GARY JENNINGS TALKS ABOUT THE MAKING OF "THE JOURNEYER"

I try never to do the same thing twice. While I was still at work on my 1980 novel Aztec, set in Mexico in the 16th century, I determined that my next story would deal with an entirely different era and locale. Marco Polo naturally came to mind -- a hero to my taste, with an insatiable curiosity and an appetite for adventure, who, in the 13th century, traversed nearly the whole breadth of the Eastern Hemisphere.

However, what new was there to tell of Marco Polo? His own chronicle of his wanderings had been published in his lifetime. And in the seven centuries since, many another writer had done annotations to his work, commentaries on it, plunderings of it, renderings of it for other media, including motion pictures, at least one stageplay, and most recently a television thing which accomplished a feat I would have thought impossible -- making the adventures of Marco Polo boring.

That might have put me off Marco Polo for life, except that I had meanwhile made a small discovery which persuaded me that I could write something new and different about Polo -- yet something of which I believe he himself would have approved. What I had happened upon was the first scrap of biography ever written about him, a paragraph in the writings of a contemporary of his, a Dominican friar of Lombardy named Jacopo d'Acqui. That fragment by Fra Jacopo, only slightly reworded, was to become the epigraph to my new novel:

> When Marco Polo lay on his deathbed, his priest,
> his friends and relations clustered around him
> to plead that he at last renounce the countless
> lies he had related as his true adventures, so

> his soul would go cleansed to Heaven. The old man raised up, roundly damned them all and declared, "I have not told the _half_ of what I saw and did!"

I would tell the other half. My novel, to be entitled _The Journeyer_, would recount the adventures Marco had left untold. Without deviating from his known itineraries, without distorting his own story, and without doing violence to historical facts, I would tell the many other things that might have happened, could have happened, perhaps did happen to him during his wanderings.

And what might those be? Well, I could most knowledgably make some guesses if I began by going where he had gone. That is what I did. I followed his route from Venice through the Middle East to China, and roundabout China, and down into southeastern Asia, and to Indonesia, where he touched during his homeward voyage.

I had one advantage over Marco, in that I could make the longer hops -- across oceans and over uninteresting stretches -- by jetliner. And I did, in every kind from Tupolevs to the Concorde. I also had to make frequent use of jeeps, Land Rovers, steam-engined railroads and some rather derelict bush planes. But not every mode of travel has been modernized in these seven centuries. I also rode in or on every kind of conveyance that Marco used: Venetian gondolas, a Chinese "junk," Arab dhows, goatskin rafts, tonkas, rikshas, dugout canoes, horse, camel, elephant...

On the other hand, I encountered obstacles that Marco didn't. In his day, not every frontier was a barrier. I had chosen to traverse Asia at a time when Iran had gone anti-American, and Afghanistan was policed by the Soviets, and Burma was xenophobic about _all_ strangers. To set foot in those countries necessitated some subterfuges

on my part, like buying my way into a camel caravan of smugglers on one occasion, and some other ruses that I had better not brag about.

I found that a lot of other things besides transport have not changed much since Marco's time: the punishing terrain and weathers of the Silk Road, for instance. On the streets of Venice and Istanbul and Trabzon and Gilgit and Urumqi and Beijing and Chiang Mai and Djakarta today are women just as beautiful as Marco admired in those places. In the streetless vast stretches between, there are women even more beautiful, in their wild way. (There are also beautiful boys, and other sorts of partners for other sorts of practices.) The camel herds and yak herds and rice padis are the same as ever, and the elephants still labor in the teak and mahogany forests. The hard-riding Uzbek tribesmen still play their bous-kashia horseback game in the far western outback of Chinese Turkestan. Banditry is still an honorable occupation among the Baluchis. A sandstorm on the Gobi is no less fierce now than it was when Marco crossed that black desert, or an ocean gale in the Sunda Straits, or an earthquake in the Punjab.

(In addition to legwork, the writing of The Journeyer required an ungodly lot of bookwork. A bibliography of the works consulted would run to some 1,000 titles. And at least 100 people helped in the research: librarians, professional fact-finders, museum curators, professors and scientists of every ology, officials of the U. S. and about 20 other governments, native guides and interpreters. But reading and interviewing, though both rigorous and productive, does not make for much in the way of anecdote. So I'll go on about the legwork.)

Like Marco Polo, I am voraciously curious. I wished to learn, for example -- and this was needful in some twenty different languages --

the sorts of words that dictionaries do not print, describing activities that anthropological texts usually obscure in discreet Latin. There are logical ways to go about learning such things, but, in many of those Eastern societies, such forthright researches can invite massacre. While I did manage to survive unmassacred (and to learn everything I needed, plus a lot I would never have dreamed of asking), my curiosity was sometimes in other ways hazardous to my health. When, in avalanche season, I tried to take a jeep along the Karakoram Road, that journey was interrupted when Nanga Parbat, the world's tenth highest mountain, resentfully dumped a portion of its height on me, and I was marooned up there in the Vale of Hunza for nearly two weeks. (The Hunzukut were hospitable, but I hope never again to taste mutton, rice, ghee or green tea.) In the Kurdish hinterland of Turkey I got arrested. In Thailand I almost (inadvertently) got married. In the Golden Triangle opium country I got shot at.

In some places, I had the eerie feeling that Marco Polo had come through only shortly before I did. In a Shanghai market alley, when I bade my interpreter ask an aged artisan to carve for me a yin (a signature seal) and gave my name as "Marco Polo," the Master Yinmaker Liu did so without demur, only remarking as he carved the Chinese characters into the stone, "There was another Marco Polo once, a famous one, in these parts." At other places along Marco's trail, I found things that he apparently overlooked. In one remote jungle, I came upon the lost people called the Baidui, isolated by their bizarre religion, a tribe so long and so defiantly reclusive that even the National Geographic Society has not yet discovered it.

But Marco Polo could have met the Baidui, if I did, and so could he have done many another thing that I did, which I have now attributed

to him. Clearly I could not represent Marco as having dodged bullets in the Golden Triangle -- opium was not big business in his time, nor were the poppy farmers wielding Vietnam War-surplus M-16s. But I could transmute that experience, and many others of mine, into his era and milieu. Other adventures I extrapolated from vague references in Polo's own book, and elaborated upon. Others I frankly invented. But nothing which occurs in this novel could not have happened, and I think Marco Polo would have liked doing this retracing of his journey again as The Journeyer.