

Vogel, Hans-Ulrich: *Marco Polo Was in China. New Evidence from Currencies, Salts and Revenues.* Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2013. xxxii + 643 pp., ISBN 978-9-00423-193-1.

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Hans Ulrich Vogel's *Marco Polo Was in China*, the second installment in the academic series "Monies, Markets, and Finances in East Asia, 1600-1900", is an outstanding book with occasionally brilliant flashes on a topic that has intrigued scholars for more than half a millennium. Ideally, readers aspiring to fully appreciate and properly digest its rich and highly specialized content should be acquainted with the book it is responding to in its title, namely Frances Wood's *Did Marco Polo Go to China?*¹ It is true that Vogel devotes a large part of his "Introduction" (esp. pp. 11–88) to both summarizing and elaborating on the arguments brought forth by Wood *contra* Marco Polo. However, by reading her book, preferably from cover to cover, one will get a better sense of the extent to which Wood's intellectual style diverges from – and is in fact diametrically opposed to – what Vogel has tried to achieve in the present work. Wood's book makes for an easy and agreeable read. It takes just a couple of hours to finish. It wraps its scholarly content in a coat of autobiographical digressions and occasionally bawdy anecdotes. It has a provocative agenda, limiting itself to casting doubts rather than offering conclusions. It is not investigative, relying on previous academic work done by others – most notably Herbert Franke (1914–2011) – rather than on new research findings. By contrast, Vogel's book is focused on, to quote from Mark Elvin's preface, "cautious erudite sobriety, massive detail and informational density" as well as "multilingual and multicultural *maîtrise*" (p. xvii). You will need at least one week to work through its content, also because some parts are so packed with evidence that they require more than a single reading. In addition, the book presents its expert knowledge in a strictly academic rhetoric with a penchant for ponderous sentences. Far from being provocative, its main agenda is to provide new evidence for settling the "Marco-Polo-question", preferably once and for good. To achieve this goal, it resorts to long argumentations which frequently meander towards their conclusions by drawing encyclopedic circles around its main subject, thus oftentimes touching upon

1 Wood 1995.

somewhat extraneous topics ranging from modern Swiss banknotes (p. 217) to traditional African salt currencies (pp. 286–287) and Stefan Zweig’s last novel *Die Welt von Gestern* (p. 308). In other words, unlike Wood’s book, the monograph under review is a full-fledged book of academic investigation written by a scholar at the vanguard of Marco-Polo scholarship. Most certainly, its foremost goal is not to recapitulate what has been said before on Marco Polo and his account, but rather to present new research findings.

What is new then about Vogel’s evidence and argumentation? Assessments of the China-related knowledge contained in Marco Polo’s *Il Milione* tend to be patterned according to the expectations of modern tourists who check sightseeing items off a standard list as ultimate proof that they have been to a particular country or world region. However, *Il Milione* was not intended to be a pre-modern version of a *Lonely Planet*-guide catering to world travelers in search of cultural highlights. Despite the strong exotic aura of wondrous adventurism it still exudes today, Marco Polo’s text is often rather technical and formulaic, occasionally to the point of tiring even those tiny audiences who enjoy reading instruction manuals. It is precisely by focusing on the *Milione*’s most technical (and for most readers definitely least appealing) information – currencies, salts, and revenues – that Vogel succeeds in making visible a crucial yet largely unnoticed layer in Marco Polo’s text. As Vogel’s analysis shows, the rather specialized knowledge contained in this layer is surprisingly consistent and systematic. As far as currencies, salts, and revenues are concerned, Marco Polo’s text possesses, despite its somewhat modest length, a historical depth and complexity that surpasses any description of China provided by other European or Persian accounts of that time. This reinforces the “amazingly good job” – paradigm as it was articulated by Stephen G. Haw in his highly readable *Marco Polo’s China: A Venetian in the realm of Khubilai Khan*.² If Marco Polo disingenuously fabricated his account, Haw argued, he took great care to match the information included in his forgery to the empirical reality of Yuan China, at least as far as we can access it through the extant sources. Obviously, there are blatant omissions in his text (tea, bound feet, Chinese characters, and a few more) as well as serious misrepresentations (most notably, Marco Polo’s claim that he was involved in the siege of Xiangyang, which in reality took place a while before his alleged arrival in the Middle Kingdom), but mostly the information given in the *Milione* makes for an astonishingly precise account of China under Mongol rule.

Now the major revelation of Vogel’s book is that it convincingly shows – on an unprecedented level in terms of methodology and thoroughness – how factually detailed the text of *Il Milione* can be after being exposed to close philological scrutiny. Marco Polo’s treatment of paper money, to highlight one of the most

² Haw 2006.

captivating topics in the book under review, is impressively complete, covering all aspects dealing with its production, functioning, and circulation as well as its direct impact on public finances and commercial transactions. Equally admirable is the Venetian's knowledge of regional currencies such as cowry and salt monies. He also paid attention to the complex processes involved in the production of salt, noticing, among many other things, that in China salt could be gained by other means than solar evaporation, specifically by boiling down a brine produced by leaching sand in which salt had naturally or artificially accumulated. Moreover, this technical information is pegged in a spatial narrative that reveals Marco Polo's accurate sense of the administrative geography which structured the Yuan territory.

In its scholarly spirit, the book under review is remindful of the seminal work achieved by Sir Henry Yule (1820–1889), the perhaps most famous of Marco Polo scholars. What ultimately led Yule to compile his voluminous *The Book of Ser Marco Polo* (1871) and *Cathay and the Way Thither* (1913) was to a large extent related to the explosion of knowledge that occurred in the West from the second half of the nineteenth-century onwards. Access to new knowledge from different cultures and disciplines as a result of imperialist expansionism had rendered much of the information contained in William Marsden's (1754–1836) standard edition of *The Travels of Ser Marco Polo* (1818) obsolete. As such, Yule's monumental work on Marco Polo is indicative of the epistemic *zeitgeist* that was prevalent in the West in the late nineteenth century. There was a sense, vividly captured in the recent *The Triumph of Human Empire: Verne, Morris, and Stevenson at the End of the World* by Rosalind Williams,³ that all that needed to be known had been more or less explored thanks to modern technology in combination with imperial expansionism. More than a century later, we are experiencing a new, radically fast and pervasive explosion of knowledge that the book under review both reflects and makes extremely good use of, to such an extent that Yule's efforts appear now to a considerable extent as antiquated and expendable as Marsden's in the nineteenth century. Unlike Yule (and Paul Pelliot [1878–1945] for that matter, who caught only a short yet intense glimpse of what was about to be unearthed in the decades to come), Vogel could for instance recur to the thesauric results of more than a century of frenetic archaeological research in China and Central Asia and thus enrich his argumentation with both massive and substantial evidence. Most notable in this context is his inclusion of extant paper money found in 1965 and 1983/84 respectively (pp. 103–105), based on which Vogel is able to illustrate the accuracy of Marco Polo's description of Yuan currencies. Vogel is also admirably versatile in his usage of the digital humanities, in particular the oracle-like CrossAsia database,

3 Williams 2013.

when he needs to scan large text collections such as the *Siku quanshu* (Imperial Collection of Four Treasuries) for specific information or to retrieve primary materials, for instance the image of Chinese seals stamped on a Persian letter to Philip IV of France (p. 117) or the first edition of Giovanni Battista Ramusio's version of Marco Polo's text (p. 553). Alone for its bibliography, which is both large (covering almost 100 pages) and state-of-the-art (including all important literature published until 2012), any aspiring or established Marco Polo researcher should try to obtain a copy of Vogel's book – despite its prohibitive price of 180 €. Implicitly, this copious bibliography highlights the main features of the explosion of knowledge Vogel's book is reflective of, i.e., hybridity of physical and digital resources; professionalization, further diversification and internationalization of the academic disciplines that started out as semi-amateurish *Altertumswissenschaften* in the nineteenth century; and global and rapid exchange of research information across different fields of knowledge. In fact, one of the most appealing and innovative aspects of the book under review is that, as can be seen from its "Acknowledgements" and a few footnotes to the main text, a bold and highly successful effort was made to step out of the sinological box in order to establish a wide transdisciplinary network with leading authorities from different areas of expertise, which also served as a testing ground for calibrating the author's arguments.

The major drawback of the data overflow caused by the explosion of knowledge in our digital age is that it tends to implode any book aspiring to contain it. More to the point, *Marco Polo Was in China* is replete with precious evidence and groundbreaking research findings. But a great portion of patience and tenacity is required from those readers who want to access them. It is not so much its gargantuan length along with the lack of professional copyediting and narrative strategies that makes it difficult for readers to manage the information presented, although systematic efforts in these areas could help this book reach the large audiences it definitely deserves based on its academic merits. Rather, it seems that the large amounts of multi-layered evidence included in the main text and its appendices – most notably "Appendix 1: Compilation of Passages on the Production and Use of Paper Money in the Yuan Empire from Selected Manuscript and Print Versions of Marco Polo's Account" (pp. 429–438), "Appendix 2: Compilation of Passages on the Production and Use of Chinese Paper Money and Salt Revenue in the Accounts of Other Western, Persian and Arabic Accounts" (pp. 439–470), and "Appendix 7: Compilation of Passages on Chinese Salt Money, Salt Production and Salt Revenue from the Most Important Manuscript and Print Versions of Marco Polo's Account" (pp. 491–528) – could be more efficiently accessed in a digital environment. Inherent in the reading

behavior we tend to have vis-à-vis *Il Milione* is always a hermeneutical movement that makes us switch back and forth between Marco Polo's original account and its abundant exegesis. What's more, besides its many editions, the *Milione* has a rich paratextual history – which includes Christoph Columbus' postils in his copy of the Latin Pipino version as well as Paul Pelliot's seminal *Notes on Marco Polo*⁴ – that is best accommodated in an interactive (ideally open-access) on-line project. In such an electronic environment, readers would be able to click on key passages and terms in the *Milione*'s main text in order to access textual variants as well as additional materials, such as historical information, maps, images of artefacts, etc. While dealing for example with a passage in which Marco Polo talks about paper money, readers would be able to retrieve, via mouse click, versions of the same or similar passages in other editions and accounts as well as all the relevant historical information contained in the book under review.

In the final section of this review there is of course one question that needs to be addressed, which is: does *Marco Polo Was in China*, as its title confidently asserts, dispel once and for good the doubts sown by Frances Wood two decades ago? After arduously ploughing through hundreds of pages, will the reader be able to put down Vogel's book and utter with a sense of great relief: "Question solved at last!"? The present reviewer feels inclined to say a timid yet clear and decisive no. Whereas Wood cast doubts on Marco Polo's actual trip to China by highlighting the "disappointingly bad job" – aspects of his account and persona, Vogel's strategy consists in working on the "amazingly good job" – dimension of *Il Milione* and its author. Specifically, he tries to make the case that Marco Polo's description of monies, salts, and administrative territories is neatly compatible with the data that have been handed down to us via other primary materials. Readers are told on a regular basis, especially in the concluding section of each chapter, that the contents of *Il Milione* is "(...) in almost perfect agreement with what historical research in Yuan history has brought to light through the analysis of written sources and historical relics" (p. 419). Predictably, the large amounts of evidence mobilized by Vogel, which are often processed in long enumerative tables and complex statistical computations, tend to almost always support his argumentation. Obviously, there is no easy and fast way to check if the case he tries to make is too perfect to be always true. Indeed, it would be a very complex and time-consuming affair to dismantle the evidential architecture erected by Vogel, look at each and every nook and cranny of it and then try to reassemble it in exactly the same order. However, there is a sense, at least occasionally, that Vogel tends to subtly re-shape some of the evidence to fit

4 Pelliot 1959–1973.

his paradigm. The most striking instance of this positive bias seems to be his argumentation in favor of a passage related to salt production that has been included by Giovanni Battista Ramusio (1485–1557) in the *Milione*-version he incorporated in his collection *Delle navigationi et viaggi* (1559). Published several centuries after Marco Polo had finished dictating his account to Rustichello da Pisa in a Genoese prison, Ramusio's edition contains many passages – such as the one defended by Vogel – not included in previous *Milione*-editions. This has led a considerable number of scholars to regard Ramusio's text as corrupt. Appreciative of the historical accuracy of Ramusio's salt-related passage but reticent to use it due to its uncertain origin, Vogel makes a somewhat strained argumentative effort on pp. 291–295 to rehabilitate its status, mainly by claiming that the Ramusian accretions were in fact authored by Marco Polo himself. According to Vogel, no source of information other than the Venetian could have been available to Ramusio at the time he published his version of *Il Milione*, which was almost a century before the Jesuits started to circulate China-related information in Europe. Direct access to China-knowledge, Vogel points out, was not available then as a result of the closed-up environment prevalent in the early Ming period. In other words, the only European equipped with solid knowledge about the Middle Kingdom before the late sixteenth century had to be Marco Polo. This may have been the case, but we don't know for sure. In fact, Vogel seems to be recurring to the same kind of argumentative strategy used by Wood for the case she construed against Marco Polo, i.e., the *argumentum ex silentio*-approach, which consists in focusing on the interstices our extant sources are silent about. Just because Marco Polo failed to mention tea, Chinese characters and many other things in his account, does not necessarily mean he did not go to China, as Hans-Wilm Schütte has most poignantly shown in his booklet *Wie weit kam Marco Polo?*⁵ It is more likely that Marco Polo may have just forgotten to mention this particular piece of information or that he took it for granted. In a similar vein, just because we do not (yet) have any written evidence of knowledge flowing from China to Europe in the long period between Marco Polo and Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), it does not necessarily mean that the Venetian was the only possible source of information in things Chinese at that time, including matters as technical as money and salt production. But even if that is what it meant, nearly perfect harmony between the information contained in the *Milione* and in Chinese sources is not the final and ultimate proof that Marco Polo was in China. He could still have accessed his information outside of China via extremely reliable sources, both oral and written, that have not survived. As it happens, Vogel himself admits that "(...) it is obvious that the research presented

5 Schütte 2008.

in this book cannot be the cast iron proof that Marco Polo was in China. The most conclusive evidence naturally would be his being mentioned in a Yuan source” (p. 423). Considering how difficult it sometimes is to unambiguously identify foreigners in Chinese sources – and some attempts have been made in the case of Marco Polo, most persistently by Peng Hai it would also be most helpful to have additional and literally more solid evidence, or to quote Frances Wood: “No trace remains of the Polos in Yangzhou and it is perhaps to be regretted that none of them died there, for a handsome tombstone would have been useful.”⁶

Ultimately, however, it does not really matter that this question has not been conclusively solved by the book under review. What truly matters is that we now have finally at our disposal a fantastically well-researched book that takes a systematic look at the *Milione* from the perspective of currencies and salt production, thus allowing us to discover an old and often read text in an entirely new and most revealing light. Moreover, Vogel has definitely succeeded in making palpable to us the depth and complexity of Marco Polo’s text as a historical source. Indeed, *Il Milione* is a delicate time machine. Readers who step into the Venetian’s text in such a patient and dedicated manner as Hans Ulrich Vogel has done for the present book will be able, to quote from Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* in William Weaver’s fine rendition, “(...) to discern through the walls and towers destined to crumble, the tracery of a pattern so subtle it could escape the termites’ gnawing.”⁷

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⁶ Wood 1995: 15.

⁷ Calvino 1974: 5–6.