



Gaze and Molding: A Perspective into the Image of China in the Rihla of Ibn Battuta

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Abstract

Centering on the description of China in the Travels of Ibn Battuta, this paper, guided by the theory of imagology, aims to observe and analyze the image of China shaped by the travels. Ibn Battuta shaped China in Yuan Dynasty as an open, friendly, diverse, and inclusive ancient oriental civilization, expressing his recognition and respect for the political economy, culture, and religion of the China Yuan Dynasty and reflecting the consistent understanding of the image of China in Yuan dynasty by western travelers and missionaries in China at that time. The image mainly derives from the writing subject - the collective memory and imagination of the Arab society and the author's experience and cognition in China. The image of China constructed collectively by Arab society for a long time has realized its recognition of Chinese politics, economy, culture, and religion. At the same time, Ibn Battuta, who has a religious and political mission, has a keen power of observation, with his all-inclusive narrative techniques and positive experience of visiting Yuan Dynasty, prompting him to shape this distinctive image of China in his works.

Subject Areas

Literature

Keywords

The Rihla of Ibn Battuta, the Image of China, Gaze Theory

1. Introduction

The study of imagology constitutes “a mutual interpretation among diverse ethnic groups, various travel writings, and multiple imaginations.” [1] The image of

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foreign nations represents a particular manifestation of social collective imagination: the discursive construction of the Other. [1] Such cross-cultural image-shaping may encompass specific individuals, material artifacts, symbolic landscapes, conceptual frameworks and discursive practices. The representation of a foreign nation's image inherently involves not only the creator's consciousness but also the collective cultural psyche of the nation's societal milieu. In other words, the shaping of foreign nation image serves dual functions: it simultaneously reflects the creator's personal experience and cognitive understanding of foreign cultures, and it embodies the interpretive paradigms and positional strategies constructed by the collective social consciousness underlying individual creators.

The portrayal of a foreign nation's image fundamentally derives from the empirical existence of the observed nation, yet persistently, it resides in a dialectical tension between objective reality and subjective imagination. Consequently, the image of a foreign nation shaped by creators is not just a mimetic reproduction but a production of a tripartite process of gaze-imagination-construction. The concept of gaze (as theorized in critical discourse) denotes a mode of observation permeated with power dynamics, libidinal investments, and identity consciousness [2]. Within this framework, the gazer operates as both the subject of vision and the agent of power-desire, at the same time, the gazed-upon becomes the object of vision and the target of power's instrumentalization. This epistemic positioning dictates that the construction of foreign nation image is contingent upon the gazer's perceptual filters, and it is also circumscribed by their sociocultural milieu and epistemological conditioning. During this process, creators transcend mere image fabrication to function as cultural intermediaries. They negotiate latent cultural differences, mediate identity negotiations, and channel collective imaginaries that reflect zeitgeist imperatives and subconscious societal demands [3]. Through hermeneutic analysis of textual artifacts, we may thus decode the creator's representational strategies, interrogating both the mechanisms of foreign image construction (the "how") and the substantive content of such representations (the "what").

In the mid-14th Century, the Moroccan traveler Ibn Battuta (1304-1369), following his sojourn in Yuan China (1345-1346), orally recounted his experiences under the commission of Sultan Abu Inan Faris¹. These narratives were systematically compiled into *The Rihla of Ibn Battuta* (hereafter Rihla), which introduced China to the Maghreb region of the Arab world, significantly contributing to Sino-Moroccan cultural exchange and mutual comprehension.

This study employs *the Rihla* as its primary text to deconstruct and analyze the semiotic markers and narrative devices constructing China's image through close textual analysis, juxtapose the text against contemporaneous Arabic literary works and historical records to delineate the interplay between collective Arabo-Islamic memory and the author's empirical encounters, to investigate how 14th-century

¹"Sultan" originated from the Arabic language sultan, refers to a person of authority, here refers to Muhammad bin Tuluk, king of Delhi. In the past, some documents translated in Chinese as Sudan, duan, and tan, etc. To distinguish the name of sultan, Chinese words "Sudan" were used in this paper.

trans-Eurasian connectivity, Islamic cosmopolitanism, and individual mobility shaped the author's perceptual apparatus.

2. Ibn Battuta and the Genesis of the Rihla

Ibn Battuta (1304-1369), a Berber polymath from Morocco, is one of the preeminent travelers and Islamic scholars of the medieval era. Born into an erudite family—his father was a Maliki jurist—Battuta received a comprehensive classical education, mastering multiple languages (including Arabic, Persian, and Berber dialects), which facilitated his three transcontinental journeys across Asia, Africa, and Europe, including four pilgrimages (hajj) to Mecca.

In 1325, at age 22, Battuta departed Tangier for his inaugural hajj, traversing Algeria, Tunisia, and Egypt. His subsequent itineraries spanned East Africa, Mesopotamia, the Arabian Peninsula, and ultimately India. By 1333, he crossed the Hindu Kush to reach Delhi, where Sultan Muhammad bin Tughluq appointed him qadi (judge) of the Maliki school. In 1342, commissioned to accompany a Yuan embassy to China, his delegation navigated Bengal, the Nicobar Islands, Sumatra, and Vietnam before arriving at Quanzhou—the southeastern maritime hub of Yuan China. Returning to Fez in 1349 concluded his first grand voyage, later followed by expeditions to Andalusia and Central Africa. Over nearly three decades, Battuta traversed approximately 120,000 kilometers across over 30 Afro-Eurasian polities, a feat unparalleled before the steam age. The Encyclopedia Britannica aptly recognizes him as “the greatest traveler of the pre-mechanized era” [4], cementing his status alongside Marco Polo, Odoric of Pordenone, and Niccolò de' Conti as one of medieval Eurasia's “Four Great Travelers.”

In 1354, Sultan Abu Inan Faris, intrigued by Battuta's accounts, commissioned his scribe Ibn Juzayy to compile these oral narratives into *Tuhfat al-Nuzzar fi Ghara'ib al-Amsar wa Aja'ib al-Asfar* (A Gift to Observers Concerning the Curiosities of Cities and Marvels of Journeys), and the book completed in December 1355. Colloquially known as *The Rihla of Ibn Battuta*, this encyclopedic work documents Battuta's four hajjs and global peregrinations, offering unparalleled insights into 14th-century Afro-Eurasian historical geography, socioeconomics, ethno-religious practices, and transcontinental trade networks.

Western scholars essentially regard *the Rihla* as a credible primary source, although the content remains sporadic exaggeration. It remains indispensable for studies of premodern globalization and cross-cultural exchange². As a normative phenomenon in historiographical analysis, contentious debates persist regarding specific anecdotes³, while the overall reliability of the book is without doubts. As scholar Li Guangbin asserts:

²In 1829, Samuel Lee published the English edition of the *Rihla* in London; from 1853 to 1858, C. De-fremery and B.R.Sanguinetti published four volumes of the *Rihla* in Paris, and some scholars published annotated editions.

³See: (France) G. Fernand, (China) Geng, S. and Mu, G. L. (1982) Collections of Arab Persian Turkic Oriental Literature (ii). Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company; Xu Y. Z. (2003) Investigations of Some Questions about Ibn Battuta's Visit to China. *Journal of Huanghe S&T College*, No. 2, 65-71.

Despite internal contradictions, factual errors, and ambiguities, the Rihla remains fundamentally authentic and invaluable. Its accounts of China align with verifiable historical records, corroborated by contemporaneous Arabic and Chinese sources.” [5]

The authors prioritized the documentation of firsthand accounts in their historical records. For instance, Ibn Battuta’s *Rihla* and Marco Polo’s *The Travels of Marco Polo* (hereafter *the Travels*) are grounded in direct observational experiences, with their narrative richness and granularity of detail far exceeding secondary or derivative accounts. To ensure textual integrity, scholars have conducted rigorous collation of the earliest extant 14th-century Arabic manuscript of *Rihla*—such as MS Arabe 2287 held at National Library of France—against later versions, thereby minimizing the risk of anachronistic alterations or interpolations.

Additionally, Li’s Chinese translation of the Arabic manuscript in 2004, coupled with his 2009 monograph *A Study of Ibn Battuta’s Chinese Itinerary*, systematically cross-referenced Battuta’s observations with Chinese dynastic annals (e.g., Yuan Shi), local gazetteers, and Arabic diaspora records. Notably, key events and figures mentioned in the *Rihla*—including documented Arab communities in Yuan China—can be found corroborated in archival materials. Thus, the historiographic significance of the book for reconstructing 14th-century Afro-Eurasian geopolitics, economic systems, and transcultural interactions remains irrefutable.

3. An Open and Cosmopolitan Ancient Civilization: The Image of China in The Rihla

3.1. The Image of China in the Rihla

The *Rihla* dedicated substantial passages to Ibn Battuta’s sojourn in Yuan China (1345-1346), documenting not only geographic landscapes, agricultural outputs, and material culture (e.g., porcelain, silk), but also institutional frameworks, transportation networks, social customs, and religious pluralism under the Mongol-Yuan regime. Synthesizing political economy, ethnoreligious dynamics, and socio-material realities, Battuta constructed an image of mid-14th-century China as an open, tolerant, and administratively sophisticated civilization—a portrayal corroborated by contemporaneous Eurasian sources.

The Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368), proclaimed by Kublai Khan, catalyzed unprecedented Afro-Eurasian exchanges. Key policies underpinning this openness included: establishment of Shibosi in Quanzhou and Guangzhou, which regulates overseas commerce; creating of Laiyuan Yi in Wenzhou and other cities which accommodates foreign envoys; systematic institutionalization of multireligious governance through specialized bureaus. Ibn Battuta arrived at Citong (Quanzhou), first went south to Suizhou (Guangzhou), then by water to Xingzai (Hangzhou), along the Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal north to Khan Bali (Beijing). Finally he returned to Quanzhou, then left China for India. In the book, he gave the following description of Chinese navigation, administration, overseas trade, and port prosperity during the Yuan dynasties:

Every Chinese city contains designated Muslim quarters with mosques for Friday prayers. Muslims enjoy high social esteem. [6]

Traveling in China is the safest. China is the most stable country in the world. Travelers are not afraid even if they are single for nine months. That's because there are post stations everywhere in China. The post station had post orders, cavalry, and garrison soldiers. [6]

Citong Port (Quanzhou Port) is one of the largest ports in the world and it is even arguably the largest port in the world. I saw hundreds of large ships in the harbor, and there were also countless small boats in the harbor. [6]

In Ibn Battuta's observations, China's maritime industry was both advanced and secure. The Mongol-Yuan administration demonstrated remarkable efficacy in governance. Urban zoning of distinct religious enclaves reflected a hospitable attitude towards foreign merchants, complemented by a proliferation of bustling ports facilitating frequent trade between China and overseas. Notably, Battuta went so far as to assert that Quanzhou ranked as the world's largest port during his era. This characterization aligns with the assessment by Yuan scholar Wu Cheng.

Quanzhou, which is the paramount metropolis of Qimin regions, is a repository for exotic treasures and rare curiosities from distant lands. It has become the commercial enclave for wealthy merchants from diverse foreign territories, earning its reputation as the world's foremost [port]. [7]

Battuta's documentation of Quanzhou's prosperity—marked by its cosmopolitan markets and maritime dynamism—corroborates contemporary Chinese records. His judicious conclusions stemmed from empirical observation and a sophisticated understanding of global commerce, underscoring the reliability of his cross-cultural account.

As a devout Muslim, Battuta systematically engaged with Islamic communities in each city he visited, employing a faith-based lens to document the socioreligious fabric of Chinese Muslim society. The *Rihla* meticulously recorded the organizational structures, ritual practices, collective mentalities, and mercantile lifestyles of Muslim populations in Yuan China:

A designated Muslim quarter exists within the city, featuring a grand mosque, a zawiya (Sufi lodge), and a specialized marketplace. The quarter is administered by a qadi (Islamic judge) and an imam (prayer leader). In every Chinese settlement containing Muslim residents, all matters of Islamic law must refer to the local imam, with final adjudication rendered by the qadi. [6]

The following day, we entered the second city through its 'Jewish Gate,' inhabited by substantial populations of Jews, Christians, and sun-worshipping Turks... On the third day, we proceeded to the third city—it's an Muslim enclave with remarkable architectural beauty. Its bazaar configuration mirrored classical Islamic urban planning, with multiple mosques and active muezzins. At noon, we heard the adhān (call to prayer) summoning the faithful Muslims to do zuhr (mid-day prayer). [6]

The westward expansion of the Yuan Dynasty, coupled with the revitalization of trade alongside the Silk Road and Spice Route, precipitated the influx of Central Asian, Arab, and Persian merchants into China. This demographic shift facilitated the rapid dissemination of Islam during the Yuan Dynasties, culminating in the widespread presence of Huihui (Chinese Muslims) and the formative stages of the Hui ethnic group. As is evidenced by toponyms such as Muslim Quarter, Jewish Gate, and documented communities of Christians and sun-worshipping Manichaeans, it can be seen that China of the Yuan Dynasties witnessed the harmonious coexistence of Islam, Judaism, Christianity, and Manichaeism. While privileging Buddhism and Daoism as state religions, the Yuan administration institutionalized religious pluralism through specialized bureaucratic organs, such as Jixianyuan, the directorate for Daoist affairs; Xuanzhengyuan, the Bureau of Buddhist clergy regulation; Chongfusi, the office for Nestorian Christian administration; Huihui Zhangjiao Hadi Si and Huihui Hadi Suo, the central and local Islamic judicial systems. [8] The Inscription on the Reconstruction of the Libai Mosque attests to Islam's proliferation:

From the imperial capital to remote prefectures, over ten thousand mosques uniformly oriented westward now observe the ritual prayers (salah). [9]

The Rihla documented striking instances of Sino-Islamic cultural synthesis. For example, it mentioned that the Hangzhou magistrate's son, accompanied by musicians versed in Arabic qasidas and Persian ghazals, hosted Battuta with performances of refined Persian melodies. It also mentioned that Borhan al-Din Sa'erji, appointed by the Yuan Khan as Islamic communal leader, and Governor Qurtā employed Muslim chefs to provide halal banquets which exemplify elite patronage of Islamic cultural practices. These narratives reveal Islam's conscious acculturation into Chinese society, paralleled by China's pluralistic ethos that accommodated exogenous traditions.

The Rihla extolled Yuan China's unparalleled material wealth and artisanal sophistication, and it wrote, "*China's territorial expanse encompasses exhaustive resources—fruits, grains, gold, and silver—surpassing all global regions in abundance [6]; silkworms subsist solely on mulberry foliage without artificial sustenance [6].*"

Also, the book provided systematic accounts of ceramic and porcelain classification systems, coal combustion techniques, naval architecture, and paper currency functioning as de facto global tender. These observations collectively depict a civilized China characterized by resource abundance and technical sophistication under Mongol governance.

Battuta's meticulous urban ethnography of Quanzhou, Guangzhou, Hangzhou, and Beijing revealed China's advanced urban planning. It wrote, "*Beijing (Khan-baliq) is one of the world's most majestic cities, its garden placement diverges from conventional Chinese urbanism—gardens lie beyond city walls, aligning with foreign layouts [6].*" "*Guangzhou is a premier metropolis and commercial hub. Its ceramic market dominates national and international trade networks,*

exporting wares to India and Yemen [6].” Battuta also wrote, “Hangzhou is the largest city I have encountered, requiring three days to traverse... encircled by six concentric walled districts, each with specialized functions [6].”

Scholar Tian Rucheng in Ming Dynasty mentioned in his book *West Lake Trav- elogue* corroborates Battuta’s account, which wrote, “Zhenjiao Mosques in Hang- zhou’s Wenjin Quarter, founded by the Persian master Alā al-Dīn during the Yuan’s Yanyou era (1314-1320)... Muslim communities proliferated across Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Fujian, and Guangdong, with Hangzhou as their epicenter.” [10] Battuta’s descriptions capture Hangzhou’s dynamic urban fabric, which re- garded Hangzhou as functional zoning, commercial vibrancy, and cosmopolitan- ism.

3.2. Comparative Image in Different Documentary Books

The image of China portrayed by Battuta characterizes by openness, hospitality, and pluralistic inclusivity. However, as a Muslim pilgrim whose travels were fun- damentally religious in purpose, Ibn Battuta’s brief sojourn in late Yuan China (1345-1346) may have limited the depth and comprehensiveness of his observa- tions. This study conducts a comparative analysis with accounts by Marco Polo (1254-1324) and Giovanni de’ Marignolli (c.1290-?), contemporaries who docu- mented early and mid-Yuan China to triangulate these representations.

Marco Polo’s *The Travels* and *Journey of Giovanni de’Marignolli* (hereafter *the Journey*) provide critical depictions of the Yuan Dynasty. *The Travels* offers par- ticularly exhaustive and systematic documentation, which spans 1271 to 1295. Polo’s narrative chronicled his eastward journey to China, incorporating detailed observations of regions in West Asia, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia. Beyond its meticulous records of Kublai Khan’s courtly governance, ceremonial rituals, and imperial hunts, *the Travels* delivered granular accounts of urban prosperity in Dadu and other key cities—including Xi’an, Nanjing, Suzhou, Hangzhou, and Quanzhou. Similarly, *the Journey* detailed the papal envoy’s diplomatic mission to Dadu, where he presented state letters and thoroughbred horses to the Yuan emperor, alongside his return journey through Hangzhou and Quanzhou. Con- vergences emerge between these European accounts and *the Rihla*, particularly in their shared emphasis on the Yuan Dynasty’s administrative sophistication, urban grandeur, and intercultural dynamism.

In his books, Marco Polo wrote, “*The Great Khan summoned all Christians of Dadu, commanding them to bring the Four Gospels. Incense burned in solemn veneration; he reverently kissed the scripture, mandating all officials to emulate this actsimilar honors accorded to Muslim, Jewish, and Buddhist festivals [11].*” “*Dadu’s twelve suburban districts surpassed the inner city in population density. These peripheries hosted foreign envoys and merchants—some bearing tribute, others trading luxuries—residing in palatial residences [11].*” Giovanni de’Marignolli wrote, “*In Dadu, we frequently debated theology with Jews and het- erodox groups... The city housed multiple bell-towered churches near the imperial*

palace, their clergy fully provisioned by the Khan [12].”

The Mongol-Yuan administration not only demonstrated tolerance toward foreign religions by having the emperor observe and celebrate diverse religious festivals, but also systematically provided material support—including food, clothing, and dedicated places of worship—to religious communities. Concurrently, the dynasty implemented preferential policies for foreign merchants, establishing Dishe (specialized residential compounds) to accommodate commercial diasporas. These practices epitomize the Yuan regime’s strategic openness and institutionalized multiculturalism.

As for the social reality in Yuan Dynasty, *the Travels* and *the Journey* both give detailed descriptions of the layout and commercial conditions of cities such as Dadu, Hangzhou and Quanzhou. For example, when describing Dadu, the capital’s palatial thoroughfares, festive ceremonies, imperial hunts, and sophisticated transportation networks—particularly the advanced zhanchi (postal relay system)—are meticulously chronicled in *the Travels*. *The Journey* wrote, “*The grandeur of Khanbaliq’s urban scale, demographic density, and military might requires no elaboration [12].*” When describing Hangzhou and Quanzhou, *the Travels* wrote, “*The city of Xingzai spans a hundred li in circumference, interlaced with 12,000 stone bridges... Its merchant class thrives in opulence, with commercial volumes defying quantification [11].*” “*Citong Port, situated within this city, receives all Indian vessels laden with spices and luxuries. The influx of gems and pearls reaches unimaginable quantities before redistribution across southern China [11].*” And in *the Journey*, Giovanni de’ Marignolli wrote, “*Campsay (Hangzhou), renowned for its grandeur, thrives as a prosperous city where residents indulge in extravagant opulence [12].*” “*Citong (Quanzhou), a colossal entrepôt, teems with population and boasts ornate churches alongside specialized warehouses for mercantile storage [12].*” The descriptions in their books highlight the colossal scale, thriving commerce, and opulent residents of Hangzhou and Quanzhou.

While all three travelers provided detailed accounts of Yuan Dynasty China, their narratives diverged in focus. Marco Polo emphasized material wealth and economic structures, particularly highlighting the grandeur of imperial court politics. In contrast, Battuta and Marignolli prioritized observations on religious propagation and quotidian social practices. This dichotomy reflects their distinct identities: Polo’s mercantile background inclined him toward commercial and political hierarchies, whereas Battuta and Marignolli, as a jurist and evangelist respectively, engaged more deeply with cultural and spiritual dimensions of Yuan society.

This analytical synthesis demonstrates that the portrayal of China during the Mongol-Yuan period in *the Rihla* aligns consistently with representations found in *the Travels* and *the Journey*. As noted, “Missionaries, merchants, and literati—represented by Friar Odoric, Marco Polo, and John Mandeville—introduced China characterized by territorial vastness, prosperous cities, political stability,

commercial sophistication, and infrastructural efficiency to late medieval Europe through their writings. [13] “From the 13th to 15th centuries, western observers—whether missionaries, travelers, or literary figures—converged in their depictions of China, constructing a coherent civilizational image transcending individual textual agendas. This epistemic consistency underscores the Yuan Dynasty’s paradigmatic role in the premodern global imaginary.

As demonstrated above, Ibn Battuta’s *Rihla* portrays China in the Yuan Dynasties as an open, hospitable, pluralistic, and prosperous ancient oriental civilization—a polity worthy of global pilgrimage. This depiction articulates profound recognition and reverence for the Mongol-Yuan regime’s political-economic efficacy, cultural-religious pluralism, and material-civilizational prowess. Crucially, a diachronic analysis of contemporaneous and subsequent Western accounts—including those by missionaries, travelers, and literati—reveals a persistent late-medieval European representation of China as a resource-abundant, urban-magnificent, commercially hyperconnected, and politically stabilized country. This epistemic consistency across diverse observers—from Friar Odoric to John Mandeville—reflects not merely textual borrowing, but a convergent civilizational image shaped by the Yuan Dynasty’s unparalleled integration into Eurasian systems.

4. The Formation of China’s Image in the *Rihla*

The construction of China’s image in *the Rihla* arises from the interplay between Arab societal collective memory, imagination and Battuta’s personal experiential knowledge acquired during his travels. This process can be analytically deconstructed through three dimensions, namely the Arab civilizational memory, historical-cultural contexts, and Battuta’s empirical observations.

In premodern Arab consciousness, the Silk Road and Spice Route had long cultivated China’s reputation as a civilization of technological mastery. These networks transmitted not only material goods—silk, porcelain, lacquer-ware—but also advanced techniques, such as sericulture, well-digging, and iron-casting, to the westward. The Spice Route facilitated the large-scale transportation of Chinese porcelain, silk textiles, damasks, and other luxury goods to Arab territories along the Persian Gulf and beyond. Arab medical discourse even attributed prophylactic properties to silk garments. Arabs believed that wearing silk costumes could help prevent skin diseases and repel parasites like lice and fleas [14]. As recorded in *the Eastern Travelogue*, Guangzhou’s porcelain stockpiled awaiting maritime export, and Baghdad’s medieval markets featured dedicated Chinese quarters specializing in silk and ceramics [15]. Arab merchants dominated Indian Ocean trade networks during this era from the 8th to 15th centuries, as it was said, “In every Indian Ocean port and city, Arab traders thrived, their markets overflowing with Chinese commodities [16].” Egyptian scholar Ragheb El-Banna’s *Journey to China* further elucidated that emperors of the Yuan Dynasties lavishly hosted Arab merchants, facilitating massive porcelain exports to Egypt. Arab traders repatriated not only silk, porcelain, and tea but also transformative technologies, namely paper-making,

navigation with compasses, and gunpowder [17]. This sustained interaction crystallized a durable Arab perception of China with aesthetic superiority, technological preeminence, and mercantile reciprocity.

The twin transportation arteries—the Silk Road and Spice Route—forged an enduring Sino-Arab civilizational connection, catalyzing unparalleled economic and cultural exchanges. During the medieval era, a continuous stream of Arab envoys, merchants, and travelers visited China, many documenting their observations. Sulayman al-Tājir wrote, “China surpasses any other lands in beauty and fascination... while vast tracts of India remain uninhabited, every inch of Chinese soil is cultivated, with dense population spanning its territories [18].” Ibn Khuradādhbih enumerated that China had 300 densely populated cities, 90 of which were very renowned; it was agricultural abundant in diverse grains, fruits, and cash crops; also, it was artisanal supreme in silk, porcelain, and brocades [19]. Additionally, Al-Idrīsī, in his *Nuzhat al-Mushtāq (the Book of Pleasant Journeys)*, the scholar noted, “China’s vast territory sustains immense populations. Its numerous harbors—mostly estuary-based—require ships to navigate upstream rivers. These ports teem with commercial activity and dense settlements [20].” Collectively, these accounts construct China as a territorially expansive, economically dynamic, and culturally alluring mysterious realm.

Medieval Arabic travel accounts consistently extolled the enlightened wisdom of Chinese emperors, efficacy of administrative governance, and hospitable disposition of its people. Al-Masūdī in his *Murūj al-Dhahab wa-Ma’ādin al-Jawāhir (Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems)* recorded a revelatory episode which read, “A Chinese emperor personally received a Qurayshite descendant, inquiring about caliphal governance and Islamic doctrines. The sovereign showcased portraits of religious prophets—including Buddha and Laozi—demonstrating comparative theological awareness [21].” Al-Masūdī ultimately lauded this monarch as the consummate ruler, governing through codified laws, rational principles, and statecraft mastery. [21] This narrative illuminates two historical realities. One is the Tang dynasties (618-907) and the Abbasid Caliphate maintained sophisticated reciprocal awareness of each other’s political-religious systems. The other is that the Tang dynasty’s sustained ethnoreligious inclusivity and proactive engagement with the overseas world fostered positive impressions among foreign merchants. Quantitatively, between 651 (2nd year of Yonghui reign) and 789 (14th year of Zhenyuan reign), the Abbasid Caliphate dispatched envoys to Tang on 39 documented occasions [22]. Concurrently, innumerable Arab merchants—later serving as cultural intermediaries—disseminated accounts of China’s prosperity upon returning westward. These cumulative experiences constituted the informational bedrock for Arab society’s collective memory and sociocultural imagination of China.

The Arab conquest of Morocco in the late 7th Century initiated profound sociopolitical transformations. By the 10th Century, rapid economic and cultural development, alongside burgeoning handicraft industries and commerce, fostered

the emergence of proto-Arab urban centers. However, the 14th to early 15th centuries witnessed the decline of the Marinid dynasty, marked by feudal rivalries, court coups, and tribal conflicts, plunging Morocco into a fragmented feudal state [23]. To consolidate the fractured feudal alliances, and to counter the internal and external threats, the caliphate dispatched emissaries and travelers to forge cooperative networks. Concurrently, Arab merchants ventured abroad for trade, while devout Muslims undertook the Hajj pilgrimage, heeding the Prophet Muhammad's injunction, "Seek knowledge even as far as China." The Mongol Empire's three westward campaigns (1219-1260) catastrophically dismantled the Islamic heartlands of Baghdad and Damascus, instilling awe across the Western world. As one historian noted, this dual legacy of destruction and compelled engagement catalyzed unprecedented Eurasian interactions. [24] Concurrently, Mongol-Yuan policies of openness and synthesis revitalized Silk Road connectivity, achieving peak Afro-Eurasian integration. As Henry Yule asserted, "It was under the Mongols that China became first truly known to the European world [25]." These intersecting dynamics—Morocco's feudal crises, Islamic intellectual imperatives, and Mongol-Yuan-driven globalization—informed Battuta's favorable construction of China's image in *the Rihla*.

Battuta's acute observational acumen, encyclopedic narrative methodology, and positive experiences during his sojourn collectively informed his favorable portrayal of Mongol-Yuan China.

Battuta was born into a scholarly lineage of Islamic jurists, he received elite classical education, and he mastered multiple languages. His travel accounts exhibited documentation of geographic features, agricultural systems, political and religious institutions, and cultural practices, consistently applying comparative analysis and objective evaluation. Ibn Juzayy, the scribe of *the Rihla*, extolled Battuta as "a Shaykh, jurist, erudite scholar, and the Islamic world's preeminent globetrotter [26]." Within Islamic scholarly tradition, the honorific *Shaykh* denotes a mastery of religious sciences, while *globetrotter* signifies authoritative travel scholarship—epithets Battuta embodied through intellectual rigor. Crucially, *the Rihla* documented Battuta's initial contact with Mongol politics in AH 726 (1326 CE), traversing the Ilkhanate, Chagatai Khanate, and Golden Horde before reaching Quanzhou two decades later. His reception in Mongol-Yuan China proved highly exceptional because the municipal authorities accorded him ceremonial welcomes, and the local Muslim communities provided him with lodging and logistical assistance. Battuta also mentioned there were documented Muslim quarters with mosques in every city, the guarded postal stations ensured their journey safety, and the affluent Muslim merchants enjoyed spiritual and material fulfillment. Battuta also documented, "*When disputes arose between Han Chinese and Muslims, they were required to seek adjudication separately from Han officials and Qadi (Islamic judges) respectively. I personally witnessed a Muslim merchant prevail in a debt dispute case, as the Qadi rendered judgment in accordance with the Quran, whereas the Han official based his decision solely on contractual*

documents.” This kind of selective documentation epitomizes his hierarchical cultural gaze and projection of religious authority. These firsthand encounters with Mongol-Yuan China’s open governance, interfaith tolerance, and socioeconomic stability fundamentally shaped Battuta’s representation of China as a civilizational exemplar. His narrative strategically foregrounded these attributes, reflecting empirical observation and conscious image curation.

The image of China in *the Rihla* emerges from the dialectical interplay between Arab society’s collective Sino-Arab memory and civilizational imaginary—serving as the informational bedrock—and the author’s empirically grounded positive experiences during his sojourn to Mongol-Yuan China, which enriched and accentuated this portrayal. In essence, the Chinese civilizational image constructed in *the Rihla* represents a “product of Sino-Arab civilizational interchange [27]”, rendered particularly salient through Battuta’s comparative framework against other Eastern polities.

As proto-ethnographic accounts bridge the East and the West, travelogues like *the Rihla* transmitted foundational knowledge about China to premodern Europe, crystallizing its earliest extraterritorial civilizational image. Battuta—the north African Arab-Islamic scholar from Morocco—traversed both Silk Road arteries, witnessing the commercial vitality between the East and the West, the institutional openness, and its material prosperity. Crucially, Battuta’s depiction of affluence in Mongol-Yuan China diverges from colonial-era narratives of prosperity through exploitation. His account instead reveals a developmental paradigm rooted in non-colonial reciprocity. In other words, China’s sustained advancement propelled Silk Road expansion terrestrially to Mediterranean littoral states, maritimately to the East African coast—through equitable civilizational exchange.

5. Contemporary Implications of China’s Image in Arabic Classics for Cross-Cultural Communication

As seminal works of early Sino-Western cultural mediation, medieval travelogues transmitted the first systematic corpus of China-related knowledge to the West, fundamentally shaping the proto-imagology of Chinese civilization in foreign consciousness. Ibn Battuta, a North African Arab scholar from Morocco whose Islamic faith propelled his transcontinental journeys, traversed both overland and maritime Silk Roads—dual arteries of Eurasian connectivity. His chronicles documented the commercial vibrancy along these routes while extolling Yuan China’s openness, multicultural tolerance, and material prosperity.

Battuta’s observations of China exhibit profound intertextuality with his dual identity as both a Muslim jurist and Sufi mystic-traveler. His accounts of Yuan judicial practices constituted a transcivilizational projection of Shafi’i madhhab principles. By emphasizing narratives of Quran-based adjudication, he rhetorically reconstructed Islamic legal idealism onto Chinese socio-judicial realities. Simultaneously, as an envoy of Sufi, his mystical depictions of Hangzhou’s mountain hermits represented a cross-cultural transposition of Sufi ascetic experiences

through analogical hermeneutics, exposing the cognitive mechanisms by which Sufi adepts assimilated foreign cultural phenomena via their spiritual frameworks.

Notably, Battuta's portrayal of Chinese affluence remains distinct from colonial discourses of civilizational prosperity. Historically, China's developmental momentum continuously propelled Silk Road expansion-terrestrially towards Mediterranean civilizations and to East African coasts.

The global resonance of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has reinvigorated Sino-Arab exchanges, presenting both unprecedented opportunities and challenges. Historically, Sino-Arab civilizational interactions—from diplomatic envoys during the Han-Tang dynastic eras, to missionary and mercantile engagements since the Song-Ming periods, and modern political, economic, and cultural collaborations—have established paradigmatic models for intercultural dialogue. Archival records illuminate a historical trajectory of interconnections leading to harmonious coexistence, which offers critical historical precedents for contemporary engagement through excavating the positive image of China preserved in Arab-African collective memory.

Current challenges in China's cultural diplomacy manifested as over-historicization of content, self-referential communication modes, state-dominated agency, and propaganda-oriented strategies [28]. To transcend these limitations, the synthesis of historical wisdom and innovative methods can recalibrate China's cultural diplomacy, transforming soft power from a state-monopolized resource into a globally co-constructed civilizational discourse.

As for the content, bridging tradition and modernity should be the strategy. China's cultural diplomacy should anchor itself in exemplary traditional culture while articulating contemporary innovations that preserve authenticity. This, on the one hand, requires culturally sensitive discourse mining via systematically excavating the linguistic logic, substantive content, and expressive forms of Chinese traditions through cross-cultural hermeneutics. Modern spirit transmission should be the other one through codifying the philosophical essence of socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era into globally legible narratives.

As for the method, grounded narratives should be the innovation. For example, China should adopt culturally resonant narratives by developing grassroots-engaged storytelling that fosters emotional resonance and psychological proximity, facilitating intercultural persuasion through inductive reasoning. To avoid state monopoly in cross-culture communication, China should empower civilian actors by strategically mobilizing enterprises, think tanks, NGOs, diaspora communities, and citizen diplomats as cultural interlocutors while maintaining government stewardship.

Additionally, instead of propaganda-oriented approaches, China should implement culturally immersive strategies by prioritizing silent permeation tactics that enhance receptivity. As is known, the U.S. has been suppressing and stigmatizing Confucius institutes over the past years, which stems from divergent Sino-American political-cultural traditions [29]. Such a case exemplifies this dynamic. This

development validates the strategic necessity and institutional correctness of the organizational transformation of Confucius Institutes in 2020.

In advancing China's global cultural dissemination, practitioners must simultaneously acknowledge legitimate critiques and constructive feedback while confronting malicious defamation and systemic vulnerabilities. This requires steadfast adherence to institutional comparative advantages and artistic self-confidence, through which evidentiary responses to skepticism can project a self-assured, autonomous, open, and inclusive civilizational ethos.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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