



Myriam Hönig
Leitung

Michael Seifert
Abteilung Presse, Forschungs-
berichterstattung, Information
Telefon +49 7071 29-76789
Telefax +49 7071 29-5566
Michael.seifert@uni-tuebingen.de
www.uni-tuebingen.de/aktuell

Wir bitten um Zusendung von
Belegexemplaren! Danke.

Pressemitteilung

Marco Polo was not a swindler – he really did go to China

A thorough new study of Chinese sources by University of Tübingen Sinologist Hans Ulrich Vogel dispels claims that Venice's most famous traveler never truly went as far as China.

Tübingen, den 16.04.2012

It has been said that Marco Polo did not really go to China; that he merely cobbled together his information about it from journeys to the Black Sea, Constantinople and Persia and from talking to merchants and reading now-lost Persian books. But in *Marco Polo was in China: New Evidence from Currencies, Salts and Revenues*, (Brill Verlag) Hans Ulrich Vogel, Professor of Chinese Studies at the University of Tübingen, puts paid to such rumors. He begins with a comprehensive review of the arguments for and against, and follows it up with evidence from relevant Chinese, Japanese, Italian, French, German and Spanish literature. The result is compelling: despite a few, well-known problems with Marco Polo's writings, they are supported by an overwhelming number of verified accounts about China containing unique information given over centuries.

Doubts have been raised since the mid-eighteenth century about Marco Polo's presence in China. Skeptics have pointed out that Marco Polo did not mention the Great Wall. Yet research in the East and the West have shown that the Great Wall as we know it is a product of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) and that earlier earth walls had long since disintegrated and had lost the military role they played in the Mongol Empire. Another argument often used is that Marco, his father and his uncle are not mentioned in any Chinese document. However, this argument overestimates the frequency of documentation and the intentions of Chinese historiographers. Even Giovanni de Marignolli (1290-1357), an important papal envoy at the court of the Yuan rulers, is not mentioned in any Chinese sources – nor his 32-man retinue, nor the name of the pope. Only the "heavenly horse" sent as tribute from the "Kingdom of Franks" in 1342 gets a mention.

Professor Vogel also examines an area so complex and which requires such a high level of historical expertise that it has largely been neglected – Marco Polo's descriptions of currency, salt production and revenues from the salt monopoly. Vogel concludes that no other Western, Arab, or Persian observer reported in such accurate and unique detail about the currency situation in Mongol China. The Venetian traveler is the only one to describe precisely how paper for money was made from the bark of the mulberry tree (*morusalba l.*) He not only details the shape and size of the paper, he also describes the use of seals and the various denominations

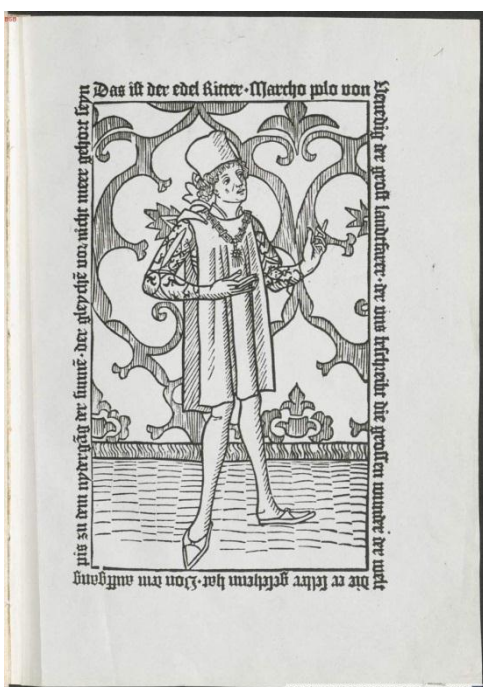
of paper money. He reports on the monopolizing of gold, silver, pearls and gems by the state – which enforced a compulsory exchange for paper money – and the punishment for counterfeiters, as well as the 3% exchange fee for worn-out notes and the widespread use of paper money in official and private transactions.

Marco Polo is also the only one among his contemporaries to explain that paper money was not in circulation in all parts of China. It was used primarily in the north and in the regions along the Yangtze, but not in Fujian and certainly not in Yunnan, where according to Polo, cowries, salt, gold and silver were the main currencies. This information is confirmed by Chinese sources and by archaeological evidence. Most of these sources were collated or translated long after Marco Polo's time – so he could not have drawn on them. He could not read Chinese.

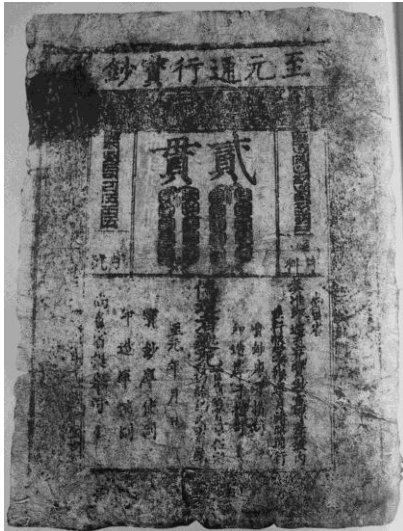
Marco Polo's description of salt production is also accurate and unique. He lists the most important salt production centers known to him: Changlu, Lianghuai, Liangzhe, and Yunnan, as well as the authorities administering them. His report of the methods used to make salt in Changlu checks out with Chinese documents of the Yuan era. Salt in the Venetian monopoly was produced in a different way. This and other information, the accuracy of which has not yet been fully appreciated, all indicate that Marco Polo really did serve the Great Khan. Chinese sources show that he was not the only young man to be taken under the wing of Kublai Khan (1215-1294) and entrusted with important tasks. Marco Polo's claims of the value of salt production – for instance, that the revenues from Kinsay brought in 5.8 million saggi of gold annually – can be checked against the exchange rate for paper money, bringing Professor Vogel to the conclusion that Polo knew what he was talking about. This book, based on work carried out in the DFG Research Training Group 596 "Monies, Markets and Finance in China and East Asia, 1500-1900" provides ample evidence that Marco Polo did go to China.

Contact:

Prof. Dr. Hans Ulrich Vogel
University of Tübingen
Institute of Asian and Oriental Studies
Dept. of Chinese and Korean Studies
Phone +49 7071 29-72701
hans-ulrich.vogel[at]uni-tuebingen.de



Marco Polo in the first printed edition (Source: *Hie hebt sich an das puch des edeln Ritters vnd landtfarers Marcho Polo, in dem er schreibt die grossen wunderlichen ding dieser welt*, Nuremberg: Friedrich Creussner, 1477.)



Yuan-era banknote. (Source: Neimeng guqianbi yanjiuhui 内蒙古钱币研究会 (Inner Mongolian Numismatic Research Institute) and “Zhong guoqianbi” bianjibu 《中国钱币》编辑部 (“China Numismatics” Editorial Department) (eds.), Cai Mingxin 蔡明信 (transl.), *Zhong guogu chao tuji* 中国古钞图辑 (A Compilation of Pictures of Chinese Ancient Paper Money)) Beijing: Zhong guo jinrong chubanshe, 1992, p. 57.



Yuan-era representation of salt production. (Source: Yoshida Tora (author) and Hans Ulrich Vogel (transl.), *Salt Production Techniques in Ancient China: The Aobotu*, Leiden: Brill (SinicaLeidensia 27), 1993, p. 246.)