Marco Polo and the Silk Roads

The Reopening of the Silk Roads

In 1260, Kublai Khan became the leader of the Mongols. Northern China already belonged to his kingdom. In 1279, Kublai Khan conquered the rest of China. The Mongols ruled China until 1368. During Mongol rule, Asia enjoyed a period of peace and stability known as Pax Mongolica. Merchants and other travelers were guaranteed safe passage through the Mongol empire. As a result, trade increased between Europe and Asia. People felt secure enough to travel the Silk Roads again. These were ancient trade routes connecting China with Europe. They had become too dangerous to use with the decline of strong central governments, including the Roman Empire and the Tang Dynasty.

Among the increasing number of travelers on the Silk Roads was Marco Polo. His 24-year journey to China and back would have a major impact on Europe’s relationship with Asia.

1. What were the Silk Roads?
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2. Why was the Pax Mongolica an important moment in time?
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Marco Polo

Marco Polo was a trader from Venice. He and his father and uncle traveled the Silk Roads, arriving in China in 1275. There they made their way to the court of Kublai Khan. Kublai Khan welcomed foreign visitors to his court. He warmly received Marco Polo, who stayed in China for 17 years. During that time, he traveled to many cities in order to perform missions for Kublai Khan.

3. Who was Marco Polo? How extensive was their 24 year journey to China?
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Marco Polo returned to Venice in 1295. Later, he was captured and imprisoned in a war between Venice and Genoa. While in prison, he told his fellow inmates about his adventures in China and what he had seen. He described how the government worked as well as many aspects of Chinese life. Another prisoner collected his tales into a book. This book became a best seller in Europe.

4. What happened to Marco Polo upon his return to Europe? ___________________________________
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5. How did his book come to be written? ___________________________________________________
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Many readers doubted the absolute truth of Marco Polo’s stories. However, his journey increased people’s interest in Asia and desire to trade with countries such as China. Whenever Europeans heard words such as the following quote, “More precious and costly wares [goods] are imported into Khan-balik [Beijing] than into any other city in the world. . . .” (Marco Polo, The Travels of Marco Polo), they had to see it for themselves. As a result, new ideas and goods from Asia began flowing into Europe, including Chinese inventions such as gunpowder.

6. Based on the quotation, what impression of China was created by Marco Polo’s description of it?
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7. How did Marco Polo’s descriptions of China affect Europe?
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