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CHINESE RESEARCH ON
MARCO POLO'S *DEVISEMENT DOU MONDE*: AN OVERVIEW

Marco Polo's *Devisement dou monde* was reintroduced to a Chinese readership in the nineteenth century. For more than a century, Chinese scholars have continually mined the book as a fundamental source for reconstructing both China's own past and the broader history of the Silk Road. The abundant Chinese contributions are still largely unknown to the world. On the occasion of the 700th anniversary of Marco Polo's death, this paper aims to present an overview to the important achievements and to demonstrate the approaches over the past century. Chinese scholars gradually acquired various English translations and French translations, while only in recent decades have critical editions of *Devisement dou monde* become available in Chinese academia. On this basis, the evolution of Polian studies in China can be divided into three phases.

1. Before 1983

After the mid-nineteenth century, as the Qing Empire cautiously reopened to the West, Marco Polo's name surfaced in Chinese for the first time – scattered across missionary dispatches, diplomatic reports, and sinological journals – giving readers no more than fleeting, fragmentary glimpses of the Venetian traveler and his book (Wu 2012). The earliest known Chinese owner of Marco Polo's book was Guo Songtao 郭嵩焘 (1818-1891), the Qing Empire's first ambassador to Europe. During a visit to London in 1876 Guo met Henry Yule (1820-1889) and received a copy of Yule's newly issued 1871 edition, yet the volume never circulated within Chinese scholarly circles.

The first Chinese scholar to mine Marco Polo for historical evidence was Hong Jun 洪钧 (1839-1893), ambassador to Europe from 1887 to 1890. In his posthumous *Translations of Foreign Texts for Certifications and Additions to the History of the Yuan* 元史译文证补 (1897) Hong quotes Marco Polo three times,

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but omits the book from his bibliography – clear proof that his knowledge came from Western secondary sources rather than from Polo’s text itself.

The first Chinese rendering of Marco Polo appeared only in 1913. Wei Yi 魏易 (1880-1930) produced it from the 1818 English version by William Marsden (1754-1836), itself derived from Ramusio’s sixteenth-century text. Wei’s rendering, however, is marred by large, undocumented omissions and has never been considered reliable. Yet, as the sole Chinese version then available, it inspired the historian Ding Qian 丁谦 (1843-1919) to publish a cluster of topographical and historical studies.

Four subsequent Chinese translations – Li Ji 李季 (1936), Chen Kaijun 陈开俊 et al. (1981), Liang Shengzhi 梁生智 (1998), and Yu Qianfan 余前帆 (2009) – all go back, directly or indirectly, to Marsden or to Manuel Komroff’s popular redaction of Marsden. Directed at a general readership, they add little to scholarly research (cfr. Dang 1999).

Only three Chinese versions possess sustained academic value. Zhang Xinglang 张星烺 (1889-1951) issued a partial translation in 1929 based on Yule’s text, but abandoned it after only one quarter. When Aldo Ricci’s 1931 English rendering of L. F. Benedetto’s critical Italian edition appeared (Benedetto 1932), Zhang immediately shifted to it, publishing a complete, unannotated Chinese version in 1936. Lacking apparatus and commentary, Zhang’s 1936 translation never gained wide scholarly acceptance.

In the same year, 1936, Feng Chengjun 冯承钧 (1887-1946) issued a Chinese rendering of Charignon’s 1924 annotated French edition, itself based on G. Pauthier’s 1865 text. Feng enriched this edition with additional passages from Ramusio and with selective summaries of the scholarship of Yule, Cordier, and Charignon, adding his own critical observations. The result is the first complete Chinese Marco Polo edition with sustained philological and historical commentary. In 1999 Dang Baohai 党宝海 further revised and expanded Feng’s apparatus; the Feng-Dang edition is now regarded as the most authoritative for scholarly use.

Early Chinese researchers also tried to locate Marco Polo in the Chinese standard history *Yuanshi* 元史 (“History of the Yuan”). Zhang Xinglang followed Pauthier’s conjecture that «Polo» was identical to P’o-lo/Bo-luo the vice-minister of the Shumiyuan 枢密副使孛罗 who appears in the annals of Qubilai’s reign. In fact, this official was a Mongol whose Turco-Mongolian name Bolod ‘steel’ has nothing to do with the Venetian traveler; this plausible identification was soon rejected by Feng and subsequent scholars.

A decisive breakthrough came in 1941, when the Chinese historian Yang Zhi-jiu 杨志玖 (1915-2002) identified a hitherto-overlooked passage in the *Yuanshi*. According to the entry for the eighth lunar month of 1290, three imperial envoys – Wu-lu-dai 兀鲁鲋 (“Turco-Mongolian Uludai”), A-bi-shi-ha 阿必失呵 (“Turco-Mongolian Abisqa, Perso-Arabic ‘Abīsqā”), and Huo-zhe 火者 (“Turco-Mongolian Qoja < Perso-Arabic Khwāja”) – together with 160 companions, were outfitting a fleet bound for Persia. These names correspond exactly with the Oulatai, Apousca, and Coja whom Marco Polo names as his fellow-travelers

when he describes leaving China. Yang concluded that Polo therefore departed at the very end of 1290 or the first days of 1291.

Yang's findings were summarized in English in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal Letters* (1944) and the *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* (1945), yet they went largely unnoticed in the West until Francis W. Cleaves (1976) linked Yang's Chinese evidence with a Persian source that records Khwāja's arrival in Persia escorting the princess Kökechin Khatun. Marco Polo's narrative of the voyage now supplies the connective tissue that transforms two previously isolated Asian chronicles into mutually corroborating testimony. It remains the only direct confirmation that Marco Polo was physically present in China and enables us to identify, name by name, the Persian ambassadors he claimed to have accompanied.

Equally noteworthy, the first systematic study of Marco Polo's accounts of Yunnan and Burma was undertaken by Fang Guoyu 方国瑜 in 1939. Together with his student Lin Chaomin 林超民, Fang expanded this research into a full monograph in the early 1980s; the manuscript, however, remained unpublished until 1994.

The establishment of Sino-Italian diplomatic relations in 1970 spurred a new wave of interest. In 1983 Yu Shixiong edited *Marco Polo: Introduction and Research* 马可·波罗介绍与研究, a comprehensive anthology that gathered virtually every significant Chinese article on the subject published before 1983.

2. 1983-2010

The 1938 Moule-Pelliot 'integral' edition and Pelliot's posthumous *Notes on Marco Polo* (1959-1972) began to shape Chinese scholarship only after the 1980s. Paul Pelliot's Chinese pupil Shao Xunzheng 邵循正 (1909-1972) had studied in Europe between 1934 and 1936 while Pelliot was preparing his Marco Polo materials. On returning to China, Shao delivered two lectures, around 1950, on the book's historical value; both appeared in print only in 1982. As a professor at Peking University, Shao's interests in the Mongol Empire and in Marco Polo deeply influenced the cohort of researchers who dominated Polian studies in China from 1983 to 2010.

The 700th anniversary of Marco Polo's departure from China, celebrated in 1991, produced a landmark academic volume: *Marco Polo, a Pioneer in the Cultural Exchange between East and West*, edited by Lu Guojun (1995), which brought together the latest studies by Chinese and Italian scholars alike.

Frances Wood's notorious *Was Marco Polo in China?* (1995; Chinese translation 1997) quickly drew a wide Chinese readership, yet it failed to acknowledge the Chinese scholarship that had already answered many of the questions she raised. Chief among these was Yang Zhijiu, who resumed his Polian research and published dozens of articles in the closing decades of the twentieth century. Nearly all of them were reprinted in his 1999 monograph *Marco Polo in China*; an enlarged, revised edition, *Yang Zhijiu's Collected Works: Marco Polo and Sino-Foreign Relations*, appeared in 2015 and remains the richest source of precise, nuanced information on Marco Polo's China.

In 2000, Professor Yang Zhijiu of Nankai University convened the international conference “Marco Polo and Thirteenth-Century China” at Tianjin. Francis Wood was invited to participate in what was billed as a formal ‘debate,’ yet in her presentation she neither denied Marco Polo’s presence in China nor advanced any new doubts; her remarks on the intricacies of manuscript transmission left most delegates unmoved (Wood 1999). The conference proceedings appeared as no. 8 of the Journal *Yuanshi Luncong* (2001) and contained the following studies:

- Zhou Qingshu, “The *Arquns* and *Nasij* in Marco Polo’s Book”;
- Qiu Shusen, “Muslims in China as Described by Marco Polo”;
- Liu Yingsheng, “Concerning Mar Sergis”;
- Wang Ting, “Further Notes on the Great Khan Riding an Elephant”;
- Li Zhian, “Naian’s Rebellion in Marco Polo’s Account”;
- Dang Baohai, “The Destruction and Reconstruction of City Walls under the Yuan Dynasty: New Evidence for Marco Polo in China”; and
- Gao Rongsheng, “*Choncha* and the Routes by Which Marco Polo Entered Fujian”.

Complementing these papers, Zhou Liangxiao’s “Western Travelers to China during the Yuan Period—Also a Reply to *Was Marco Polo in China?*” (2001) demonstrates that Marco Polo was by no means an isolated phenomenon in the Eurasian exchanges of the Mongol era.

Alongside Yang Zhijiu, three scholars – Cai Meibiao 蔡美彪 (1928-2021), Chen Dezhi 陈得芝 (1933-), and Huang Shijian 黄时鉴 (1935-2013) – shaped the 1983-2010 wave of Marco-Polo studies in China.

Cai Meibiao, renowned for Sino-Mongol philology, produced three seminal articles. “A Discussion of Marco Polo’s Stay in China” (1992; English 1993) argues that Polo acted as an *ortaq/ortoq* “partner” merchant. “A Critical Analysis of the Records Concerning the Return Journey of Marco Polo” (1997) re-examines Polo’s occupation, Kökechin Khatun and her Manzi maid, and the Persian leg of the voyage. In 1998 he identifies the *Cenchu* and *Van chu* of Ahmad’s episode with the Chinese terms *qian-hu* “chiliarch” and *wan-hu* “myriarch”.

Chen Dezhi’s forte is historical geography of the Mongol Empire and Yuan China. His 1986 paper offers the most complete and internally consistent reconstruction of Polo’s itinerary and chronology inside China, cross-checked against Chinese sources. “Some Additional Notes on Marco Polo” (1995) supplements Pelliot’s *Notes*, covering

1. Polo as Qubilai’s envoy,
2. Giogiu = Zhuozhou 涿州,
3. Quengianfu = Jingzhaofu 京兆府, and
4. Tebet.

Chen’s 2009 study of the Uyghur maritime merchant Yiheimishi (Yighmish) deepens the evidence for Polo’s role as an *ortoq* merchant in the Yuan realm.

Huang Shijian, a specialist on Mongol-era Sino-foreign relations, concentrated on chronology and omissions. Huang 1981 fixes the dates of Polo’s departure

from Venice and China, his arrival in Persia, and his Genoese captivity. His twin articles on tea (1993; 1994), Great Wall (with Gong 1998; 1999) and foot-binding (2006; 2011) marshal exhaustive sources to explain why Polo never mentions them, thereby answering Frances Wood's skepticism with precision and nuance.

Throughout this phase the Moule-Pelliot edition remained the standard reference. Monographs by Shen Youliang (2001; 2012; 2013) and Peng Hai (2010), though still useful for Chinese data, rely on older translations and now appear dated.

3. 2011 onward

Twenty-first-century Marco-Polo studies in China are distinguished by tightly integrated, multidisciplinary teams and by systematic engagement with philology, archaeology and codicology. For example, in 2008 archaeologist Lin Meicun proposed a possible location for Marco Polo's residence in Beijing, and in 2011 he examined the so-called 'Marco Polo jar' preserved in Venice (Lin and Zhang 2018).

Since 2011, when the International Institute for China Studies at Peking University launched the "Marco Polo Research" project under the direction of Professor Rong Xinjiang, the study of Marco Polo has entered a new phase. The project's core aim has been to render the principal recensions of Marco Polo's book, together with the most influential modern commentaries, into Chinese, and to supply them with exhaustive new annotations. The team has now completed its Chinese translation based on the Moule-Pelliot edition, which will appear in six substantial volumes. To facilitate scholarly exchange, the project inaugurated the column "Marco Polo Research" in the *Newsletter for International China Studies* (Peking University Press). Contributions to the column range well beyond Marco Polo's own itinerary in China, embracing the broader history of Eurasian interchange along the Silk Road – trans-continental geography, religions, folklore, zoology, botany, and much else besides.

To intensify international dialogue, the project has systematically introduced pivotal foreign scholarship to a Chinese readership. The anthology *Foreign Scholars on Marco Polo: Selected Essays* (2022), co-edited by Rong Xinjiang and Dang Baohai, assembles for the first time in Chinese the classic English studies of Arthur C. Moule, Igor de Rachewiltz, David Jacoby, Peter Jackson and Stephen Haw; foundational French contributions by Antoine Mostaert, Jean Richard and Philippe Ménard; and key Japanese research by Otagi Matuo 愛宕松男 and Takata Hideki 高田英樹. In the same year, Hans Ulrich Vogel's *Marco Polo was in China: New Evidence from Currencies, Salts and Revenues* appeared in Chinese translation by Dang Baohai, Ma Xiaolin and Zhou Sicheng.

These publications have been complemented by a regular cycle of international conferences: Yangzhou 2015 and 2024, Beijing 2016 and 2024, and Shanghai 2024. Delegates from China, Italy, France, the United States, Germany, Japan, Korea and Iran explored themes ranging from the political history of the Mongol Empire and medieval European, Persian-Arabic and Turco-Mongolian literature

to Silk-Road archaeology. The proceedings, *Marco Polo, Yangzhou and the Silk Road* (Xu and Rong 2016) and *Marco Polo and the Silk Road 10th-14th centuries* (Rong and Dang 2019), have already become standard references.

Dang Baohai, co-leader of the “Marco Polo Research” project, has produced a sustained body of work that combines rigorous philology with wide-ranging regional expertise. After his pre-2011 studies on Marco Polo and the Yuan postal network, his research has unfolded along two complementary tracks. On one hand, his work illuminates the political world of the Yuan Dynasty such as

- “*Köke Ayula* ‘green hill’ and Dadu (Khanbaliq)” (Dang 2011a; English version 2024),
- “*Hicutu-da* and *Qaqca-Modun*” (2011b; English version 2024),
- Qubilai’s Tree Planting Decree (2013),
- the *paiza* “tablet” in the Mongol Empire (2014a), and
- *Achbaluch* and Qubilai’s game reserve (2020).

On the other hand, his articles contribute to the cross-cultural themes of the Yuan world including the Old Uyghur ancestral legend (2012), the Tangut commodities on the Silk Road (2014b), the city *Singiu* = Zhenzhou (2016), and the Curfew in the City of Quinsai (2021).

Special attention is paid to the latest archeological results and unearthed documents when Rong Xinjiang studies Marco Polo’s description of Khotan (2015; 2016). Luo Shuai (2012) reviews Aurel Stein’s archeological adventure to Central Asia, and then furthers his research into oasis cities including Qiemo (2016), Yarcan = Shache (2017a; 2017b), Lop (2019) in Xinjiang, and Swat in Pakistan (2021). Indeed, these discussions regularly reach back a full millennium before Marco Polo.

Members of the project focus on the history of Silk Road, especially the Middle East, Central Asia, and Maritime Silk Road. Qiu Yihao discusses the Mamluk literature on the Arabic merchants in East Asia during the Marco Polo’s time (2016). Wang Yidan (2019) uses Persian literature to verify the bridges of Quinsai described by Marco Polo. Chen Chunxiao (2021) inspects Polo’s ethnographic observations of the wedding customs in the Tarim region.

Ma Xiaolin’s research mainly concerns rituals, customs and religions. His articles include

- the Kashmir Buddhism described by Marco Polo (2012),
- the Christianity in the Tangut province (2013),
- the Salamander (Asbestos) and Marco Polo (2016),
- the Grand Qa’an’s birthday feast (2017),
- the ceremony of mare milk and the date when Polo was in Shangdu (2019), and
- the Yuan court festivals witnessed by Marco Polo and Odorico da Pordenone (2022).

Ma Xiaolin’s *Marco Polo and Yuan China: in the light of Texts and Rituals and Beliefs* (2018) is the first Chinese book to use European philological results on manuscripts.

Other papers in various perspectives include

- Zhou Sicheng on the soothsayers on battlefield (2015) and astrologers in Quinsai (2019),
- Luo Wei (2014; 2017) on the custom of sexual hospitality,
- Li Mingfei (2018) on Polo's 'inaccurate' description of Qubilai's age,
- Gao Yazhe (2020) on the person Mangatay in Marco Polo,
- Chen Xi (2021) on the date of Qaidu's war, and
- Li Xinyu (2021) on the date of Polo's travel to Yunnan.

Qiu Zhirong (2021) re-examines the long-disputed Persian segment of Marco Polo's homeward route. By collating every significant manuscript family with the political chronology of the Il-khanate, she shows that Ramusio's text preserves some authentic data even while it contains obvious editorial amplifications. Her reconstruction also explains that when Polo was in Ilkhanate Persia 1293-1294, envoys en route to Ghazan's court brought news that Temür had already been designated as Qubilai's heir; yet Polo had already departed Persia before news of Qubilai's death (February 1294) could reach him, which is why his book reports Temür as the designated heir yet shows no awareness that the Great Khan had in fact died.

The aforementioned studies are a continuation and development of the previous two stages of research. The content of historical studies has been refined, and the geographic scope has expanded from China to the Silk Road. My monograph and a series of articles (Ma Xiaolin 2017b; 2018; 2019b) have introduced Chinese readers to the most recent developments in European textual criticism. Recognizing the limitations of the Moule-Pelliot edition, scholars now need to integrate Asian historical perspectives with Roman philology, as exemplified by the work of contemporary Italian scholars such as Eugenio Burgio, Alvisè Andreose, Samuela Simion, and Chiara Concina. Engaging with Chinese historical scholarship can provide crucial evidence for resolving long-standing textual cruces.

4. Conclusions

To sum up, Marco Polo's *Devisement dou monde* has long been the exclusive concern of Chinese historians. In the pre-1983 period, Polo's journey was largely accepted as historical fact, with little critical scrutiny. From 1983 to 2011, however, a wave of skepticism emerged, fueled by arguments that his *Devisement dou monde* omit key aspects of Chinese culture, such as the Great Wall, chopsticks, and footbinding – features presumed to be unmistakable signs of firsthand experience. As response, historians have shown that many of the 'missing' elements were not prominent in Yuan China and that Polo's account includes numerous accurate details – particularly about administration, currency, and geography – that align with Chinese and Persian sources. Since 2011, a more balanced phase has taken shape. Rather than simply dismissing the *Devisement dou monde* as fiction or accepting them uncritically, Polo's narrative should be considered as a complex product of personal memory, co-authorship, and me-

dieval literary conventions. Acknowledging the layered and mediated nature of his account, a nuanced reading will further support the position that Marco Polo most likely did reach China.

Since the mid-twentieth century, the study of the Mongol Empire and the Yuan dynasty inside China has been molded – sometimes consciously, sometimes implicitly – by the multilingual agenda of European Sinology and Inner-Asian studies epitomized by Paul Pelliot. Building on that inheritance, Chinese scholarship has steadily enlarged its linguistic tool-kit: Mongolian, Persian, Turkic, Tibetan, Arabic, even Syriac and Armenian texts are now routinely mined. Against this backdrop, Marco-Polo research has become a convenient microcosm of the field: every trans-continental topic Polo touches – currency, postal relays, salt administration, naval technology, ethnography – forces the scholar to shuttle between Chinese, Persian, Franco-Italian, Latin and other corpora. The next frontier is therefore obvious: to approach the European-language witnesses with the same philological sophistication already lavished on Asian texts, and to do so in sustained collaboration with European colleagues. Bibliographical practice is already shifting. Although some reference works still uncritically reproduce Moule-Pelliot, a growing circle insists on critical editions and on manuscript evidence. Eastern with Western fields. The new trend is to combine Eastern with Western fields. I am preparing an annotated corpus of Latin texts on the Mongols and China, while Qiu Zhirong has completed a critical Chinese translation of Odorico da Pordenone's *Relatio* (forthcoming). As a result, Chinese researchers are now engaging ever more closely with the philological, linguistic and textual-critical methods, ensuring that future Marco Polo studies will be conducted on a global and interdisciplinary footing. Fresh transcriptions of Polo manuscripts, increasingly accessible through digitization, are attracting a new generation of Chinese scholars who combine training in Latin and Romance philology with their inherited strengths in Asian history.

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