

BOOK REVIEW

Marco Ferrarese, *The Travels of Marco Yolo: Blazing Trails Where Marco Polo Feared To Go. Petaling Jaya: Gerakbudaya Enterprise, 2017. Pp. xxiv + 204. ISBN 978-983-2344-81-0 (Paperback).*

Marco Ferrarese's *The Travels of Marco Yolo*

Marco Ferrarese is Italian but has lived in Malaysia since 2009. *The Travels of Marco Yolo* is his third book. His first is *Nazi Goreng* (2013), a novel that has the distinction of being banned in Malaysia. His second is *Banana Punk Rock Trails* (2015), a non-fictional work which I reviewed for *Star Two* soon after its launch.

Ferrarese also writes about travel, culture, and “extreme music” in Asia for international publications. *The Travels of Marco Yolo* is a collection of 28 such articles published between 2013 and 2016, covering 10 countries: Mongolia, Indonesia, Russia, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, India, Turkey, Malaysia, Iran, Tajikistan, China, Nepal, Thailand, and the Philippines.

In the introductory “Note from the Author”, Ferrarese tells us about the journeys on which he bases the articles. Apart from “jaunts” to countries close to Malaysia, he made two journeys “completely overland” from Malaysia to his native Italy. The first was in 2012, a nine-month journey across Asia along the Silk Road routes, travelling “on buses and trains . . . and all sorts of hitch-hike-able transport”. The second, in 2015, was by train, from Hong Kong to Finland, and thence to Italy.

Both in the book title and in his “Note”, Ferrarese reminds us that some 750 years ago, another Italian, Marco Polo, had travelled overland across Asia along the Silk Road. But *The Travels of Marco Yolo* is not an in-the-footsteps-of kind of travelogue. Marco Polo’s overland journey was from Europe to China and his homeward journey was mainly by sea. Further, he travelled for specific, career-enhancing purposes whereas our present-day Marco travelled “all because of a primal desire: to see all of the world I could see, or die trying”.

Another difference lies in the way the two travelogues are structured. Marco Polo’s accounts are organized in chapters defined by time and place, giving the reader a good idea of his various itineraries. This orderly structure is missing in *The Travels of Marco Yolo* – and the result can be discombobulating to the reader, to put it mildly.

Discombobulated was how I felt on reading the first three chapters, which threw me willy-nilly into central Mongolia, Northern Sumatra, and Siberia – in that order, and in quick succession, too, because the chapters are short. Where in all this, I asked myself in disgruntlement, is there any evidence of Ferrarese’s declaration that his stories “celebrate travelling slowly, taking the longest overland route” (p. xix)?

So disgruntled was I that I put the book away. And I thought. I thought about the conventions of travel literature through the ages, about the ease and speed of contemporary travel, about the reading habits and tastes of people today. I wondered about the relevance and even necessity of travel literature in an age

when armchair travellers can access the sights and sounds of the whole world with the click of a switch, the tap of a key, or the swipe of a phone screen. And I marveled at the thousands of people who still bothered to write, publish, and read about travel in books, blogs, books, Twitter and what-have-you.

As I pondered and wondered, it slowly dawned on me: I had been reading the book all wrong!

The problem was not the book or its structure; the problem was me. I was out of step with the spirit of the age, the author, and the book. There before me was a travelogue by a young, contemporary Italian who has, tongue in cheek, named his writing persona Marco (you-only-live-once) Yolo. And here I was, my brain calcified by age-old (old-age?) prejudices, missing the joke, and feeling grumpy because this 21st century travelogue is not structured like the long-dead Marco Polo's.

Chastened, I resumed my reading, this time skipping randomly from chapter to chapter as I pleased. And I was pleased. No longer encumbered by my old expectations, I became more responsive to what was being described and depicted. Each chapter, I noticed, gives a brief history of the place but concentrates on the present in which the author finds himself: the people he meets, his interactions with them, and his thoughts about the experiences.

What I found particularly delightful is that, like Marco Polo (finally!), Ferrarese avoids well-known and oft-visited places. Instead he takes us to out-of-the-way places and shares with us their secret histories, their rare events, and their once-in-a-lifetime sights.

To me, *The Travels of Marco Yolo* exemplifies the essence of 21st-century travel and its literature. It is not about itineraries and destinations but about an individual traveller's unique and unrepeatable "momentary now" in any given time and place. And like all good travel literature, it leads us both outward to the world and, as the author's thoughts and feelings become ours for a while, inward to ourselves.

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<https://www.thestar.com.my/lifestyle/books/2018/01/03/marco-ferrarese-travel-writing>)

