

Marco Polo Was in China: New Evidence from Currencies, Salts and Revenues

Review Number: 1667

Publish date: Thursday, 9 October, 2014

Author: Hans Ulrich Vogel

ISBN: 9789004231931

Date of Publication: 2012

Price: £148.00

Pages: 676pp.

Publisher: Brill

Publisher url: <http://www.brill.com/marco-polo-was-china>

Place of Publication: Leiden

Reviewer: Na Chang

Since its publication in the 13th century, the *Travels of Marco Polo* has attracted a wide readership around the world. The transmission and translation of the original Rustichello-Marco text (either in French or Franco-Italian) resulted in 150 medieval manuscripts. Despite its popularity, not everyone believed Marco Polo's account. Many people throughout the Middle Ages viewed the book as a romance or fable, while in recent years some scholars have deemed the book to be fraudulent. At the time the book came out, the general verdict was that the contents seemed 'incredible'. As John Larner notes, 'the real difficulty for the Western reader was in believing in the revelation of a wholly new world of towns and cities'.⁽¹⁾ Marco Polo's description of the Far East met with such scepticism in large part because it differed so widely from the accounts of travellers in the first half of the century. Friars John of Pian Carpini and William of Rubruck portrayed the Mongols as 'barbarians' who seemed to be members of 'some other world', and this perception had taken root in Europe. Thus, it was difficult for Westerners to accept such a sharp contrast between the friars' accounts and Marco Polo's description of the East in the same century.

The *Travels of Marco Polo* again came under suspicion of fraud in the 20th century, when certain flaws, mistakes and proud boasts that do not tally with the facts prompted scholars to ask whether Marco Polo had really been to China. Historians such as K. D. Hullmann, Herbert Franke, Craig Clunas and Frances Wood have all written about this question. Based on his research, American scholar John W Haeger posed the question 'Was Marco Polo in China?' in 1979, expressing his view that the Venetian only reached Beijing.⁽²⁾ Frances Wood renewed the question in 1996 with the publication of *Did Marco Polo go to China?*, arguing that Marco Polo 'probably never travelled much further than the family's trading posts on the Black Sea and in Constantinople'.⁽³⁾ Wood points out various inconsistencies in the travel narrative and the omission of important characters under the Khan's reign. She claims the *Travels* is not a 'logical itinerary' and completely fails to 'pick up a few Chinese or Mongol place-names'. Neither did Marco Polo mention the Great Wall.⁽⁴⁾ Although Marco Polo claimed he was intimate with the Khan, Wood stresses that he was not mentioned in any official Chinese documents. Wood does not believe that Marco Polo was a merchant, instead attributing his interest in paper money to curiosity.⁽⁵⁾

Hans Ulrich Vogel is an established sinologist, writing on various aspects of Chinese history. His book *Marco Polo was in China*

was published last year as part of the *Monies, Markets, and Finance in East Asia, 1600–1900* series. Anticipation and excitement grow when you encounter the book, hoping it will reveal new data, provide new lenses and offer new methodological approaches to historical inquiry that may inform the authenticity of Marco Polo's book. The author succeeds in all of these respects.

The book focuses on the description of 'currencies, salts, and revenues in Yuan China' in the *Travels of Marco Polo*. (p. 1) The author claims that many of the descriptions concerning the above aspects are supported by Chinese sources – official and private historic records and historical relics. He argues that no contemporaries of Marco Polo produced similarly accurate accounts related to these aspects of the economy in Yuan China; therefore, the only way Marco Polo could have provided such precise information was if he had actually been there.

The first chapter of Vogel's book starts with an introduction to its structure and methods. His research method involves an item-by-item comparison of the currencies, salts and revenues detailed in the *Travels of Marco Polo*, using both official and private Chinese sources and other travel writings from that period. In the last part of the chapter, the author offers a detailed introduction to the heated debate over whether Marco Polo visited China. He lists 13 major topics of debate, including 'authorship of the book, complexities of manuscript transmission, the book's nature and style, itinerary and data, Persian rendering of Chinese place names, etc.' (p. 13).

The second chapter examines the usage of paper money in Yuan China, starting with an introduction to its development in Ancient China (p. 93). A short chronological account of the issuance of paper money in Yuan China concentrates on the period of Marco Polo's visit and introduces the kind of paper money that was in use at that time. (p. 108) The author then examines the main manuscripts of the *Travels of Marco Polo*, and decides that they do not differ much in their accounts of the types and functions of paper money in Yuan China. Vogel lists the major information provided in eight versions of the *Travels* and compares his account of paper money with those of eight other non-Chinese medieval writers. According to this comparison, Marco Polo provided the most detailed descriptions of all 23 items included on the list. None of the other authors provided such detailed descriptions of paper money in Yuan China, and none of them showed an understanding of the economic meaning of paper money. The author also examines the short period in which Persia experimented with paper money and the relevant records, to rule out the possibility that Marco Polo borrowed from Persian records. He also compares Polo's descriptions with Chinese sources and finds that Polo's words were consistent in almost all cases with the extant historical records and relics.

The next item to be compared, in chapter three, is the use of other currencies in Yuan China. The author convincingly argues that Marco Polo's record of the use of currencies such as the cowry in Yunnan was true. He begins the chapter with the history of cowry usage, especially in the Yunnan area. The author analyses Chinese sources that mentioned cowry money in the Yuan, including its denominations and exchange rates with other types of money, and its usage in private and governmental sectors. At the end of the chapter, he compares Marco Polo's report with Chinese sources and concludes that Marco Polo's description is not only accurate but also unique.

Frances Wood accused Marco Polo of confusing cowry money with Chinese ceramic-porcelain. Vogel argues that in Marco Polo's time, Venice witnessed Maldivian cowries being transported from Egypt, and Marco Polo must have been aware of their importance as a commodity. Vogel claims that Marco Polo's description was unique because he was the only writer to mention the use of the cowry as a currency in Yunnan during the Yuan. At that time, Yunnan was controlled by the Mongol empire, and other Chinese sources confirm that cowries were used there. Not only was Marco Polo the sole non-Chinese author to mention this, but he also accurately pointed out that the cowries were not local, but imported from India.

The next item to be compared is salt production and salt monies used in Yunnan and Tebet. Frances Wood was not convinced that there were salt wells in Yunnan, and did not believe Marco Polo's description of brine wells in the area. According to Marco Polo, in the province of Yunnan, people made a living by the

salt produced from the brine wells, which also formed a major part of the king's revenue. To prove that Yunnan has had many salt wells since ancient times, Vogel provides two tables listing Yunnan salt production sites mentioned for the Tang and Nanzhao periods and for the Yuan Dynasty, then compares the salt wells in Zigong with those in Yunnan. Zigong's salt wells were developed in the late Imperial period and are often mistaken for those in earlier periods. Yunnan's salt wells were underground and less technologically advanced. One of their main features was that the wells were not operated by Chinese, but by minority ethnic groups. Marco Polo was correct 'not only in pointing out that salt was produced from boiling down brine hoisted from wells, but also with regard to the fiscal importance of this indispensable condiment in this region of limited salt supply' (p. 282). Vogel also argues that 'these salt works not only produced salt for purpose of consumption, but also manufactured the various salt monies current in parts of Yunnan and Tebet' (p. 282). He also discusses the circulation of salt as money in Yunnan and other parts of the world, and points out that Marco Polo was the only non-Chinese author to have mentioned this practice in Yunnan.

The dates suggested by Chinese and Western researchers for Marco Polo's mission to Yunnan vary widely. Vogel presents Marco Polo's records of the use of salt currency and the exchange of salt for gold in Tibet and Caidun province in Yule's English translation, which serves as a basis for comparison with information on salt currencies transmitted by Chinese sources from the periods before and after the Yuan. Vogel provides ample evidence that salt was used as a form of currency in Yunnan and adjacent regions from at least the late eighth up to the mid-20th centuries. Relatively few records exist in Chinese because the salt currency was the product of particular regional demand and supply conditions and of specific ethnic circumstances. It was not a creation of governmental actors.

In the following chapter, Vogel discusses salt production, revenue and trade in Changlu and Lianghuai to demonstrate Marco Polo's authenticity. Marco Polo provided detailed evidence about the salt production technique used in the well-known salt producing regions of Changlu and Lianghuai. His concentration on these regions is in perfect agreement with their overall importance for the Yuan Empire's salt production and salt revenue. Marco Polo introduced 'the peculiar process of salt production in the famous Changlu salt region' and it perfectly agreed with Chinese sources (p. 333). No other Western, Arabic or Persian author provided such accurate information about the technique for producing sea or earth salt. The method is presented in great detail in Chen Chun's *Aobo tu*, and it did not exist in the Mediterranean region. Marco Polo also reported on salt production and taxation in the Lianghuai region, from where large quantities of salt were shipped to other places, reflecting precisely the subdivision of the salt administration during the Southern Song and Yuan. Every place he mentioned belonged to the famous Huai salt production region in today's Jiangsu Province. During the Yuan, Huainan donglu, as it was then called, produced more than 30 per cent of all legally registered salt in Mongol China. Marco Polo's remarks about the 'large' and 'incredible' revenue produced by the Huai saltworks were by no means exaggerated. Details about the administration, taxation and distribution of salt provided by Chinese sources such as *Zhongxing huiyao* also conform with Marco Polo's account.

In this chapter, Vogel also discusses the debate about whether Marco Polo was an official or even salt official in Yangzhou. He believes that Marco Polo held some form of office there, although perhaps not one related to salt. He lists the pros and cons put forward by those such as Frances Wood, Henry Yule and Hans-Wilm Schütte, and Chinese specialists Zhu Jiang and Peng Hai, and discusses their views. Following Zhang and Peng's analysis, several possible official ranks that Marco Polo might have held are ruled out. Chinese historians have also produced convincing evidence showing that Marco Polo's stay in Yangzhou lasted from 1282–84. Polo had a great deal of knowledge related to salt production and distribution, but he did not mention the supervisory agency in Yangzhou. It is more likely that he served as an (Assistant) Overseer or Accounting Official.

Chapter six compares Marco Polo's figures on the tax revenue of Zayton (Quanzhou). To analyse the data on the salt tax revenue and other fiscal resources of this region, and the customs and revenue of Kinsay and its territories exclusive of the salt income, Vogel converts these data into gold *liang* and Zhongtong *guan* paper

money. He then compares these figures with established knowledge of the Yuan financial system, especially in the Hangzhou region. Vogel uses the analyses of Franz Schurmann, Chen Gaohua, Shi Weimin and Herbert Franke on tax items, revenues and expenditures in money or kind from 1263–1329 to estimate the general quantitative and qualitative trends in public revenue in the Yuan. He concludes that considering all the complexities of the currency situation, state revenue system, price developments and market conditions, Marco Polo's figures are in accordance with the Yuan monetary conditions and the fiscal regime. He then discusses how and from where Marco Polo obtained the information. He believes Marco Polo belonged to local administrative provisions that demanded daily participation by all ranked officials such as overseers, assistant overseers and lower-level local officials. According to Vogel, Marco Polo also provided precise information on the taxation of a number of commodities. He recorded that all spices and other commodities were subject to a tax of three and a third per cent of their value. He also noticed that rice wine and silk made great returns. Marco Polo stated that all ships arriving at Zayton (Quanzhou) harbour, from the Indies were charged ten per cent duty on all commodities. Vogel tracks the history of government regulation of maritime trade in the Yuan and obtains average values for basic monetary and metrological units such as *grosso*, *saggio*, *libbra*, *miskal* and *liang*. Besides the mean values, he also provides the highest and lowest values to indicate the range of possible variation. Vogel proves that Marco Polo's one-tenth rate and his statement about freights costs and profit shares matched perfectly with Chinese sources.

Chapter seven discusses Marco Polo's 'precision in administrative geographical terms'. According to Vogel, Marco Polo's description of the circulation of various kinds of monies in different parts of the Yuan empire was both unique and precise. Marco Polo also provided 'quite accurate and very plausible indications of administrative-geographical information' in his travels (p. 400). Vogel lists several examples of such precision. For example, Marco Polo correctly pointed out that there were 12 barons governing 12 regional secretariats, and they were responsible for the selection of the 34 great provinces. Vogel manages to find four ways to explain this number, which may have referred to the superior prefecture, the legacy of the Song and Jin systems, the surveillance commissions and pacification commissions or 11 branch secretariats and 23 circuits. The number of cities and their military garrisons in Manzi, the former Southern Song mentioned by Marco Polo, also corresponded with the facts. Marco Polo's precision is also evident in religious geographical terms. Vogel compares the overlapping cities mentioned by Marco Polo and Arabic or Persian sources between the ninth and early 16th centuries, and concludes that there is no clear evidence of mutual influence. In response to Frances Woods' accusation that Marco Polo never went to China, but rather got his information from Persian guidebooks, Vogel rebuts that no such guidebook exists. Perhaps the Persian merchants had access to unofficial guides. Vogel believes that a more plausible explanation is that Marco Polo got his information on the place names through his official duties and missions in Yuan China.

By comparing all of the items listed above with historical research on Yuan history, the author concludes that Marco Polo's information on monies, salts and revenues in the Yuan Empire are in almost perfect agreement with historical sources and relics. Most of these Chinese sources were not publicly available when Marco Polo or any of his contemporaries were in China. Historical records such as the *History of the Yuan* were compiled in the subsequent dynasty after the collapse of the Yuan. Hence, Marco Polo could not have read or copied from them. Vogel not only compares Marco Polo's words with Chinese sources, he also carefully examines and compares them with other Western, Arabic and Persian authors. It is evident that none of the other authors provided monetary, economic and financial information as detailed and precise as Marco Polo's. Based on his investigation and overall appraisal of the pros and cons, Vogel is confident that Marco Polo was in China.

Marco Polo was in China is not only about the authenticity of Marco Polo's book, but also about the Yuan's monetary and fiscal history – it deals with the history of monies, finance, salt and metrology in Imperial China. Vogel uses a different method when examining financial data and it yields novel and inspiring results. He demonstrates the accuracy of Marco Polo's figures by examining textual sources and archaeological relics and by carrying out conversions between different currencies in the Yuan. Rather than converting the monetary and metrological data supplied by Marco Polo and the Chinese sources into contemporary values, Vogel expresses the data in the units used in the Yuan. He also pays attention to the

fluctuations in exchange rates between paper money and gold and silver. These methods make his research more reliable and plausible.

Unlike his predecessors in the West who mainly relied on European sources, or those in China who relied on Chinese sources, Vogel's book is a masterwork using primary sources and secondary literature of different origins and cultural backgrounds. Zhang Longxi considers John Larner's *Marco Polo and the World* the most comprehensive study of Marco Polo's book, but Zhang observes that 'Larner has no choice but to acknowledge with regret that 'No Chinese source can be used to gain evidence of them'' to confirm Marco's presence in China.⁽⁶⁾ 'Yang Zhijiu is indeed the most eloquent of Marco's defenders' ⁽⁷⁾ in Zhang Longxi's eyes, but he relied only on Chinese sources. Vogel, instead, extensively examines research on these topics published in Chinese, thereby shedding light on the findings of Chinese scholars in these areas, particularly for Western scholars who cannot read Chinese. The author offers a most thorough discussion of the pros and cons of Marco Polo's authenticity, and so provides a convincing defence.

Vogel's work greatly enhances our comprehension of the fiscal situation of the Yuan. It does in fact reveal new data, provide new lenses and document new methodological approaches to historical perspectives. This excellent book is to be warmly commended. It offers a wonderful resource for anyone wishing to study Marco Polo and Chinese economic history.

Notes

1. John Larner, *Marco Polo and the Discovery of the World* (New Haven, CT, 1999), p. 108.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. John W. Haeger, 'Marco Polo in China? Problems with internal evidence', *Bulletin of Sung and Yuan Studies*, 14 (1978), 22–30.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Frances Wood, *Did Marco Polo Go to China?* (Boulder, CO, 1996), p. 150.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 29, 64, 96.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. *Ibid.*, p. 68.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Zhang Longxi, 'Marco Polo, Chinese cultural identity, and an alternative model of East-West encounter', in *Marco Polo and the Encounter of East and West*, ed. Suzanne Conklin Akbari and Amilcare Iannucci (Toronto, 2008), p. 280; Larner, p. 41.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Zhang Longxi, pp. 281–2.[Back to \(7\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review, especially because he was glad to see that both intricate details and major arguments were adequately and skilfully brought to the fore. Hence, he does not wish to comment further.

Other reviews:

Science Daily

<http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2012/04/120416100439.htm> [2]

Source URL:<https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/1667>

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/67584>

[2] <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2012/04/120416100439.htm>