

Contrasting Views

by Anne Wiessing

Anne Wiessing composed the following essay while enrolled in a freshmen level World Civilization course. In her essay, she analyzes two different primary sources on Mongol court culture.

Two people can look at similar circumstances and see something different. Such was the case of Marco Polo and Ch'ang Ch'un—a Taoist monk.¹ Each in his time went to visit the Mongol capital, each noticed something different. What accounts for the disparity in their narratives? One possible answer is the differences in the backgrounds of Marco Polo and the Taoist monk. An even better reason is that the two visited the Mongol court at different times during Mongol rule. Their accounts show how the civilizing process occurred among the Mongols, a group without a strong written tradition of their own. With this knowledge, it is possible to understand why each man finds different aspects of Mongol life noteworthy.

The Taoist monk had a background that was based on nature. Taoism, a Chinese philosophy, stresses "conformity to the great pattern of nature."² Its followers were supposed to make a "meditative return to nature."³ Taoists also believed that "wealth and place breed insolence."⁴ For these reasons, the monk did not find the power of the Mongols noteworthy. Instead he placed an emphasis on nature. For example, he noted that "there are many plants with many yellow flowers."⁵ He also noticed which way the rivers flow. The tall willows, peculiar reeds, large lizards, and

¹In 1219, Ch'ang Ch'un, a learned Taoist priest, was invited by Genghis Khan to visit the court of the Mongols "10,000 li" (about 3300 miles) to the west." Reilly, 253. [od. note]

²J. S. Stavrianos, *A Global History: From Prehistory to the Present* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1988), 141.

³Ibid.

⁴Lao Tzu "Taoism: The Tao Te Ching," in *Readings in World Civilizations*, ed., Kevin Reilly, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988) 171, 171.

⁵Ch'ang Ch'un, "A Chinese Taoist Traveler to Genghis Khan," in Reilly, 284.

blooming trees did not escape his eye. The world view of the Taoist monk determined what he found significant.

Marco Polo, on the other hand, had a background that caused him to find value in different objects. He was a merchant from Venice, Italy. During the Middle Ages, Italy "had been the developed part of Europe."⁶ As a merchant, he scrutinized the value of the objects he saw. As a man from one of the most developed and wealthiest cities in Europe, he was shocked by the advances and the riches of the Mongols. Because of his background, Marco Polo had a fetish for material goods. He described at length the wealth that was contained within the Khan's palace. The palace had a marble terrace and a marble staircase. Chambers within the structure "are all covered with gold and silver and decorated with pictures of dragons and birds and horsemen and various beasts and scenes of battle."⁷ Marco Polo's background strongly determined his interests.

The best explanation which accounts for the differences in what the two travellers noticed was that they visited the Mongol court at different times during the Mongols' rule. When the Taoist monk visited the capital, the ruler was Genghis Khan. He and his subjects were nomadic warriors, and their daily life was "a continuous rehearsal of campaign operations."⁸ The people lived off of the land. They "live in black wagons and white tents, and they "live on meat and curdled milk." The Mongols wore clothes made of "hides and furs."⁹ At the time of the Taoist monk's visit to Genghis Khan, the Mongols were still fighting and were still nomadic.

When March Polo visited the Mongol court at Khan-balik, Kubilai Khan was the ruler. The very fact that the capital was at Khan-balik was "indicative of the assimilation process."¹⁰ The Mongols had assimilated themselves into Chinese culture, and Kubilai Khan was actually a Chinese emperor. With assimilation came the great wealth and traditions of the

⁶Stavrianos, 372.

⁷"Marco Polo Travels to Kubilai Khan," in Reilly, 292.

⁸Stavrianos, 211.

⁹"A Chinese Taoist Traveler to Genghis Khan," in Reilly, 284.

¹⁰Stavrianos, 216.

Chinese people. The great palace that Marco Polo described was actually a "palace of Chinese design."¹¹ The Khan's private rooms at the palace were filled with treasures that included "gold, and silver, precious stones and pearls, and his gold and silver vessels."¹² The Great Khan had also adopted the Chinese tradition of sending emissaries to the provinces "to select for him out of the most beautiful maidens, according to the standard of beauty which he lays down for them, some four or five hundred."¹³ Unlike the nomads of Genghis Khan's time, the Mongol people under Kubilai Khan were more settled and lived in great cities. There were hotels in the city for merchants, and "every day more than 1,000 cart-loads of silk enter the city."¹⁴ Assimilation into the Chinese culture gave the Mongols the great wealth that Marco Polo saw.

Both the Taoist monk and Marco Polo visited the Mongol court. They each found different objects noteworthy. Their contrasting backgrounds contributed to this. But the main reason that they saw different objects was that they visited the Mongol court at different stages of Mongol rule.

History as a discipline revolves around analytical argumentation. Below, two undergraduates, Mr. Choate and Ms. Crawford, resurrect the Irish Home Rule debate. This issue dominated English politics during the latter part of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries.

The Irish Problem and Its Best Solution

By Lamar Choate

What was the Irish problem and what was the best solution to it during the nineteenth Century? This paper will try to answer these questions. It is not an easy task, considering the scope of the problem and its many aspects. However, this brief overview be sufficient in its discussion of the problem to present a convincing argument as to which of the solutions to the Irish Home Rule debate was the best. In the end, I can come to no other conclusion than that all of Ireland should have been granted home rule as early as 1886, not only for the good of Ireland, but for the good of the United Kingdom as well.

To begin, we must understand the nature of the problem. Because of its many aspects, Irish Home Rule was a highly controversial issue. It stirred up so much controversy not only because of its many aspects, but also because Home Rule was a part of a larger problem in English politics. Historian Tom Dunne put it this way:

The home-rule debate generated such extraordinary public excitement and reshaped politics precisely because it was the culmination of a major debate on the issues of democratic pressure and imperial control. The crisis of 1885-6 was about ideological conflict at least as much as it was about political tactics.¹

How to answer questions about Irish Home Rule would lead to the larger questions of empire and ideology. Much was at stake with the Irish question

¹Ibid.

²Marco Polo Travels to Kubilai Khan," in Reilly, 290.

³Ibid., 288.

⁴Ibid., 291.

¹Tom Dunne, "Responses to Gladstonian Home Rule and Land Reform," *Irish Historical Studies* XXV, no. 190 (November, 1987), 434.