoism, and Islam - but did not impose any of them. Marco Polo was given the opportunity to talk to Khan face-to-face.



Figure 1: *Kublai Khan Presents Golden Seal to Polo*

(Source: <https://ancienthistory.abcclio.com/Search/Display/662731>)

The reason he proposed this was that he didn't have sufficient motives to answer the nobles of the court and to convince the nobles to follow his choice. He said that he hadn't seen the actual profit that the god brought to people. In other words, he hadn't seen any miracles yet (Polo, 1953). The masses, similar and influenced by Khan, found no good reason to believe in any religion. Instead, it would bring more restrictions, psychological burdens, and responsibilities to them. Khan showed no bias towards religions, not only because he did not believe in any religion, but also because his fairness could help the Yuan Dynasty to better carry out the open foreign policy, thereby enhancing the country's economic level. This can be shown through the "paper money issued by Khan", which had been used for trading within the Chinese community and between foreign merchants frequently, and the highly organized and developed markets in China (Polo, 1953, p. 97). Khan's show of non-discrimination and respect on religious issues also earned respect from those religions, giving each religion a fair and free opportunity to spread in China.

But from Marco Polo's description, it can be seen that although Khan's attitude towards religion was positive, it did not mean that Khan was going to believe in any religion at all. Taking a pyramid model as an example, Emperor Khan "the Lord of Lords", the emperor of China and spire of the pyramid worldwide "for in respect to a number of subjects, the extent of territory, and amount of revenue [who] surpassed every sovereign that has heretofore been or that now is in the world," did not believe in Christianity, which led to the fact that most officials and nobles around him did not believe in it; this resulted in the failure of the popularization of Christianity among ordinary people

which formed the base of the pyramid (Polo, 1953, p. 55). Polo described challenges to the spread of Christianity in the city of Yarcán:

“Not long ago, a prince named Za- gata'i who was own brother to the then reigning Great Khan, became a convert to Christianity. This greatly delighted the Christian inhabitants of the place, who under the favour and protection of the prince, proceeded to build a church, and dedicated it to St. John the Baptist. It was so constructed that all the weight of the roof, being circular, should rest upon a column in the centre, and beneath this, as a base, they fixed a square stone, which, with the permission of the prince, they had taken from a temple belonging to the Mahometans, who dared not to prevent them from so doing. But upon the death of Za- gata'i, his son who succeeded him showing no disposition to become a Christian, the Mussulmans had influence enough to obtain from him an order that their opponents should restore to them the stone they had appropriated and although the latter offered to pay them compensation in money, they refused to listen to the proposal because they hoped that its removal would occasion the church to tumble down.” (Polo, 1953, p. 52)

3. Methodologies

A variety of primary and secondary source research was conducted to provide an in-depth illustration of Marco Polo's journey to China where he attempted to spread Christianity. Primary sources included Buddhist murals, the first-hand account of *The Travels of Marco Polo*, as well as letters written by Christopher Columbus. Consulted secondary sources ranged from scholarly history journals including *The Journal of Asian Studies* and analytical texts such as *Chinese Aesthetics: The Ordering of Literature, the Arts, and the Universe in the Six Dynasties*. In recognizing connections between art and history throughout the research process, there is specific attention given to the influence of art on the historical account presented in this essay.

4. Intellectual Analysis

Buddhism also accounted for the failure of the popularization of Christianity in China during the Yuan dynasty. Buddhism in the Yuan Dynasty had an unprecedented prevalence. “Healing practices played an important role in the transmission of Buddhism throughout China (Fo, Met Museum).” Buddhist preachers went to Chinese cities to help people treat diseases for free. People were more likely to follow Buddhism since it brought them practical benefits. Artwork “*Buddha of*

Medicine Bhaishajyaguru (Yaoshi fo 藥師佛)” is a mural built during the Yuan Dynasty and has a height of 751.8cm and a width of 1511.3cm.



Figure 2: *Buddha of Medicine Bhaishajyaguru (Yaoshi fo)*, 1319

(Source: “Buddha of Medicine Bhaishajyaguru (Yaoshi Fo).” Accessed July 14, 2020.

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/42716>)

The figure of Buddha and Bodhisattvas in the picture is different from how they look in Hindu since they are wearing clothes with Chinese characteristics: Red robes, dark brown, and green clothing; even their facial structure ha[d] become more “Chinese” with a bit collapsed nose, narrow eyes, and flat faces. Although the overall impression, motion, and temperament of these characters did not change, it made people feel more intimate and familiar. These examples are evidence of the influence of Buddhism in China. For one, this mural is rather large, which showed people's respect for Buddhism. The Chinese elements in this work, in addition to indicating the spread of Buddhism in China, also show that the public has an accepting attitude towards Buddhism. The initiative “Chineseization” in the works of art is the best proof. There are more than ten pieces of Buddhist murals created in China during the Yuan Dynasty that have been described in a book called *The Yuan Buddhist Mural of the Paradise of Bhaishajyaguru* (Jing, 1991), which is evidence of the popularity of Buddhism in the Yuan Dynasty. Therefore, the prevalence of Buddhism during the Yuan Dynasty led to the failure of the spread of Christianity.

Since Buddhism, originating from Asia, is more closely related to Eastern culture, it has an inherent advantage over Christianity in its connection with Chinese people. One other important factor mentioned in *The Travels of Marco Polo* which largely contributed and explained the spread of

Buddhism in China is that, unlike Marco Polo and Christianity, Buddhists have converted Kublai Khan to an “ardent Buddhist” later around the 1280s. Khan’s great influence and high social status also established the “Buddhism custom” and speeded up the popularization of it in China (Polo, 1953, p. 24). All of those elements coupled with the fact that people see the help Buddhism has given to them are more willing to believe in Buddhism rather than Christianity’s miracles that have never been shown to them before. In other words, civilians believe in the benefits of the present. The rise of Buddhism during the Yuan dynasty in China, therefore, influenced the failed popularization of Christianity.

The contradiction between the western values shared by Christianity and the traditional thoughts and culture held by the Chinese resulted in the unsuccessful spread of Christianity. Because of the late exchanges between the East and the West, the number of supporters of Christianity in China was few. The Yuan dynasty was mainly constructed by two ethnic groups: Mongolians and Han people. The Yuan’s noble Family and the Ministers of the government had heard little about Christianity, and their attitude toward it was confusing. The values and beliefs shared by Christianity were much different from what the Mongolians had learned before. They believed that only “fools say there is one God, but wise men say there are many” because they are questioning what if they are “not men strengthen by god” (Polo, 1953, p. 8). When their interests could not be guaranteed, or when there was no clear evidence of the power of the Christian God, most Chinese chose to continue to wait and see instead of reacting unilaterally. Besides, Christianity was not well understood by normal people nor was it integrated into Chinese culture, which is also a reason for the ineffective communication. This can be seen from the rare artwork in Christianity during the Yuan Dynasty. Whether from the mainstream population of religion (Europeans), official writing (Latin), circulated stories (Bible), or cultural atmosphere (Western), Chinese ordinary people could find any common points and empathy. This lack of Chinese people's sense of identification with Christianity and sense of belonging to Western culture made it difficult for Christianity to develop in China. Another main difference between Chinese traditions and Christianity is that Chinese people are mostly polytheists while Christianity is Monotheistic. From all the stories they have been taught since they were kids, there are different gods who have different powers and control different aspects of the world. For example, Cai Shen controls wealth, Yan Wang controls death, and Zao Wang controls meals (Zongqi, 2004), while in Dante’s inferno that the desire to eat and wealth has been criticized (Alighieri, 2009). Although people might never see any of these gods from the tales performing miracles for the

people, still everyone celebrates them on different days; these are the traditions that have lasted for a long time and have made Polytheism part of the Chinese tradition. The “tradition” of Christianity by contrast “regards Jesus Christ as their only divinity” (Polo, 1953, p. 78). This kind of contradiction between the values and traditions of Christianity and the values and beliefs that the Yuan nobility and normal people held, led to the unsuccessful experience of the popularization of Christianity.

5. Conclusion

Differences between Eastern and Western cultures, leaders' hesitant attitudes toward Christianity, and the prevalence of Buddhism during the Yuan Dynasty all led to the failure of Christianity's popularity during this time. Considering the backward technology and transportation and the long distance between Europe and China, Marco Polo was questioned by scholars whether he arrived and lived in China. The debate about whether Marco Polo came to China hasn't stopped until recently. Figure 3 has shown the route of Marco Polo's trip from 1271 to 1295. (Brown, 2021).

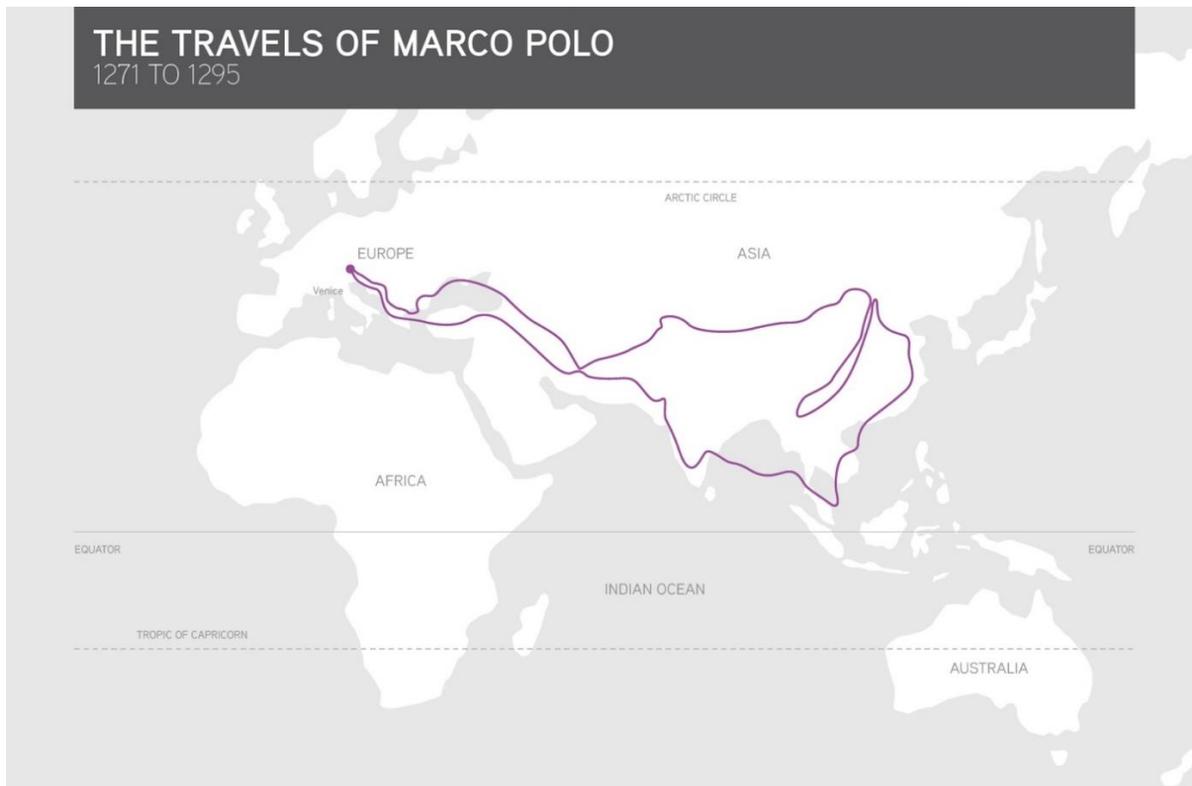


Figure 3: *The Travels of Marco Polo*

(Source: <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/big-history-project/expansion-interconnection/exploration-interconnection/a/marco-polo>)

Stephen G. Haw represents a group of scholars who believe that Marco Polo did arrive in China. He illustrated that the story by Marco Polo is “highly time-sensitive and matches the conditions during the exact years, unlikely to be second hand or added later.” The specific details including “accurate rendering of local places” in Marco Polo’s story have made scholars believe in its authenticity (Birge, 2007, pp. 240-241). Although with a big group of “hundred educated missionaries” with the mission to convert Chinese to Christianity, a short amount of time and less effort compared to Buddhism had implied its failure (Polo, 1953, p. 55). On this basis, Marco Polo's failure to spread Christianity in China has also become a fact. There haven't been any examples of emperors in China who believed in any religion since ancient times. The Yuan Dynasty as the first dynasty ruled by non-Han people, however, adapted to Han's culture and traditions. Khan, following the tradition, chose to believe in Han's version of holiness: Tianzi. Besides, Buddhism, from the Yuan Dynasty to the present, has been the most widespread and most popular religion in China, and has already created huge influences among the society with its ideas and beliefs. Combined with the difference between Eastern and Western cultures, these factors eventually led to Marco Polo's failure of propagating Christianity in China. The failure at that time, however, did not affect the future influence of Christianity in China. With the changes of the times, the cultures of the East and the West have begun to gradually merge, and Christianity has gradually become popular in China: about 2.5% of the population are Christians. Although Marco Polo did not successfully complete his mission to promote Christianity, his travels became the main way for the West to understand the East. Marco Polo's deeds and his influence will be remembered as an important milestone in the history of the integration of human civilization.

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