

The Silk Road: Image and Imagination

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Samenvatting: De ‘zijderoute’ is een geheel van kortere regionale routes die vanaf het begin van de gangbare tijdrekening in gebruik waren als handelsroutes tussen Europa en Azië. Ook al waren zij in eerste instantie commerciële slagaders, toch hebben ook culturele gebruiken en objecten, religies en levensbeschouwingen zich over deze handelsroutes verspreid. In wat volgt wordt het ontstaan van deze routes besproken, wordt een korte schets gegeven van de belangrijkste handelsproducten en religies die over deze routes verspreid werden, en wordt ingegaan op de aantrekkingskracht die deze routes en het Verre Oosten dankzij de handelsgoederen en culturele artefacten op Europa hebben gehad. In een afzonderlijk luik wordt de problematiek rond het reisverhaal van Marco Polo naar Oost-Azië besproken.

Mots-clés: routes de soie, commerce, échanges culturels, Marco Polo

Résumé: Les ‘routes de soie’ sont un ensemble de routes regionales que ont lié l’Est et l’Ouest à partir du début de l’ère commune. Outre faciliter les rapports commerciaux, ces routes ont aussi servi comme route de passage pour les échanges culturels, philosophiques et religieux. Cet article discute l’origine des routes, les plus importantes marchandises et objets culturels, ainsi que les religions que ont traversé les routes. L’article décrit aussi l’attraction que les routes et l’Extrême-Orient ont eu vis-à-vis l’Europe. Dans une section à part, les problématiques concernant Marco Polo et son voyage en Asie Orientale sont discutés.

Keywords: Silk Roads, commerce, cultural exchange, Marco Polo

Summary: What has become known as the ‘Silk Roads’ are an assembly of roads that, since the beginning of the common era, have served as trade routes between the East and the West. Although primarily commercial arteries, also cultural habits and object, as well as ideologies and religions have spread over these roads. In this article, the origin of these routes is discussed, and a short description is given of the most important commodities and religions

that traversed these roads. Also the attraction these routes and the Far East have had on Europe is discussed. In a separate part of the article, the problems surrounding Marco Polo's travel account of his travels to East Asia are discussed.

Introduction

When François-Marie Arouet Voltaire, in 1755, declared that the stony heart of Genghis Khan was softened by the moral purity of the gentle Chinese [1], and, in 1756, stated that the history of civilization begins with the Chinese state [2], he witnessed of an age-old admiration for and fascination with Chinese culture, a fascination that is undeniably also linked to the magnanimity of the "Silk Road" that traverses the Eurasian continent and connects China with Europe. The overall positive perception of China that characterized 18th century Europe mainly was the outcome of the Christian – particularly Jesuit – missionaries who, in their publications, presented the Chinese as potential Christian converts. Especially French Jesuits who dominated the Christian missions in the early 18th century drew a positive picture of Chinese civilization in an attempt to convince Louis XIV to support their cause [3]. To convince him of the appropriateness of their task, they even reported that the Chinese had once had a form of monotheism that was not very different from the Jewish-Christian tradition [4].

Prior to the documents of these Jesuit missionaries, our knowledge and imagination of the Far East derived from the accounts of the Franciscan friars who were active when China was ruled by the Mongolian Yuan dynasty (1271-1279-1368) [5], and from such works as Marco Polo's fantastic "*Le devisement dou monde*" (The Description of the World). As will be discussed later in this article, reality and imagination with respect to Marco Polo who allegedly had served the Mongol Khubilai Khan have long been – and still are – subject to scholarly debate [6].

A series of famous archaeological missions in Central Asia in the early 20th century resurged Europe's fascination for the at that time often already extinguished cultures of the "Silk Road". After the Swedish Sven Anders Hedin (1865-1952) had travelled through the Central Asian region starting from 1885 and had done his major discovery – the ancient Buddhist and erstwhile Chinese garrison city Loulan (= Cherchen) on the skirts of the Taklimakan desert – in 1899 [7], the first officially sanctioned European archaeological mission was led by Sir Marc Aurel Stein (1862-1943) in 1900-1901. This expedition was

immediately followed by the German expedition led by Albert Grünwedel (1856-1935), head of the Indian section of the Ethnological Museum in Berlin, and by Georg Huth (1867-1906). In 1902-1903, this expedition explored the area of Turfan in Chinese Central Asia. The untimely death of Georg Huth and the weak health of Albert Grünwedel brought Albert von le Coq (1860-1930) to the forefront of the German expeditions. His team visited Central Asia in three consecutive expeditions: one in 1904-1905, one in 1905-1907 (again accompanied by Albert Grünwedel), and one in 1913-1914. While Sir Marc Aurel Stein led some further expeditions in the region in 1906-1908 and in 1913-1916, also the French, Japanese, and Russians joined in what became known as the “international scramble” for Buddhist treasures from the Taklimakan and Gobi deserts. The 1906-1908 French expedition was led by Paul Pelliot (1878-1945); the Japanese expeditions of 1902-1904, 1908-1909, and 1910-1913 were led by Kozui Ōtani (1876-1948), and the Russian expedition of 1908 was led by Dmitri Klementz (1847-1914). Serge Oldenburg (1863-1934) led the Russian expeditions of 1901-1910 and 1914-1915 [8]. The cultural artefacts and the manuscripts in Sanskrit, Kuchean, Agnean, Khotanese, Sogdian, Uighur, Tibetan, and Chinese that were discovered and brought back to London, Berlin, Paris, Tokyo, and Saint Petersburg gave a new dimension to European, esp. buddhological research [9].

The Beginnings of the Silk Road

The oldest historical information on what was to become known as the “Silk Road” is contained in the Chinese «*Shiji*» (*Historical Records*), a work attributed to Sima Qian (145-86? BCE), and in the «*Hanshu*» (*History of the Han*), a work attributed to Ban Gu (32-92 CE) [10]. The 123rd chapter of the «*Shiji*» and the 61st and 96th chapters of the «*Hanshu*» relate how the Yuezhi people who are generally known to us under the name ‘Tocharians’ were forced to move out of their homeland under pressure of the Xiongnu [11]. Having thus been forced to leave the area of present-day Western Gansu province in China, they reached the valley of the Oxus (Amu-Darya in present-day Turkmenistān and Uzbekistān) in the 2nd century BCE [12]. A part of these Yuezhi moved further westwards and came across the people of the Sai (= Śaka) in the upper Ili region. These Yuezhi came known to us as the ‘Kuṣāṇas’ [13]. They succeeded in subduing the Sai, but were, in their turn, subdued by the people of the Wusun (= Asiani) who had equally been pushed westwards by the Xiongnu. Before their final defeat under the force of the Wusun, however, a part of them had succeeded in reaching Dayuan (= Ferghāna) and Daxia (= Bactria) in about 139–129 BCE. Based on the evidence provided in the above mentioned Chinese historical works, it is thus possible to

divide the long journey of the Yuezhi into two stages, the first, which took them from their homeland in the Dunhuang area to the Upper Ili, and the second, which took them from the Upper Ili to Bactria. While the first movement was due to the Xiongnu, the second was due to the Wusun, probably encouraged and supported by the Xiongnu.

In the meantime, also the court of the famous Chinese Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) had to deal with the continuous pressure of the same Xiongnu. They sent Zhang Qian (?-114 BCE) as an envoy to the western regions with the task to establish an alliance with the inhabitants of these regions so as to better be able to resist the Xiongnu. Judging from the above mentioned historical works, when Zhang Qian, who had left China in 139/138 BCE, arrived in Bactria in 128/127 BCE, he reported that the Yuezhi ruled over the region. Before he was able to reach Bactria, however, he had had to go through the territory ruled by the Xiongnu. The Xiongnu had refused to let him proceed, and Zhang Qian was accordingly detained by the Xiongnu for over ten years. Having escaped from the Xiongnu in ca. 129/128 BCE, the king of Ferghāna assigned some guides to take him to the state of Kangju (= Sogdiana), situated between the Oxus and the Yaxartes (= Syr-Darya in present-day Uzbekistān, Kirgistān, and Kazakhstān). From there, he was able, in ca. 128 BCE to make his way to the land of the Kuṣāṇas. Finally at peace in Bactria, the Kuṣāṇas were not willing to – again – fight the Xiongnu.

Zhang Qian's mission thus was not the military success it was meant to be, but his adventurous journey had other important consequences. Similar to the overall positive appreciation for the Chinese we find in the European tradition up to the 18th century, also the Chinese appreciation of the regions and their inhabitants to the west of its cultural sphere overall was a positive one, as, in his reports, Zhang Qian described possibilities to acquire luxury goods for China's enrichment, to expand Han territory, and to increase imperial prestige [14]. When the Chinese decisively defeated the Xiongnu in 119 BCE, this actually opened up the possibility for the Chinese Han dynasty to establish commercial contacts with the people of the western regions. With this aim, Chinese policy from ca. 65 BCE onwards was concentrated on founding stable colonies in the region that were to be instrumental in maintaining the Chinese position there [15]. This was a major policy change after the period of military campaigns in the region that had started in 108 BCE with attacks on Loulan (= Cherchen) and Jushi (= Turfan), and were followed by the military campaigns against Ferghāna in 101 BCE, and against Turfan in 90 and 71 BCE. This new policy also saw the establishment of the Chinese office of the Protector-General of the Western Regions in 60 BCE [16].

Roads and Peoples

It is obvious that in the beginning of its existence, no single merchant ever travelled the length of the whole route, and that, therefore, the 'Silk Road' was not conceived as such by the Chinese or the Romans. Neither of them even knew of the existence of the other. As stated by Mark Elvin Lewis (2007, p.143), "The Romans knew only that somewhere the "Seres," the "silk people," produced the fabric that appeared in Roman markets" [17]. It is only in the late 19th century that the term 'Silk Road' was coined by the German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen (1833-1905), referring to a series of regional trade routes that, in steps, connected China with Rome. These roads started in Chang'an (present-day Xi'an), the Chinese capital of the Han dynasty, traversed the so-called Gansu corridor to the oasis of Dunhuang in the Gobi-desert, and then went to Yumenguan at the easternmost end of the Taklimakan desert. From Yumenguan, a northern road went through the desert to Hami, a three weeks' travel further to the west. The road then continued at the feet of the Heavenly Mountains (Tianshan) that form the northern border of the Taklimakan desert, connecting Turfan, Karashahr, Kucha, Aksu, Tumchuq and Kashgar. From Yumenguan, a southern road went to Miran, Endere, Niya, Keriya, Khotan and Yarkand at the southern edge of the Taklimakan desert, to join the northern road in Kashgar. From Kashgar, the Silk Road went over the Pamir Mountains, Khokand, Samarkand, Bukhara and Merv, through Persia and Iraq to the coasts of the Mediterranean Sea. From there, ships transported goods to Alexandria and Rome. Another road left the southern track at the uttermost western end of the Taklimakan, and went to Balkh, in present-day Afghanistan. This road rejoined the main road in Merv. Another southern road deviated from the main road in Yarkand, led over the Karakoram to Leh and Srinagar in India, and from Srinagar went further to Bombay. Still another road went from Yumenguan to Loulan along the shores of Lop-nor. From Loulan, a track led to the northern road again [18]. Of minor importance was a road that passed from Sichuan through modern Yunnan, down the Irrawaddy River in Burma and across to Bengal [19]. A route across Tibet used by some Buddhist pilgrims, finally, was too hazardous and slow to be of use for trade [20].

The fall of the Han dynasty in 220 CE, meant a decline of Chinese dominance over the Central Asian regions. As a result, also trade over the Silk Road declined. Another consequence of the decline of central power in China was that starting from the 5th century CE, Sogdians, an Iranian people who originally had inhabited Transoxiana in modern Uzbekistān and Tajikistān, started to dominate North China's major cities. They had gradually also become involved in China's diplomatic activities, and, by the middle of the 6th century, had

also established direct trade relations between their cities Samarkand, Bukhara and Tashkent on the one side, and Constantinople on the other. Only with the reunification of China in 589 CE and the subsequent installment of the Tang dynasty in 618 CE did Chinese trade over the ‘Silk Road’ resume. This notwithstanding, the Sogdians continued to dominate the Silk Road trade up to the middle of the 8th century, and their Indo-European language became the *lingua franca* for commercial activities [21]. It was the revolt of the Turkic-Sogdian general An Lushan (?-757) against the Chinese emperor in the winter of 755-6 that would finally deprive the Sogdians of their dominant role in the “Silk Road” trade [22]. China started to retreat from Central Asia as a result of this rebellion, a process which was, by the end of the 8th century, aggravated due to the defeat of the Chinese army in its conflict with the rising Tibetan state and the subsequent beginning of the incursion of Islamic forces in Central Asia. As a consequence, the Sogdians either had to flee to the north, or they were subdued by Islamic forces and were converted to this faith [23]. The Sogdians in China no longer had direct access to their kinship in Central Asia, and they eventually merged with the Chinese.

Also the Turkic empires to the North of Central Asia converted to Islam, and Islam started to make its inroad into the kingdoms of the Taklimakan desert. In the 10th century, the flourishing Islamic culture had made Kashgar a center of sciences, astronomy, and the arts, and the city developed to be an important center in the Karakhanidic empire. It is probably the news of the invasion of Khotan in 1006 by the Islamic Karakhanides who were in control of the region to the east of the Amu-Darya that urged the inhabitants of Dunhuang to seal off their famous caves in which, in the late 19th and early 20th century, western archaeological expeditions discovered the manuscript treasure mentioned earlier.

After the An Lushan rebellion, the overland routes gradually went into decline, and new sea routes were used by Muslim traders. These maritime routes across the Arabian Sea, the Bay of Bengal, and the South China Sea became more popular than the increasingly dangerous land routes [24].

The Silk Roads: Highways for Commodity Trade

Thanks to the Central Asian climate, delicate fabrics that witness of an early international trade have been preserved to the present day. In grave tombs of Pazyryk in the Altai region and in the Alagouya graves in the Heavenly Mountains (Tianshan) that form the northern border of the Taklimakan desert, e.g., fabrics that originate from Central Asia and that have to be dated between the 5th and 3rd centuries BCE have been discovered. The motives on these fabrics – tigers and multicolored animals – are evidence of contacts between the people living

at the borders of the Taklimakan desert and Scythian tribes, and are the earliest evidence of what would become known as the Silk Road trade [25].

Having secured a peaceful environment in Central Asia, Han China started its commercial activities around the beginning of the common era. Silk was the major Chinese commodity traded in Central Asia. Here, this cloth was resold for local products, and the same type of transaction was also done in India and Persia. At the other end of the road, the silk was finally sold on the markets of the Roman empire. In return, Roman gold, wool, amber, and ivory were traded on the markets of the Near East, and these commodities finally reached Han China, where they were sold on the market in the west of the capital Chang'an. As China's Confucian orthodoxy was suspicious of merchants, this trade was dominated by foreigners [26]. Great finds of Chinese style silk fabrics in Niya and Loulan testify of the large amounts of silk that were transported to the west in the period up to the 4th century CE. In the same period, woolen and cotton fabrics reached the oasis cities of the Taklimakan desert from their production sites in Central Asia. A typical example that shows the exchange of styles in the region is a woolen carpet that is decorated with centaurs that was discovered in Shanpula. While actually a Greek figure, the hair style and the clothes of the centaur on this carpet are typical for Central Asia [27]. It were to all probability Nestorian Christians who, in the 6th century, managed to smuggle the first eggs of the silk worm from China to Byzantium, whereupon silk also started to be produced in the Byzantine and Sassanidian empires. Chinese silks remained of superior quality, however, and especially Buddhist communities in Central Asia kept preferring Chinese silks [28]. The ornamentations of the fabrics found in Central Asia from the 7th to 8th centuries are typical of Sassanidian, Sogdian, and Tang China art [29]. We also know from Marco Polo's account that a certain Vilioni family was active in the silk trade in the city of Yangzhou in the 14th century. The origins of this Vilioni family have been traced back to the city of Genoa [30].

Starting from the 6th to 5th centuries BCE, also glass pearls that had been made in Mesopotamia and Egypt were introduced in China through what was to become the Silk Road. The Chinese themselves had started to produce glass in the 5th to 4th centuries BCE. Chinese poems of the 3rd to 6th centuries CE, further, describe the delicateness of Roman and Sassanidian glass. From the time of the Tang dynasty (618-907) dates the earliest Islamic glass in China [31]. When Chinese knowledge of glass production improved thanks to the import of glass from the Near East, Chinese artisans started to make glass tableware. This tableware and fine white porcelain were, in the 13th century, exported from China in

enormous quantities through Arab middlemen. Both in durability and in elegance, these white wares were superior to anything produced anywhere else in the world at the time [32].

Gold was imported in China from locations along the Silk Road, and coins that were unearthed along the Silk road show a variety of cultural provenance: some are made according to the Chinese style (round with a square hole in the middle, cast in bronze, with a Chinese inscription but without figurative decoration), others are made according to the Western tradition (round, with an inscription and decorative elements, beaten in gold, silver, or bronze), and still others are of a local tradition, either to Chinese or the Western model, or to a combination of both [33].

Chinese technologies, finally, reached the West and were instrumental in Europe's industrial revolution centuries later [34].

The Silk Roads: Highways for Religious Exchange

The first religious exchange over the Silk Roads, was the entry of Indian Buddhism in China. Chinese Buddhism was influenced by the Kuṣāṇa interpretation of Buddhism and their anthropomorphic representation of the Buddha which is clearly modeled on Greek examples [35]. In order to conduct their religious practice, Buddhists in China needed the necessary religious artifacts. This, in its turn, ushered in more trade. Both the Chinese consumption of tea and of sugar are in this respect associated with the rise of Buddhism [36]. Even the chair which played an important role in the iconography of the future Buddha Maitreya and in meditation, and which was used in monasteries, was to all probability introduced into China from western regions through Buddhism [37]. Buddhism was also constitutive for the development of writing paper and printing, as reproducing Buddhist texts was believed to be meritorious [38]. Also gold, silver, lapis lazuli, crystal or quartz, pearl, red coral, and agate or coral, collectively called the 'seven treasures,' were important for Buddhist practice, as were Indian perfumes and incense [39].

Buddhism was not the only religion that entered China from Central Asia. When outlawed at the Council of Efeze, Turkey, in 432 because they denied that Christ can simultaneously be man and god, many adherents of the Nestorian faith fled to the east, to the empire of the Sassanides in what is now Iran. From there, Nestorian missionaries-merchants reached China where the first Nestorian church was consecrated in the capital Chang'an in 638 CE. As these Nestorian Christians had traveled along the northern Silk Road, Nestorian communities had also been established in many of the oasis cities along this road [40]. Syrian remained the most important language for liturgy in the churches of Central Asia, but in other

regions, Christian texts were translated into different languages spoken along the silk roads, among others into Persian, Sogdian, Uighur, and Chinese. The most important remnants of Nestorian sacred literature were found in Bulayïq (in the oasis of Turfan), where once a Christian monastery possessed a vast library, as well as in Dunhuang, and a famous stèle in Chang'an eulogizes both in Chinese and in Syrian that Christianity came to China in the 7th century [41]. When Marco Polo traveled through the region at the end of the 13th century, he witnessed the presence of Nestorians in Kashgar, Dunhuang, and Khotan [42]. From around the same period is the most complete extant record of the presence of Nestorians in China. Based on this document, we know that in the first half of the 14th century, the region of Zhenjiang counted 215 Nestorians, or about 8.8 percent of the foreign community in the region [43].

Manichaeism had originated in 3rd century Mesopotamia. When Manichaeans were chased by Christians in the 5th century, also they went east and reached Chinese Central Asia. Here, some Sogdians converted to Manichaeism, and further introduced this religion in China, where Manichaeans established themselves starting from the 7th century. During a short period, this religion was even propagated among the inhabitants of the Chinese cities [44]. In China, other Sogdians converted to Buddhism. This explains why Sogdian texts that have been discovered in China are mostly of Buddhist content, but why some belong to the Nestorian or Manichaean faith. Some other Sogdian texts further witness of a Sogdian variant of Mazdeism, viz. a type of Mazdeism that is influenced by Greek and Hindu cults. In this, Sogdian Mazdeism differs from Sassanidian Mazdeism that was the official cult of the latter empire between the 3rd and 7th centuries. A particularly interesting artifact in this respect is a letter written in Sogdian that is part of the correspondence between local leaders and the Manichaean church [45]. The Sogdians thus appear to have taken a special position in religious exchange over the Silk Road.

When the Uighur Turks plundered the Chinese capital Chang'an around the year 762 and were, in this way, confronted with Manichaeism, some of them converted themselves to this faith. In the Uighur empire, Manichaeism was accepted as official doctrine by the elites of the 8th through early 11th centuries. When, in China, all foreign religions were persecuted between 843 and 845, also Manichaeism came into decline, and disappeared from China, except for a Chinese influenced Manichaean community in the South of the country that existed until the beginning of the 17th century. Two large silk paintings originating from the present-day Chinese province of Fujian and dated between the 12th and 14th centuries, and a large collection of 108 art pieces (manuscripts, textiles, and wall paintings) made for Uighur

clients, originating from Xinjiang and dated from the 8th to the early 11th centuries, are related to the Manichaean faith.

Starting from the 8th century, also Mazdeism was suppressed by the advent of the Islam. By the time of Marco Polo, the region that had once been the centre of Buddhist faith had become completely converted to Islam. It is only when Marco Polo reached Sachiū (= Shazhou) on the border of the present-day Chinese Gansu province, that he noted the presence of Buddhists [46]. Finally, some documents also witness of the presence of Jews – most probably individual merchants – who travelled over the Silk Roads. One of these documents is a Hebrew prayer with fragments of the book Numeri [47].

The heritage of Marco Polo

The prologue to Marco Polo's *Le devisement dou monde* (Description of the World) informs us that in 1298, while Marco Polo was in a prison in Genoa, he wished to occupy his leisure, as well as to afford entertainment to readers, and so recounted his adventures to Messer Rustichello of Pisa, who was in the same prison [48]. It is indeed quite likely that this Rustichello of Pisa is largely responsible for the style of the work, that is, a style that is very similar to his Arthurian romances [49]. Europe's fascination for the Orient is undoubtedly responsible for it that the work has been reedited and translated over and over, with as a result that Marco Polo's text was handed down in 135 manuscripts, dating from 1351 to the 19th century [50]. These versions are traditionally grouped in two categories: those deriving from a Latin 'original' and those deriving from a French 'original' [51]. The most popular of these versions is the one by Ramusio, based on a lost Latin manuscript and published under the title "Navigationi et Viaggi" in 1559, i.e. approximately 200 years after Marco Polo's death in 1324 [52]. This lapse of time does not make it unlikely that over the course of these 200 years elements that sprouted from different authors' imagination – including Ramusio's imagination itself – were inserted in the text [53]. On the other hand, it can also not be excluded, as claimed by Hans Ulrich Vogel (2013, p.293) that the material which was not deemed interesting or meaningful in the eyes of latter-day editors was deleted.

Not only the "Description of the World" is shrouded in the clouds of history, but even the person of Marco Polo himself is obscured by history. We know that there was a family called Polo in the San Geremia district of Venice and that a certain Niccolò Polo of San Geremia was made a member of the council of Venice in 1381 [54]. Although Marco Polo is thus traditionally thought to be a Venetian merchant, he is also claimed to be a native of Korcula, an island of the Dalmatian coast, then under Venetian control [55]. Ramusio also

mentions Marco Polo's grandfather, but this lineage of the Polo family cannot be traced further back in history than Marco's grandfather himself [56]. To make things even more dubious, Marco Polo's name is not mentioned in Chinese historical works (or Mongolian works for that matter), a fact that is at least remarkable given the fact that Chinese historical works abound in details, and the fact that Marco Polo claims that he had a close relationship with the Mongol Khan who ruled over China at the time [57]. As, further, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's description of China is very similar to the one by Marco Polo, Herbert Franke (1966, p.54) even suggested that Marco Polo might, perhaps, have been relying upon a Persian or Arabic guidebook to China for his description of the world. The uncertainty surrounding Marco Polo even gave him the nickname 'Il Milione,' The Man of a Million Tales, and his "Description of the World" has been characterized as a book describing "The Yuan Dynasty as Europeans believed it to be – a place as much of fantasy as of the real world, to which later writers such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge would return to fire their imaginations" [58].

What we do know is that Marco Polo's father and uncle, Niccolo and Maffeo Polo had set out as merchants and must have reached Karakorum, the Mongol capital, in the mid-1260s, that is, approximately a decade after William of Rubruck reached that city [59]. It is further likely that when Marco's father and uncle, most probably on their own initiative, transformed to be papal go-betweens, this was the occasion for them to go on a second journey to the Far East and that they took Marco along with them on this occasion. In this respect, Frances Wood suggests (1995, pp.148-149) that, perhaps, Marco Polo's text should be treated as two separate entities, the prologue that describes the first trip of Niccolo and Maffeo Polo, and the rest of the text that contains the travel account of Marco Polo himself. The first part would then contain the itinerary of the two elder Polos across Central Asia to Karakorum that was probably also followed by William of Rubruck. The second part would then describe Marco's travel over an itinerary that, however, is difficult to follow step by step beyond Persia. It is then suggested (1995, p.149) that Marco Polo might have gotten his information from family stories, the adventures of his father and uncle, and other books available to him [60]. In contrast to Frances Wood, Hans Ulrich Vogel, in his recent study of the financial policies and structures of the Mongol Yuan dynasty, concludes (2013, p.213, p.226, p.289) that compared to the accounts of other mediaeval Western Persian or Arabic authors, Marco Polo's account of the use of paper money and of monetary institutions in the Yuan dynasty is more precise and exhaustive than any other account. Also his knowledge of the use of gold, silver, cowries and salt monies in China's Southwestern regions is very precise (2013, p.227) [61]. Marco Polo also appears to be the only contemporary non-Chinese author who had any knowledge of

the financial situation in this region (2013, p.268, p.288), and he also appears to have been very knowledgeable in the tax system of some parts of the Yuan empire (2013, p.379, p.399). This is also true (2013, p.398) for his knowledge of freight costs and profit shares in China's maritime trade. What gives even more credit to the veracity of Marco Polo's presence in China is that his description is perfectly congruent with the Chinese sources of that period, although the concerned Chinese sources were not yet publicly available at his time [62]. Hans Ulrich Vogel thus concludes that (2013, p.424) "After all [...] in comparison with all the information on monies, salts and revenue we have from other mediaeval Western, Arabic and Persian authors *Le devisament dou monde* is by far both the most detailed and most complete account," and that Marco Polo thus can only have had this precise information from his own observations, wherefore he must have undertaken the travels himself (2013, p.420).

Conclusion

Cultural and commercial exchange has, for centuries, fed people's imagination both at the Western and at the Eastern end of the silk Road. This imagination has shaped our mutual images of far-away regions. As a result, "this interest in the world beyond Europe and its legends, rulers and products led to the great voyages of exploration of the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; and even in the early twentieth century, great travelers like Sir Aurel Stein set off into the little-known Gobi desert, for which Marco Polo's Description of the World remained one of the few reference sources, however unreliable" [63]. This knowledge of the hitherto unknown has – and still is – diversifying and enriching our cultures.

Notes

[1] Voltaire in *Orphelin de la Chine. Tragédie en cinq actes et en vers* (1755). Quoted through Spence, 1990, p.4.

[2] Voltaire in *Essais sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations* (1756). Quoted through Spence, 1990, p.4.

[3] This positive picture would change with such Enlightenment philosophers as Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) and Montesquieu (1689-1755).

[4] See Spence, 1991, pp.132-133.

[5] One of them being William of Rubruck who had arrived in the Mongolian capital Karakorum in 1254, i.e. a few decades before the Mongols included China in their empire.

[6] Along with Jandeseck, 1992, p.34 and p.385 and Larner, 1999, p.97, it can be claimed that – regardless of whether or not *Le devisament dou monde* is the account of Marco Polo's actual

travels – the work was the most comprehensive account of the East, and particularly of the court of Khubilai Khan, known to the West up to his time.

[7] See Hopkirk, [1987] 1991, pp.73-83.

[8] See Hopkirk, [1987] 1991, p.130.

[9] See Jong de, 1987, p.38, notes # 45-47.

[10] The «*Shiji*» was completed in 91 BCE. The «*Hanshu*» was almost completed when Ban Gu died. His sister Ban Zhao (ca.48-ca.114) and Ma Xu (fl. first half of the 2nd century), the younger brother of one of Ban Gu's pupils, completed the work.

[11] For the equation of the Yuezhi with the Tocharians: See Haloun, 1937; Tarn, [1938] 1951; Narain, 1990. The Xiongnu have wrongly been equated with the Huns. On the traditional equation of the Huns with the Xiongnu and arguments that debunk this identification: see Narain, 1990, p.155 and Sinor, 1990, pp.177-178.

[12] For an analysis of this part of the «*Shiji*» and the «*Hanshu*»: see Hulsewé, 1975, pp.95-96 and Posch, 1995, p.85.

[13] For the equation of these so-called 'Great Yuezhi' with the Kuṣāṇas: see Haloun, 1937, p.262; Zürcher, 1968, pp.346-390.

[14] See Hulsewé, 1979, p.41.

[15] See Hulsewé, 1979, p.50, p.62.

[16] See Yü, 1986, pp.409-410. From «*Han shu*» 22, it is evident that securing Ferghāna's breed of exotic horses was such a victory for the Han court that this was celebrated in hymns composed for performance in the ancestral temple. See Lewis, 2007, pp.144-145.

[17] Hopkirk, [1987] 1991, p.38 remarks that the Romans were convinced that silk grew on trees. Plinius wrote: "The Seres are famous because of the wool of their forests. With the use of water, they remove the down of the leaves...". Also Vergilius described how "The Chinese comb delicate wool from the trees".

[18] See Hopkirk, [1987] 1991, pp.36-37.

[19] Lewis, 2009a, p.164.

[20] See Sen, 2003, pp.160-165, pp.169-176; Schafer, 1963, pp.20-21.

[21] See Lewis, 2009a, p.164. It is evident from numerous Chinese documents that the Sogdians not only traded in regular commodities, but that a major part of their profits were made through the commerce in female slaves. See Whitfield, 2009, p.35.

[22] See Lewis, 2009b, p.3.

[23] See Wright and Twitchett, 1973, pp.8-9.

[24] Lewis, 2009b, p.161.

- [25] See Whitfield, 2009, p.148.
- [26] See Lewis, 2007, p.115; Lewis, 2009a, p.164.
- [27] Whitfield, 2009, p.151.
- [28] See Hopkirk, [1987] 1991, p.38; Vogel, 2013, p.357.
- [29] Whitfield, 2009, p.123.
- [30] In Yangzhou, a tombstone in Gothic script was discovered in 1951. The tombstone mentions that a certain Katarina Vilioni was the daughter of Domenico Vilioni and died in 1342. Another inscription mentions the death of Antonio Vilioni in November 1344. See Vogel, 2013, pp.351-353.
- [31] See Vogel, 2013, p.353.
- [32] Wood, 1995, p.65; Whitfield, 2009, pp.81-83.
- [33] Whitfield, 2009, p.94.
- [34] Kuhn, 2009, p.279.
- [35] See Hopkirk, [1987] 1991, p.42; Lewis, 2009b, p.158;
- [36] Europe gained knowledge about Chinese tea in the 15th century, after which also this commodity was traded in Europe. See Vogel, 2013, p.46.
- [37] See Kieschnick, 2003, pp.222-249.
- [38] See Kieschnick, 2003, pp.164-185.
- [39] See Lewis, 2009b, pp.159-160; Liu, 1988, pp.57-64.
- [40] See Hopkirk, [1987] 1991, p.45.
- [41] Whitfield, 2009, p.91.
- [42] See Hopkirk, [1987] 1991, p.46.
- [43] This document is entitled “Zhishun Zhenjiang zhi” (Local Gazetteer of Zhenjiang from the Zhishun Reign-period, and was compiled by Yu Xilu towards the end of the Zhishun reign-period (1330-1332). See also Vogel, 2013, pp.357-358; Van Mechelen, 2001, pp.67-68.
- [44] In an attempt to prove the possibility to convert East Asia to Christianity, these Manichaens were presented as Christians. See Critchley, 1992, pp.148-157. Also Marco Polo made two confusing contributions to our knowledge about Christianity in the Near and Far East. See Lieu, 1992, pp.297-298 and Wood, 1995, pp.27-28. See also note # [4].
- [45] Latham, 1958, p.92; Whitfield, 2009, p.140.
- [46] See Vogel, 2013, p.411.
- [47] See Whitfield, 2009, p.137.
- [48] Latham, 1958, pp.33-34; Wood, 1995, p.5.

[49] See Wood, 1995, p.41. Wood, 1995, p.142 suggests that Rustichello, impressed by the fantastic tales told by Marco Polo to pass the time, whether in a dungeon or other form of confinement, perhaps proposed a literary collaboration.

[50] Vogel, 2013, p.10.

[51] Moule and Pelliot, 1938, vol.1, pp.509-520; Iwamura, 1949.

[52] Wood, 1995, p.1, p.46.

[53] Wood, 1995, p.47.

[54] Moule and Pelliot, 1938, vol.2, pp.17-19.

[55] Wood, 1995, pp.112-113.

[56] Moule and Pelliot, 1938, vol.2, pp.15-19.

[57] See Franke, 1966, p.5; Wood, 1995, p.132, p.135.

[58] Brook, 2010, p.25. Vogel, 2013, pp.13-14 lists the major fields of controversy regarding Marco Polo and his travel account as follows: authorship of the book, complexities of manuscript transmission, the book's nature and style, itinerary and data, Persian rendering of Chinese place names, aspects of Chinese and Mongolian civilization and culture, "Latins" at Khubilai's court, participation in the Xiangyang siege, governorship of Yangzhou, missions of the Polos, the Polos and Chinese sources, return from China, and the golden tablets of authority.

[59] See Wood, 1995, p.117.

[60] This would then explain why Rashīd al-Dīn's history of China in many instances parallels Marco Polo's account. It is known that Rashīd al-Dīn wrote his history of China based on various contemporary Mongolian sources, without ever having been to China himself. See Wood, 1995, p.51, pp.143-144, pp.148-149. On Rashīd al-Dīn's work: see also Franke, 1951.

[61] On Marco Polo's possible function as official in the salt administration: See Pelliot, 1963.

[62] Vogel, 2013, p.419.

[62] Wood, 1995, p.151.

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