

Marco Polo and the Political Economy of the Yuan Empire: Realities and Ideologies

Hans Ulrich Vogel

Universität Tübingen, Deutschland

Abstract Departing from a Yuan perspective of political economy, it will be shown that we can find a substantial number of descriptions in the *Devisement dou monde* on the Mongol state's involvement in, and influence on, the Chinese economy. Apart from these explicit references, the Venetian's account contains numerous implicit indications of important sectors of the economy that, at least indirectly, can be linked to economic measures during Qubilai's reign. An idealistic tone frequently permeates Polo's narration concerning the Mongol emperor's economic policies, but relevant positive evaluations are also present in late Yuan and early Ming sources.

Keywords Marco Polo. Yuan dynasty. Political economy. Taxation. Public works. Military. Reality. Ideology.

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1 Introduction

In this article, I will undertake a first inroad into the question of how much of the political economy of the Mongol Yuan empire found its reflection in Marco Polo's account. My point of departure will not necessarily be a modern concept of political economy, but rather an indigenous perception more or less contemporary with the Venetian's stay in China. One of the aims will be to see how much of this is also referred to in Marco's report, but also to get an idea what went unrecorded, either being deemed unnecessary by the Venetian to be included or because of his unawareness or lack of knowledge. Given the vast amount of topics that potentially fall under the label of Yuan-period political economy, it is hardly surprising that the Venetian did not cover each and every topic, as such a systemic approach rather represents the work of the historiographical compilers in imperial China or that of modern research than something that could have been achieved by a single foreign individual during his stay in Qubilai Qayan's empire. A further target will be to carry out a reality check of Marco's descriptions of themes related to the Yuan political economy. Because of the large number of relevant topics, this will be only a preliminary and eclectic approach based on different versions of Marco Polo's account and relying on modern research literature, while from time to time also going directly into primary sources. Eventually, it will also be interesting to see how much idealisation is contained in the *Devisement dou monde* (hereafter *DM*) in its description of topics within the scope of this article.

2 Political Economy under the Yuan Mongols: Definition and Scope

Leaving completely aside the semantical evolution of the term within a Western context, 'political economy' nowadays can be defined as

the study of how economic systems (e.g. markets and national economies) and political systems (e.g. law, institutions, government) are linked. Widely studied phenomena within the discipline are systems such as labour markets and financial markets, as well as phenomena such as growth, distribution, inequality, and trade, and how these are shaped by institutions, laws, and government policy. Originating in the 16th century, it is the precursor to the modern discipline of economics. Political economy in its modern form is considered an interdisciplinary field, drawing on theory from both political science and modern economics.¹

¹ Cf. "Political Economy" (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Political_economy).

It goes without saying that the notion of ‘political economy’ in a more modern sense did not exist in Yuan China, nor was it a concept in the mind of Marco Polo. Therefore, and because of practical reasons, a more specific and contemporaneous definition will be chosen in this article by simply taking as point of reference those areas of Yuan policies that we may consider to have had a more or less deep impact on the economy. This strategy also finds its support when adopting a hermeneutical perspective, that is, by taking into account those parts of the Yuan governmental and military structures that contemporaries deemed to have had an influence on, or to have been interrelated with, the economic life of the population under its rule.

Let us take first a look at the topics treated in the category “Tax Institutions” (“Fudian” 賦典) of the *Jingshi dadian* 經世大典 (The Great Institutions [wherewith] to Govern the World, completed in 1333; hereafter JSDD), a work of which only parts survived, including its descriptive table of contents. The general preface to this part of the JSDD gives us an impression of the contemporary perception in those days:

The tradition says, “[On this account, the ruler will first take pains about his own virtue.] Possessing virtue will give him the people. Possessing the people will give him the territory. Possessing the territory will give him its wealth. Possessing the wealth, he will have resources for expenditure. [Virtue is the root; wealth is the result.]”² This is a statement that has not changed [to be valid] from antiquity to nowadays. Since the Imperial Yuan had laid the foundations in the North, numinously achieved the Great Enterprise and united Huaxia [i.e. China], life-loving benevolence [has spread everywhere], like Heaven which covers everything and like Earth which carries everything. This is clear demonstration of the Sagely Virtue [of the Yuan Dynasty].³

As is well known, the JSDD’s category on “Tax Institutions” was the primary source for the “Treatises of Administrative Geography” (“Dili zhi” 地理志) and for most of the records in the “Treatises of Food and Money” (“Shihuo zhi” 食貨志) in the *Yuanshi* 元史 (History of the Yuan [Dynasty]; hereafter YS), though the YS compilers shortened the JSDD’s material considerably.⁴ What was eventually perceived to be part and parcel of the policy regarding ‘tax institutions’ or ‘food and

² This is a quote from the *Daxue* 大學 (Great Learning). See Legge 1983, 375. The parts in brackets were not included in the JSDD.

³ *Yuanwen lei* (hereafter YWL) 1332, ch. 40, 887: 傳曰，有德，此有人，有人，此有土，有土，此有財，有財，此有用。茲古今不易之論也。粵若皇元肇基朔方神功大業混一華夏，好生之仁，如天地無不覆載。此聖德之昭著也。

⁴ On the compilation of the JSDD and the YS and their interrelationship see Franke 1949, 22-3, 31-4; Schurmann 1956, ix-xii.

money' can be best answered by taking a look at the topics treated in JSDD and YS (see Table 1). The specific highlighting formats that are used in this and the following two tables are representing the different degrees of intensity by which these topics were discussed and related to the Yuan political economy in the Venetian's account. The meanings of these formats is explained in the "Notes" to Table 1 and will be further elucidated and dwelt on below in chapter 3 of this article:

Table 1 Chapters and Sections, respectively, on Fiscal Economy in *Jingshi dadian* and *Yuanshi*

<i>Jingshi dadian</i> , "Fudian"	<i>Yuanshi</i> , "Dili zhi"
1) Cities and towns (<i>duyi</i> 都邑)	Administrative geography (ch. 58-63)
2) Appendix: Annan [i.e. Annam] (<i>fulu: Annan</i> 附錄: 安南)	(<i>dili</i> 地理)
3) Population registers (<i>banji</i> 版籍)	[partly integrated into ch. 58 of the "Dili zhi"]
<i>Jingshi dadian</i> , "Fudian"	<i>Yuanshi</i> , "Shihuo zhi"
4) Land surveys (<i>jingli</i> 經理)	Land surveys (<i>jingli</i>)
5) Agriculture and sericulture (<i>nongsang</i> 農桑)	Agriculture and sericulture (<i>nongsang</i>)
6) Taxes: grain taxes (<i>fudian: shuiliang</i> 賦典: 稅糧)	Grain taxes [including summer tax] (<i>shuiliang</i> 稅糧)
7) Taxes: summer tax (<i>fudian: xiashui</i> 賦典: 夏稅)	
8) Taxes: household taxes (<i>fudian: kechai</i> 賦典: 科差)	Household taxes (<i>kechai</i> 科差)
9) Maritime transport [of grain] (<i>haiyun</i> 海運)	Maritime transport [of grain] (<i>haiyun</i>)
10) Paper-currency system (<i>chaofa</i> 鈔法)	Paper-currency system [including copper-cash system] (<i>chaofa</i>)
11) Appendix: copper-cash system (<i>fulu: qianfa</i> 附錄: 錢法) ⁱ	
12) Gold, silver, pearls, jade , copper, iron , [cinnabar, mercury , turquoise], lead, tin, alum, [nitre], sodium carbonate, bamboo and wood taxes ⁱⁱ (<i>jin yin zhu yu tong tie qian xi fan jian zhu mu deng ke</i> 金銀珠玉銅鐵鉛錫礬竹木等課)	Annual taxes [from government monopolies] (<i>suike</i> 歲課)
13) Salt [monopoly] system (<i>yanfa</i> 鹽法)	Salt [monopoly] system (<i>yanfa</i>)
14) Tea [monopoly] system (<i>chafa</i> 茶法)	Tea [monopoly] system (<i>chafa</i>)
15) Liquor [and vinegar taxes] (<i>jiucu</i> 酒[醋])	Liquor and vinegar taxes (<i>jiucuke</i> 酒醋課)
16) Commercial tax (<i>shangshui</i> 商稅)	Commercial tax (<i>shangshui</i>)
17) Maritime trade (<i>shibo</i> 市舶)	Maritime trade (<i>shibo</i>)
18) [no counterpart]	<i>Non-quota taxes (ewaike</i> 額外課): calendars , [...], kilns and smelters, [...], household tax, [...], coal and charcoal , [...], fish , [...], porcelain , [...] ginger ⁱⁱⁱ
19) Annual grants to [imperial] relatives (<i>zongqin suici</i> 宗親歲賜)	Annual grants (<i>suici</i> 歲賜)
20) Salaries (<i>fengzhi</i> 俸秩)	Salaries (<i>fengzhi</i>)

21) Monies for public use [i.e. the so-called <i>ortog</i> institution of government lending of monies] (<i>gongyongqian</i> 公用錢)	[entirely omitted as a result of the historiographic bias of the YS compilers]
22) Ever-normal and charity granaries (<i>changping yicang</i> 常平義倉)	Ever-normal and charity granaries (<i>changping yicang</i>)
23) Public pharmacies (<i>huimin yaoju</i> 惠民藥局)	Public pharmacies (<i>huimin yaoju</i>)
24) [Government] purchase of grain and fodder (<i>shidi liangcao</i> 市糴糧草)	Government purchase of grain (<i>shidi</i> 市糴)
25) Exemptions: remission of taxes by [imperial] grace (<i>juanmian: enmian chaishui</i> 免:恩免差稅)	Relief measures (<i>zhenxu</i> 賑恤) [ch. 25 to 28 of the JSDD were taken over in this section of the YS in the same sequence, but without headings]
26) Exemptions: remission of taxes [because of] disasters and injuries (<i>juanmian: zaishang mian chaishui</i> 免:災傷免差稅)	
27) Relief and loans: relief by sale of grain and [relief] by ‘red document’ grain ^{iv} in the capital (<i>zhendai: jingshi zhentiaoliang hongtieliang</i> 賑貸:京師賑糴糧紅帖糧)	
28) Relief and loans: relief in all areas [because of] disasters and injuries (<i>zhendai: gechu zaishang zhenji</i> 賑貸:各處災傷賑濟)	

Source: *Yuanwen lei* 1332, ch. 40; YS 1370, ch. 58-63, 93-7.

Notes: This is a complete listing of the chapters or sections in the JSDD’s “Fudian” category and the YS’s “Shihuo zhi” treatises. The individual sections of YS’s “Dili zhi” treatises, however, are not listed here. The different formats of the chapter or section headings here and in Tables 2 and 3 reflect the intensity of Marco Polo’s description of these subjects and to which degree he related them to the Yuan political economy, as will be further explained below in chapter 3:

Bold with single underline:	Explicit reference by special chapter
Bold with dash underline:	Explicit individual reference
<i>Italics and bold with dotted underline:</i>	Implicit reference by special chapter
<i>Italics and bold:</i>	Implicit individual reference
Normal script:	No mentioning by the Venetian

i Copper coins were little used during the Yuan and issued only periodically, mainly from the very late thirteenth century onwards. Cf. Schurmann 1956, 135-6.

ii The items in brackets are mentioned in the parallel YS chapter.

iii Only those of the 32 items are listed here that are also mentioned by Marco Polo. For a full list see Schurmann 1956, 238-41.

iv The institution of a system of emergency grain distribution and sale by means of so-called ‘red documents’ in the capital took place sometime after 1301/1302. See Schurmann 1956, xv fn. 18.

In the YS we can find an introductory statement which provides us with an idea how near-contemporaries of the Venetian perceived the relationship between 'food' on the one hand and 'money' on the other:

According to the "Great Plan" chapter [of the *Shujing* 書經 (Book of History)], of the 'eight objects of government', food (*shi* 食) comes first and money (*huo* 貨) next. Indeed, food and money are the sources of maintenance of life. Without food and money the people cannot live, and the nation has no revenue. Consequently, those of antiquity who were versed in administering their countries were not able to avoid exactions from the people, yet never committed excesses in their exactions from the people. In general, [this policy] consisted simply of regulating the outgoing by the incoming. It has been said, "There is a great course [also] for the production of wealth. Let the producers be many and the consumers few. Let there be activity in the production and economy in the expenditure". This is the way in which the kings of antiquity understood finance.

Later generations [after antiquity], however, were different. [...] Initially, the Yuan had no fixed system of taxation. When [the Emperor] Shizu [Qubilai] established a [tax] system, it was entirely based on [the principle of] moderation. [...]

After these periods [i.e. Zhiyuan (1264-95) and Dade (1297-1308)] expenditures gradually expanded.⁵

Hence, in terms of this highly idealistic description of the state's role in the economic domain, we can observe that, first, economic and fiscal policies should be devised in such a way that they would benefit both the people and the state,⁶ thus also providing political legitimacy to the latter and contributing to its perpetuation. A second observation is that from those above moderation in tax demands and in their consumption was demanded so that production would not be impaired, but stimulated. Thirdly, the YS compilers highlighted that later dynasties in the course of time did not keep to this ideal of the kings of antiquity. This, they say, was after all also true for the Yuan period, because from the beginning of the fourteenth century onwards moderation – as it was claimed to have been the principle of the policy of Qubilai and his first successor – was increasingly given up and expenditures expanded instead.

In his study of ch. 93 and 94 of the YS Schurmann – in the vein of Rhea Blue's study of the food and money chapters of the *Hanshu* 漢書 (Records of the Han [Dynasty]) – has pointed out that the "Shihuo zhi"

⁵ See Schurmann 1956, 14-15.

⁶ For this concept in Chinese history see Metzger 1973, 55-6.

chapters have to be considered primarily as “monographs of fiscal administration”.⁷ This is certainly true as most of them dealt – and this very explicitly – with government income and expenditure. However, as such they had no doubt a substantial impact on the economy and thus can be defined as an important part of the political economy. Yet, a more comprehensive inclusion of the influence of governmental policies and activities on the economy needs also to take into account other areas of state involvement, namely, those that had to do with public works as well as with certain sectors of the military economy. Again, the JSDD with its categories “Public Works Institutions” (“Gongdian” 工典) and “Political Institutions” (“Zhengdian” 政典) provides a good insight into these sectors (see Tables 2 and 3). For the first, there is no direct counterpart in the YS, with the exception of the treatises on “Rivers and Canals” (“Hequ zhi” 河渠志), which appear to be based on a number of other materials than the JSDD. The sections dealing with military economy in the YS’s “Military Treatises” (“Bing zhi” 兵志), however, have drawn on their counterparts in the JSDD’s “Political Institutions” category.⁸

Table 2 Chapters on Public Works in *Jingshi dadian* and *Yuanshi*

<i>Jingshi dadian</i> , “Gongdian”	<i>Yuanshi</i>
1) [Imperial] palaces and parks (<i>gongyuan</i> 宮苑)	[no counterpart]
2) Government buildings (<i>guanfu</i> 官府)	[no counterpart]
3) Granaries (<i>cangku</i> 倉庫)	[no counterpart]
4) City walls [in the capitals] (<i>chengguo</i> 城郭)	[no counterpart]
5) Bridges (<i>qiaoliang</i> 橋梁)	[no counterpart]
<i>Jingshi dadian</i> , “Gongdian”	<i>Yuanshi</i> , “Hequ zhi”
6) Rivers and canals (<i>hequ</i> 河渠)	Rivers and Canals (ch. 64-6) (<i>hequ</i>)
<i>Jingshi dadian</i> , “Gongdian”	<i>Yuanshi</i>
7) Temples for sacrifices (<i>jiaomiao</i> 郊廟)	[no counterpart]
8) Buddhist monasteries [temples, etc.] (<i>sengsi</i> 僧寺)	[no counterpart]
9) Daoist temples [monasteries, etc.] (<i>daogong</i> 道宮)	[no counterpart]
10) Tents (<i>luzhang</i> 廬帳)	[no counterpart]
11) Weapons (<i>bingqi</i> 兵器)	[no counterpart]
12) [Imperial] carriages and honour guards (<i>lubu</i> 鹵簿)	[no counterpart]
13) Jade work (<i>yugong</i> 玉工)	[no counterpart]

⁷ Schurmann 1956, xiii.

⁸ See Franke 1949, 22 and 23-4, respectively.

14) Metal work (<i>jingong</i> 金工)	[no counterpart]
15) Wood work (<i>mugong</i> 木工)	[no counterpart]
16) Pottery [tiles] work (<i>shanzhi zhi gong</i> 埴埴之工)	[no counterpart]
17) Silk and hemp work (<i>sixi zhi gong</i> 絲枲之工)	[no counterpart]
18) Leather work (<i>pigong</i> 皮工)	[no counterpart]
19) Felt and carpets (<i>zhanji</i> 氍毹)	[no counterpart]
20) Painting and sculpting (<i>huasu</i> 畫塑)	[no counterpart]
21) Craftsmen (<i>zhujiang</i> 諸匠)	[no counterpart]

Source: YWL 1332, ch. 42; YS 1370, ch. 64-6.

Note: This is a complete listing of the chapters in the JSDD's "Gongdian" category. The individual sections of the YS's "Hequ zhi" treatises are not listed here. For most of the JSDD chapters no direct counterpart exists in the YS, though some of the material may be included in other chapters, such as the JSDD's '[Imperial] carriages and honour guards' in the YS chapters 78-80 on "Carriages and Dresses" (*yufu* 輿服).

Table 3 Chapters and Sections, respectively, on Military Economy in *Jingshi dadian* and *Yuanshi*

<i>Jingshi dadian</i> , "Zhengdian"	<i>Yuanshi</i> , "Bing zhi"
1) Military equipment (<i>bingqi</i> 軍器)	[no counterpart]
2) Statutory labour service (<i>gongyi</i> 工役)	[no counterpart]
3) Horse policies (<i>mazheng</i> 馬政)	Horse policies (<i>mazheng</i>)
4) [Military] agricultural colonies (<i>tuntian</i> 屯田)	[Military] agricultural colonies (<i>tuntian</i>)
5) Transmission by relay stations (<i>yichuan</i> 驛傳)	Relay stations (<i>zhanchi</i> 站赤)
6) Falconries and hunters (<i>yingfang bulie</i> 鷹房捕獵)	Falconries and hunters (<i>yingfang bulie</i>)

Source: YWL 1332, ch. 41; YS 1370, ch. 98-101.

Note: this is a selective listing of the chapters or sections in the JSDD's "Zhengdian" category and the YS's "Bing zhi" treatises, as only those are listed that may be defined as being part of the 'military economy'.

In the general preface to the "Public Works Institutions" of the JSDD we can read the following:

Those who have a state should value the people's power and economise on the state's expenses. It is for this reason that in matters related to the Hundred Crafts (*baigong* 百工) one has to set store by frugality and to respect their use at suitable times, abstain from extravagance, and to be anxious to hurt the people. As to the divisions of the Six Officials, one of it is for public works.⁹

⁹ YWL 1332, ch. 42, 1001: 有國家者，重民力，節國用。是以百工之事，尚儉朴而貴適時用，戒奢縱而慮傷人心，安危興亡之機係焉，故不可不慎也。六官之分，工居其一，請備事而書之。

In the case of matters related to public works it is again made clear that these could have not only a deep, but also a negative impact on the economy and livelihood of the people. Hence, an ideal attitude of those in power was depicted, that is, to be frugal and moderate in their demands and to take the worries of the people into account.

3 Economy Under Qubilai: A Short Overview

Political economy – as it is defined in this article and as it can be circumscribed on the basis of Chinese sources of the Yuan period (JS-DD) or of the Ming dynasty (YS) shortly thereafter – only addressed a part of the economy as a whole. As Schurmann has pointed out for the case of the YS’ “Shihuo zhi” chapters, nothing can be found in these records about tenancy, private commerce, stores, pawnshops, and manufacturing.¹⁰ Therefore, for a more complete picture it may be helpful to give a short overview on the major conditions and consequences of the Mongol rule in China, especially on problems related to the role of the state as a factor in the evolution of Chinese society, the influence of nomadic invasions and conquests on Chinese society, the growth and development of agriculture, manufacturing and commerce, and the development of a market economy and corresponding phenomena in the related field of credit and currency.¹¹ This short account will also help us in establishing a more adequate typology of Marco Polo’s observations and descriptions, as some of them are rather related to phenomena of the economy in general than to such of the political economy which constituted only a – though not to be underestimated – part of the former. Moreover, it also provides us with a first impressionistic insight into what parts of the economy in general went unnoticed or unrecorded by the Venetian.

Following the analysis of the economic impact of the Mongol rule in China by Richard von Glahn and other researchers, the following general characteristics can be highlighted:¹²

- Due to the devastations of the Yuan conquest wars, the North China agricultural economy was ruined and suffered from severe population losses.
- Before Qubilai, a system of appanages (*touxia* 投下) had been created by awarding large tracts of Jin territory and their inhabitants to the Great Khan’s kinfolk and other Mongol nobles,

¹⁰ Schurmann 1956, viii.

¹¹ Schurmann 1956, vii.

¹² If not otherwise highlighted, the following summary is more or less shared by von Glahn 2016, 278-84; Schurmann 1956, 1-13, 43-8; as well as by Rossabi 1988, 115-52.

thus replacing bureaucratic governance by the Mongol nobility's personal and hereditary and thus quasi-feudal rule.

- Traditionally the Mongol nobility imposed on their subjects the irregular *qubchir* levies of food, horses, equipment, cloth and labour services under the principle of personal servitude. In the North of China, however, the twice-a-year tax¹³ of former periods and retained by the Jin was replaced in 1236 by a combination of land and poll taxes. These were collected from civilian, artisan and clergy households in silk and silver, but also in grain and by requisitions of armour and weapons. In 1251 households had to pay the so-called *baoyin* 包銀 levy collected in silver, and this form of taxes became the norm.
- When Qubilai came to power, he appointed regional governors throughout North China who usurped substantial parts of the tax-gathering powers of the appanages. Moreover, he had instituted a range of commodity and commercial taxes. Thus, the process of progressive political decentralisation was halted and a relatively strong central government reconstituted.
- In order to relieve the social and economic misery in North China, Qubilai established a number of tax exemptions. In order to support the peasant economy, remissions of taxes were granted and assistance measures taken in cases of natural calamities.
- In North China, the Mongols carried out in 1270 a census of the 'Han lands' which became a basis for the establishment of a parallel system of administrative agricultural units called *she* 社. The heads of these units were responsible for promoting agriculture, improving flood control, implementing irrigation and reforestation programs, maintaining village schools, setting up granaries for famine relief, and for adjudicating civil disputes. After the victory over the Song dynasty, it was intended to introduce this organisational structure also in South China.
- Moreover, in 1260 Qubilai institutionalised a unified paper currency in his realm which was freely exchangeable with silver and which was intended to replace both bronze coins and silver in circulation and in *baoyin* levies.
- The Mongols divided the 'Han people' into numerous occupational statuses that were intended to be hereditary. They made intensive use of skilled artisans, either as servile dependents of the Khan, his government or the nobles, or by obligation to meet government needs in goods or services, and this both in

13 This was basically a combination of household tax to be paid in coin in late summer and land tax to be levied in grain in autumn. Often the household tax was, however, converted to cloth. Moreover, in certain periods of Chinese history parts of the twice-a-year tax were levied in money. For more details on the history of this tax see the entries on p. 459 in the index of von Glahn 2016.

the Mongol capitals as well as on the local level. In comparison to former dynasties, artisans appear to have fared better, especially during Qubilai's reign. 'Scientists' like physicians and astronomers were occupations that were especially favoured by the court.¹⁴

- *Ortoq* merchants, who were mainly of Uighur and Muslim origin, dominated both fiscal administration and private commerce under the Mongol Great Khans. They enjoyed tax-farming privileges. They also served as commercial agents for their Mongol overlords, who entrusted their silver revenues to them for financing overland trading expeditions to western Asia, thus depleting China's stock of silver. Interest rates for loans provided by the *ortoq* merchants to the populace were high. Both domestic and international trade were encouraged by the Mongols, and hence merchants in general fared much better under the Yuan than during other dynasties of China.
- Another class that became powerful was the Daoist, Muslim, Nestorian and, especially the Buddhist clergy. Buddhist monasteries not only enjoyed various degrees of tax exemptions, but also possessed large tracts of land worked by tenants, and they owned and operated mills, pawn shops, baths, inns, shops, ferries and boats, vehicles, orchards and gardens as well as distilleries.¹⁵

The conquest in 1279 of the south of China with a population six times larger than in the north posed enormous fiscal and administrative challenges to the Yuan imperial government:

- With the exception of the lands confiscated for the support of its armies and gifts to the Mongol nobility, there was little involvement of the Yuan state in the private economy of South China. Rich families and entrepreneurs who became liberated from the restrictive policies of the traditional Confucian state thus were able to accumulate large landholdings with masses of tenants and to invest their financial resources into lucrative commercial and industrial ventures. They founded or expanded market towns, thus providing further impetus to commercial growth.
- With the incorporation of southern China into the Yuan realm and the outbreak of Mongol internecine conflicts a reorientation of China's trade to the maritime world took place, first under *ortoq* monopoly, but later then also open to private traders.

¹⁴ For this positive evaluation of Qubilai's treatment of craftsmen and 'scientists' as well as of merchants (see below) cf. Rossabi 1988, 122, 124.

¹⁵ Cf. especially Schurmann 1956, 6-7.

- Contrary to the 'Han' territories in the north with its array of household *baoyin* taxes, the twice-a-year tax was retained in the newly acquired territories of the south.
- For securing the agricultural resources of the south for their support, Mongol overseers relied on the tax-farming services of the great landowners.
- Dadu was connected to the Grand Canal network – a project that was started around 1266 and was probably completed about 1289. In addition, from the 1280s onwards increasing parts of the transport of grain revenue from the Lower Yangzi region was diverted to the maritime route so that eventually the amounts shipped over ocean and the inland canal route were nearly equal.¹⁶ In 1328 about 37 percent of the Yuan's total grain tax quota came from the Lower Yangzi region, along with a major part of the salt, wine and commercial taxes.
- The integration into the Yuan paper currency system proved more difficult in the south of China than in its north. Issuing of increased amounts of paper money by the notorious Ahmad, a Persian fiscal adviser of Qubilai, resulted in substantial depreciation of the paper notes and in a sizable government deficit. Some stability was restored by the Tibetan Minister Sangha after Ahmad's assassination in 1282.
- For fiscal revenues in money, proceedings especially from the salt monopoly became the most important source of income.
- The Yuan dynasty eventually failed to establish a stable fiscal structure in the long run, as governance was characterised by multiple and conflicting political hierarchies rather than bureaucratic order. While Qubilai's reign was still considered successful in asserting central control over revenues, fiscal discipline disintegrated thereafter, resulting in huge debts because of spendthrift habits of the imperial family and the Mongol nobility.
- Military power was the basis of Mongol authority. In spite of the establishment of numerous bureaucratic agencies and a system of overseers (*darughachi*), chains of commands were inconsistent and responsibilities often overlapped, and provincial governments (*xingsheng* 行省) were little more than armies of occupation. The tasks of civil government were relegated to the local level, with village leaders bearing the main burden of local administration, including tax collection, labour service, and the handling of police and criminal matters.

¹⁶ See Schurmann 1956, 108-16, but also Needham, Wang Ling and Lu Gwei-djen 1971, 312-15, and especially Haw 2006, 75-81.

4 Marco Polo and the Yuan Political Economy

Matters that can be related to the political economy of the Yuan empire, as defined above, are indeed frequently reflected in Marco Polo's work, though in uneven ways. We may roughly distinguish four degrees of intensity and explicitness, as I will describe them in the individual paragraphs below and as they are accordingly represented in Tables 1 to 3 in different formats:

1.1 Explicit References by Special Chapters

First of all, I would like to mention cases in which a complete and specific chapter in *DM* is dedicated to an individual topic that we can clearly link to the political economy, that is, either to public finances, public works projects, or concerning the military economy. Let us start with a prominent example of the public finances domain, that is F XCV on “Coment le *Grant Kaan* fait despendre chartre por monoie”¹⁷ which corresponds to the chapter or sections on **Paper-currency system** (Table 1, 10). As I have pointed out in my book published some ten years ago, the Venetian gives a quite detailed account of the manufacture, form, legends, seals, denominations, issue, circulation, functions, regulations, exchange, and use of Yuan paper currency – at any rate much more information than any other mediaeval author of European, Persian or Arabian origin. When carrying out a content analysis of the most important versions of Marco Polo's account in this respect, a substantial number of topics can be discerned that are in almost perfect agreement of what we know from Chinese sources:

- a. The emperor's mint is in Cambaluc (F XCV, Fr 95, P II 21, R II 18).
- b. The art of producing and using paper money is compared to an arcane technique or alchemy (F, Fr, R).
- c. The raw material for making paper money is the fine white bast that lies between the wood and the thick outer bark of the mulberry tree (F, Fr, P, R).
- d. The paper produced in this way is black (F, Fr, R).
- e. Sheets used for the production of paper money are cut into oblong pieces of different sizes, in accordance with the denominational system (F, P, R).

¹⁷ For the sake of convenience, I take as a starting point mostly the F manuscript as the basic text of reference, and this in the transcribed form as it is available in the *Electronic Ramusio* (<https://risorse-esterne.edizionicafoscari.it/main/aboutproject.html>). For a recent English translation of F see Kinoshita 2016.

- f. Up to thirteen denominations of paper money are mentioned (F, Fr, P, R).
- g. On each paper note a number of officials write their names and put their seals (P, R).
- h. A vermilion seal of the Great Khan is impressed on the paper notes [by the chief officer deputed by the Great Khan] (F, Fr, P, R).
- i. Forgers are punished by the death penalty (P, R).
- j. All official payments on the Khan's account, [especially military pay and officials' salaries,] are to be made by these pieces of paper notes (F, Fr, P, R).
- k. In all of the Khan's dominions, i.e. the kingdoms, provinces, and territories over which his sovereignty extends, these pieces of paper are current (F, Fr, P, R).
- l. All sales and purchases of goods have to be carried out by means of these notes. No other money from elsewhere can be used for this purpose (F, Fr, P, R).
- m. The paper money is convenient because it is light and thus can be carried along easily on journeys (F, Fr).
- n. Anybody who refuses to accept the notes does so on pain of death (F, Fr, P, R).
- o. If the notes get spoilt, the people can carry them to the mint and obtain new pieces in exchange by paying a small fee of three percent (F, Fr, R).
- p. Merchants arriving from India or other countries and bringing with them gold, silver, gems or pearls are forced to sell these precious products to the emperor (Fr).
- q. Several times a year merchants from various regions present gold, silver, gems, pearls and cloth of gold and silk to the emperor (F, P, R).
- r. Twelve experts appraise the articles brought by these foreign merchants and without any delay pay a liberal price in paper money (F, Fr, P, R).
- s. The value of such articles brought to the court by merchants several times in the year amounts to 400,000 'biçant' (bezants) (F).
- t. The foreign merchants use the paper money to buy goods in the empire, which they then export (F, Fr, P, R).
- u. Gold, silver, gems and pearls are handed over to the Canbalu mint also by the population as a result of several orders issued within one year. The people receive a handsome price for these precious goods (F, Fr, P).
- v. The emperor is the only purchaser of such items and thus accumulates all these precious goods in his treasury. His wealth is endless, while he spends almost nothing to produce paper money. He has more treasure than all the kings in the world (F, Fr, P, R).

- w. If a 'baron', or anyone else, needs gold, silver, gems or pearls for making plates, girdles or the like, he goes to the mint where he can buy these items with paper money (F, Fr, P, R).¹⁸

This theme of Yuan political economy was thus amply described and praised by the Venetian, and this not only in view of its commercial and monetary interest, but also as a highly significant part of the Yuan state's economic institutions, administration and policies.

Ch. CII of F, "Comant le Grant Kaan fait amasser et repondre grant quantité des bles por secorrer seç jens" or "How the Great Khan collects and distributes great quantities of grain to help the people" perfectly describes the public granary system established for the storage of surplus grain as insurance against shortages of food. This account fits quite neatly with the chapters **Ever-normal and charity granaries** and **[Government] purchase of grain** [...] dealing with the different types of granaries (Table 1, 22, 24) and the chapter on the building of **Granaries** (Table 2, 3). In the words of the F manuscript, this reads as follows:

[2] Or sachiés qu'il est verité qe le Grant Sire, quant il voit qe de les bles soient en grant abundance et qu'il en est grant merchiés, il en fait amasser grandisme quantité et le fait metre en grant maison et le fait si bien estudier qu'il ne se gastent por trois anz ne por quatre. [3] Et entendés qu'il fait cavane de toutes bles, ce est forment et orce et mil et ris et panis et autres bles, et de cestes bles fait amaser en grandisme moutitude. [4] Et quant il avint qe de les bles ne soient et qe la charestie soit grant, adonc le Grant Sire fait traire hors de seç bles, qe en a tant com je voç ai contés. [5] Et se la mesure se vendent un beçant, ce voç di forment, il ne fait donner .IIII., et en trait tant hors qe tous en puet avoir, si qe chascun a devise et abundance des bles. [6] Et en ceste maniere se porvoit si le Grant Sire que sez homes ne puent avoir carestie, et ce fait faire por toutes les terres la ou il a seingnorie.

No doubt, Marco Polo provides us here with an account of the system of public granaries by which the government bought up grain in years of abundance and when it was cheap in order to raise its price, and had sold it in difficult times when grain was scarce and expensive in order to increase food supply and to lower its price. We learn that what was stored comprised wheat, barley, millet, rice, panic and other grains.¹⁹ Dadu alone would eventually have fifty-eight such gra-

¹⁸ For this list see Vogel 2013, 106-8, as well as 89-226 for more details.

¹⁹ Kinoshita 2016, 92.

naries, with a total storage of about 145,000 *shi* of grain.²⁰ As the Venetian mentions that this was an institution established throughout the lands under his rule, we may assume that this implicitly included both the state-established *changpingcang* 常平倉 or ever-normal granaries as well as the *yicang* 義倉 or charity granaries to be set up and administered by the *she* communities, though no such clear differentiation is made by the Venetian.

That not everything was as ideal in the administration of these granaries as suggested by the Venetian we can glean from legal stipulations of the Yuan period which speak of ruined or destroyed granaries, deficits in grain stocks, spoiled grain, theft and illegal selling of public grain, accounting irregularities, and cheating with weights and measures.²¹ Moreover, there appears to be little evidence to suggest that the charity granaries and other institutional infrastructure of the *she* system had been widely realised.²²

Another important instance is the report on the Great Khan's support of people in need of grain and animals, corresponding to **Exemptions: remission of taxes** [...] (Table 1, 25, 26) and also to **Relief and loans: relief** [...] (Table 1, 27, 28). In ch. 98 of the Fr (= F XCVIII) version this reads as follows:

[1] Et encore sachiez par verité que le Seigneur envoie ses messages encore par toute sa terre et royaumes et prouvinces pour savoir de ses hommes se il ont eu dommage de leur blez par deffaute de temps ou par tempeste ou par pestillence. [2] Et ceulz qui ont eu aucun dommage, il ne lor fait prendre nul treuage en celle annee. [3] Et encore aveuques tout ce [lor fait donner] de son blé a ce que il en aient a semer et pour mengier. [4] Et por ce est grant bonté de Seigneur.²³

As Morris Rossabi has highlighted, Qubilai was indeed concerned with the welfare of his Chinese subjects and the economic rehabilitation of his territory and thus he often granted tax exemptions to relieve the misery.²⁴

A further form of public support carried out by the Great Khan was to provide repeatedly grain to widows and orphans who had no other means of support.²⁵ This activity is reflected, e.g., in ch. 103 on

²⁰ See Rossabi 1988, 120. 1 *shi* was equivalent to ca. 133 pounds of grain.

²¹ Cf. Ratchnevsky 1937, 59, 197-8, 248, 250-3, 256-7.

²² See Schurmann 1956, 47-8; von Glahn 2016, 281-2.

²³ Digitalised transcription of this and other Marco Polo manuscripts, especially those which are not contained in the *Electronic Ramusio*, were generously made available to me by Eugenio Burgio and Samuela Simion.

²⁴ Rossabi 1988, 117-18.

²⁵ Rossabi 1988, 118.

“De la carità del Signore” of the Tuscan TA (= F CIII) version. It informs us on how Qubilai had wheat and other grains distributed to the poor households in Khanbaliq:

[1] Or vi conterò come 'l Grande Signore fa carità a li poveri che stanno in Canbalu. [2] A tutte le famiglie povere de la città, che sono in famiglia VI o VIII, o più o meno, che nno ànno che mangiare, egli li fa dare grano e altra biada; e questo fa fare a grandissima quantità di famiglie. [3] Ancor non è vietato lo pane del Signore a niuno che voglia andare per esso; e ssappiate che ve ne va ogni die più di XXXm; e questo fa fare tutto l'anno. [4] E questo è grande bontà di signori, e per questo è adorato come idio dal popolo.

It may be noted here that in the F, Fr and TA manuscripts three specific chapters are dedicated to the three forms of public support (exemption of taxes: F XCVIII, Fr 98, TA 98; granaries: F CII, Fr 102, TA 102); charity for poor families: F CIII, Fr 103, TA 103) and that V 48 and 49, VB 70 and 72, and R II 21 and 24) put the first two in one chapter and the third one in another chapter, while in VA 81, P II 24, LT II 25, and TB 137 (which all depend on VA) all the three are summarised in one chapter. We may compare this all with the section on ‘Relief measures’ (*zhenxu* 賑恤) in ch. 96 of the YS, which put all the JSDD chapters on exemptions and relief (Table 1, 25-8) – i.e. the DM’s exemption of taxes and charity for the poor – into one section and introduced them as follows:

Among government policies to relieve distress, there is nothing more important than relief measures (*zhenxu*). During the Yuan, there were two designations for relief measures: in the case of exemption (*juanmian* 蠲免) [the government] exempted [people] from levies and taxes. [...] Among exemptions there are exemptions granted as an [imperial] favour and exemptions granted [as a result] of disasters. Among relief and loans (*zhendai* 賑貸), there is relief to widowers, widows, orphans, and childless people; there is relief to those stricken by flood, drought, illness, and so on. [Moreover,] there are annual relief sales of grain because of overpopulation in the capital. Such orders as those [calling for] payment of grain to support the government’s [resources for relief measures] are also a kind of policy to alleviate disaster. As institutions, all these are different. Now we shall list them hereunder in order to demonstrate their [i.e. the Yuan’s] generosity and love of the people.²⁶

²⁶ See Schurmann 1956, 21 fn. 32.

Though naturally the YS is much more detailed and systematic in its account than the DM, both post-Qubilai sources are full of praise for these measures.

With regard to the public works domain, let us start with the important topic of building and maintaining **[Imperial] palaces and parks** (Table 2, 1). No doubt, this required substantial inputs of funds, materials and labour, which is implied not only in Marco's description of the Khan's wondrous palace in Ciandu (Shangdu 上都) (F VXXIV) and his even larger and more splendid palace in Canbaluc (Dadu 大都) (F VXXXIII),²⁷ but also in the case of the palace for his son Chinggis (Zhenjin 真金; 1240-1285/86) (F VXXXIV) and the one for his son Mangalai (Manggala 忙哥剌, c. 1242-1280), who resided as 'roi' ('king') in Quengianfu (Chang'anfu 長安府, i.e. Xi'an, Shaanxi province) (F CX).²⁸ Marco tells us that the Great Khan's palace complex in Canbaluc has interior and exterior walls with gates and contains many other buildings. Its extravagant and splendid parks and palaces are amply described in Ramusio's (R II 6) rendering, from which I cite the beginning of the section that deals with Qubilai's main palace:

Del grande et maraviglioso palazzo del Gran Can, appresso la città di Cambalú. [II] Cap. 6.

[...] [9] Et dentro a questo muro, che circuisce quattro miglia, è il palazzo del Gran Can, il qual è il più gran palazzo che fosse veduto giamai. [10] Esso adunque confina con il predetto muro verso tramontana et verso mezzodí, et è vacuo, dove i baroni et i soldati vanno passeggiando. [11] Il palazzo adunque non ha solaro, ma ha il tetto o vero coperchio altissimo; il pavimento dove è fondato è più alto della terra dieci palmi, et a torno a torno vi è un muro di marmo egual al pavimento, largo per due passa, et tra il muro è fondato il palazzo, di sorte che tutto il muro fuor del palazzo è quasi come un preambulo, pel quale si va a torno a torno passeggiando, dove possono gli huomini veder per le parti esteriori. [12] Et nelle estremità del muro di fuori è un bellissimo poggiolo con colonne, al qual si possono accostar gli huomini. [...] [14] In ciascuno quadro del palazzo è una gran scala di marmo, che ascende di terra sopra il detto muro di marmo che circonda il palazzo, per la qual scala si ascende in palazzo. [15] La sala è tanta grande et larga che vi potria mangiar gran moltitudine d'huomini. [16] Sono in esso palazzo tante camere, che mirabil cosa è a vederle; esso è tanto ben ordinato et disposto, che si pensa che non si potria

²⁷ On Shangdu and Dadu see, e.g., Haw 2006, 68-73.

²⁸ Cf. Kinoshita 2016, 64, 73-5, 98. On Mangalai see Haw 2006, 97-8, and especially Shurany 2018.

trovar huomo che lo sapesse meglio ordinare. [17] La copertura di sopra è rossa, verde, azurra et pavonazza et di tutti i colori; vi sono vitreate nelle fenestre così ben fatte et così sottilmente che risplendono come christallo, et sono quelle coperture così forti et salde che durano molti anni.

The great efforts that were made in equipping the Mongol ruler's palaces and parks are made clear in the same chapter when reporting about the transplanting and transport of whole trees to the Green Mound²⁹ north of the palace:

[21] Et il signore, quando alcuno li referisse in qualche luogo essere qualche bel'arbore, lo fa cavare con tutte le radici et terra, et fosse quanto si volesse grande et grosso, che con gli elefanti lo fa portar a quel monte: et in questo modo vi sono bellissimi arbori sempre tutti verdi, et per questa causa si chiama Monte Verde, nella sommità del qual è un bellissimo palazzo, et è verde tutto, onde, riguardando il monte, il palazzo et gl'arbori, è una bellissima et stupenda cosa, perciocché rende una vista bella, allegra et dilettevole.

Well-known examples of this type of information category, that is, that a complete chapter was dedicated to a specific topic of the Yuan political economy, we can also find in matters related to the military. This is the case for the *DM*'s detailed and extensive description of the messenger system with their 'ianb' (*yam*) stations in F XCVII (**Transmission by relay stations**, Table 3, 5)³⁰ and the manifold hunting activities of the Great Khan as well as that of the population especially, but not exclusively, in F XC-XCIII (**Falconries and hunters**, Table 3, 6).³¹

1.2 Explicit Individual References

A second type of information comprises cases in which *DM* dedicates within a chapter or within several chapters a more or less substantial part to an explicit theme of political economy. Let us start again with cases related to public finances. For instance, in F CLL, "Ci devise de la noble cité de Quinsai", we are told that every inhabitant of Xingzai (Hangzhou 杭州) had to write his name and those of his relatives, slaves and other household members on his door, as well as how many horses he had, and that this was done throughout the province

²⁹ On the Green Mound see Dang Baohai 2024, 363-73.

³⁰ For a thorough investigation of the Mongol imperial postal service see Dang Baohai 2006.

³¹ On the topic of the royal hunt with many references to *DM* see Allsen 2006.

of Mangi and Cathay. This, no doubt, refers to the system of **Population registers** (Table 1, 3) and thus the Mongols' efforts at registering the population primarily for taxation and control purposes.

Our next topic is the **Salt [monopoly] system** (Table 1, 13) on which the YS writes the following in ch. 94:

Of the nation's assets, that which [brings in] the greatest profits is certainly salt. Ever since it was first monopolised by Sang Hongyang 桑弘羊 [152-80 BC] of the Han, for generations thereafter the profit [derived] therefrom has never been neglected. [...] In the thirteenth year of Zhiyuan [1276/1277], after the [Southern] Song had been conquered, [because of] the salt of Jiangnan, revenues were much greater [than before].³²

As I have shown in my book, the Venetian paid great and rather systematic attention to salt in a number of chapters in his account. He not only described the production of well salt in Yunnan, but also the use of normed salt pieces as currency in China's Southwest. In addition, he gave detailed information of the production process of the Yuan empire's third most important salt production region Changlu 長蘆, which consisted of leaching out saline earth and boiling down the resulting strong brine to salt, as well as on the salt trade in the salt distribution zone of Lianghuai 兩淮, the most important salt production region. Eventually, he also provided insight into the large revenue derived from salt in Quinsay which represents the Liangzhe 兩浙 salt zone or the then second most important salt production region. There can be no doubt that proceeds derived from the salt monopoly constituted one of the main pillars of Yuan public income, especially regarding those exactions that were collected in paper money.³³

Commercial taxes (Table 1, 16) were probably already introduced in 1230/1231, based on a proposal submitted by Yelü Chucai 耶律楚材 (1189-1234). A Tax Collection Office (*zhengshou keshui suo* 徵收稅課所) was set up for the first time in 1234, but no quotas were fixed at that time.³⁴ Our Venetian traveller mentions, first, that all spicery as well as all merchandise pay a tax of three and one-third percent on the value.³⁵ This is fully confirmed by the YS which states the following:

³² See Schurmann 1956, 175.

³³ For details see Vogel 2013, 271-379.

³⁴ See Vogel 2013, 391-2, based on Schurmann 1956, 213-14.

³⁵ F CLII: "[4] E depuis che je vos ai dit de la sel, or vos dirai de les autres chouses e mercandies. [5] Je [68d] voç di que en ceste provences naist e se fait plus sucар qe ne fait en tout le autre monde, e ce est encore grandissime rende. [6] Mes je ne voç dirai de cascune couse por soi, mes vos dirai de toutes especerie ensenble, car sachiés que toutes especeries rendent .iii. et ters por cent, et de toutes mercandies rendent ausi

Later, in the seventh year of the Zhiyuan reign-period [1270], the system whereby [the government] took one-thirtieth [in taxes from the merchants] was established. Forty-five thousand *ding* of silver was established as the quota.³⁶

Ch. CLVI of F, “Ci devise de la cité de Çaiton”, contains information on the duties on goods coming via the sea from India and thus would correspond with the chapter or section on **Maritime trade** (Table 1, 17). Marco Polo states there that for all the ships coming from the Indies the Great Khan levies in Çaiton (Citong 刺桐, i.e. Quanzhou 泉州) a duty of ten percent on all the merchandise, including precious stones and pearls.³⁷ This indication fits well into the history of the organisation and control of maritime trade set up by the Mongols. Shortly after the conquest of South China in 1276, the Yuan appointed maritime trade officials (*shiboguan* 市舶官) to supervise the ships travelling to foreign countries. During this time, and also in most of the later period, the government “took [as] tax one-tenth of the goods. If [the goods] were coarse, [the government] took one-fifteenth”.³⁸ Although the Venetian does not mention the tax rate of one-fifteenth for the coarse goods, the indication of a one-tenth levy [for ‘fine’ goods] is in perfect agreement with his statement. Moreover, he also makes a clear distinction between fine (‘soptil’) and coarse (‘grose’) commodities, which corresponds to the terms *xi* 細 (fine) and *cu* 粗 (coarse) in relevant Chinese sources.³⁹

Much less attention was paid by the Venetian to **grain taxes** (Table 1, 6) which were of crucial importance for feeding the court, its bureaucracy as well as the armies. Nonetheless, we can find one substantial statement about the collection of large quantities of grain and rice in the small city of Caygiu (Guazhou 瓜州) from where they

.iii. et ters por cent”. For an English translation see Kinoshita 2016, 137. On the Yuan tax rate see Vogel 2013, 392.

³⁶ See Schurmann 1956, 215, 217. For more details and other sources see Vogel 2013, 391-2.

³⁷ Cf. Vogel 2013, 394. That for the sea-borne goods from India and other distant places a tax of ten percent was levied is also mentioned in the chapter on Kinsay, but only in the Ramusio version. See Yule [1903] 1993, 2: 235.

³⁸ See Vogel 2013, 395, based on Schurmann 1956, 230.

³⁹ F CLVI: “[8] Et si voç di qe le Grant Kan reçoit en cest port et en ceste ville grandisme droit, por ce qe vos fais savoir que toutes les nes qe vienent de Inde, de tutes mercandies e de toutes pieres et perles, donent .x. por cent, ce est la desme part de toutes chouses. [9] Les nes tolent por lor loier, ce est le nol, de mercandies soptil .xxx. por cent, e del pevre tollent .xl.iii. et de sandoint e de autre mercandie grose tolent .xl. por cent, si qe bien donent le mercant, entre le nol et droit dou Grant Kan, la monoie de tout ce qe il aportent. Et por ce doit cascun croire qe le Grant Kan a a ceste ville grandisme quantité de tesor”. For an English rendering see Kinoshita 2016, 141. On the distinction of goods of different fineness see Vogel 2013, 295.

were carried on boats via the Grand Canal to Khanbaliq. In the V manuscript this reads as follows:

73 Dela zità de Chaichui et di quela de Giginafu.

[...] [3] Et in questa zitade sono una gran quantità de biave; e da questa zitade le se porta fina ala zità de' Tartari chiamata Chanbalun, ala chorte del Gran Chan, per aqua: e non chredé per mar, ma per flumi. [4] Onde el Gran Chan fa tuor queste biave che vien da questa zitade e fale meter in Chanbalun per fossadi grandi e largi che par uno flume; e per quello vano le nave chon le dite blave dal Mangin infina ala zità de Chanbalun.

Apart from highlighting the large amounts of grain shipped from the Lower Yangzi region to the North, this passage also testifies about the Venetian's knowledge of the Grand Canal, thus relating to the public works topic of **canals** (Table 2, 6). He was, however, apparently not aware that already before 1282 grain was not only shipped by means of canals (with some overland portorage), but also on coastal shipping routes, or a combination of both, and that from 1282 onwards the direct sea route became increasingly important for grain conveyance.⁴⁰

Ch. CI of F, "Here the wine drunk by the people of Cathay is described", tells us that most of the people of Cathay drink a clear and beautiful, but also very hot wine made from rice and spices, but it does not speak about taxation. Levies on wine made out of rice are, however, mentioned in F CLII, "Here the Great Khan's revenue from the city of Quinsai is described". We are informed that rice wine is one of the commodities from which the Mongol ruler has great income,⁴¹ thus corresponding to **Liquor [... taxes]** (Table 1, 15). Liquor and Vinegar Offices (*jiucuwu* 酒醋務) for taxations purposes were already established by Ögödei in 1231 and involved government control of both production and distribution. Private manufacture of liquor was strictly forbidden and severely punished. It was only in 1285 that the government monopoly of liquor production was abolished and farmed out to private producers who had to deposit a tax in accordance with the amount of grain used for distillation. Some governmental liquor production was introduced again in 1304, at least in the Dadu area, though it is difficult to judge the government's control over liquor production.⁴²

The Venetian also mentions in F CLIII that *charbonz* (**charcoal**, Table 1, 18) was taxed. Coal and Charcoal Yards (*yangzhongyuan* 養種園) were established in 1262 for gathering coal at Xishan 西山, west

⁴⁰ See Schurmann 1956, 111-12.

⁴¹ F CLII: "[7] Et dou vin{i} qu'il font de ris ont il ausi grant rente, et des charbonz e des toutes les.xii. ars qe je voç di desovre". Cf. Kinoshita 2016, 137.

⁴² Schurmann 1956, 203-8. On wines, rice wines and kumis see Haw 2006, 148-51.

of Dadu, and for making charcoal at Yangshan 羊山, northwest of the capital, and Coal and Wood Office[s] (*meimusuo* 煤木所) were founded in 1285.⁴³ The YS lists coal and charcoal (*meitan* 煤炭) as goods for which non-quota taxes (*ewaike* 額外課) were collected. For the year 1328, an amount of some 2,615 *ding* of paper money is mentioned, of which 129 *ding* came from Datong Route 大同路 and 2,496 *ding* from the Coal and Wood Stations (*meimusuo*).⁴⁴

In the sphere of public finances also the topic of officials' **Salaries** (Table 1, 20) and soldiers' pay find some random mentioning in *DM*. Thus, in the chapter on paper money it is stated, e.g. in Pipino's (P II, 21) rendering, that "[6] De hac moneta suis exercitibus et officialibus stipendia tribuit et quicquid pro curia necessarium est emitur".

Public works input is certainly indirectly implied in Polo's accounts of **City walls [in the capitals]** (Table 2, 4). In F LXXXIV, "Ci devise dou palais dou filç dou Kan qe doit reigner après lui", the city walls of Khanbaliq are described:

[7] Elle est si grant com je voç conterai. Elle est environ .XXIIII. miles et est quarés, qe ne a plus de l'un quaré que de l'autre, <et> est murés des murs de teres que sunt grosses desout .X. pas et haut .XX., mes voç di qu'elle ne sunt pas si grosse desovre come desout, por ce qe toute foies dou fundemant en sus venoient mermant, si que desovre sunt grosses entor trois pas. Elles sunt toutes merlés et blances. [8] Elle a .XII. portes et sor chascune porte a un grandisme palais et biaux, si que en chascu<n> quarés des murs a trois portes et .V. palais, por qu'il hi a por chascun cant encore un palais. [9] Et cesti palais ont mout grant sale, la o les armes de celz [38c] que gardent la cité demorent.

This is also an example of how **Military equipment** (Table 3, 1) was stored and prepared for the troops guarding the city.

The manufacture of **Weapons** (Table 2, 11) did not escape the attention of Marco Polo, at least not in the cases of Taianfu (F, CVI: Taiyuanfu 太原府), Quengianfu (F CX: Chang'anfu) and Yangiu (F CXLIII: Yangzhou 揚州).⁴⁵ According to Ulrich Theobald's findings, these places perhaps only included the private production sector. In 1285 the Yuan court initiated central production of arms and fixed numbers to be supplied to each garrison, and it was only in 1293, i.e. the year when the Polos left China, that private production of weaponry was prohibited and craftsmen became employees of state-owned workshops.⁴⁶

⁴³ See Vogel 2013, 393, based on Farquahar 1990, 104, 181.

⁴⁴ Cf. Vogel 2013, 393, based on Schurmann 1956, 238, 240.

⁴⁵ See Kinoshita 2016, ch. 107, 94; ch. 111, 97; ch. 144, 27.

⁴⁶ See Theobald 2024, 441-3.

Tents (Table 2, 10) were another item for which imperial workshops had to care for. The Venetian dedicates much space in F XCIII, “Ci devise comant le Grant Kan vait en chace por prandre bestes et oisiaus”, to the description of the Great Khan’s huge and luxurious hunting and audience tents at Cacciar Modun⁴⁷ with their crafted spicewood columns and silken cords, and with their outer coverage consisting of tiger skins and their inner linings composed of ermine and sable furs. Marco claims that for Qubilai’s sons, barons and mistresses as well as for the gyrfalcons and other hunting birds and animals and certainly also for doctors, astronomers and many other officials more than 10,000 tents were set up at this imperial hunting place, where the ruler and his cortege stayed from March to Eastern every year.⁴⁸ The spicewood columns mentioned above, but also the wood required for building the walls and roofs of the palaces refer to the importance of **Wood work** (Table 2, 15) needed for such public projects. This was also the case for the columns of the bamboo palace in Shangdu, described by Ramusio (R II 55) in the following words:

Del bellissimo palazzo del Gran Can in la città di Xandú; [...] Cap. 55.
[...] [5] In mezzo di quei prati, ove è un bellissimo bosco, ha fatto fare una casa regal, sopra belle colonne dorate et invernicate, et a cadauna è un dragone tutto dorato che rivolge la coda alla colonna, et col capo sostiene il soffittado, et stende le branche, cioè una alla parte destra a sostentamento del soffittado et l’altra medesimamente alla sinistra.

This passage also highlights the importance of **Painting and sculpting** (Table 2, 20) that was carried out for adorning the imperial mansions, further testified by Ramusio’s account of the “grande et maraviglioso palazzo del Gran Can, appresso la città di Cambalú” (R II 6):

[13] Nelle mura delle sale et camere vi sono dragoni di scoltura indorati, soldati, uccelli et di diverse maniere di bestie et historie di guerre; la copritura è fatta in tal modo che altro non si vede che oro et pittura.

The importance of **Silk and hemp work** (Table 2, 17) in public works projects and the role of **Craftsmen** (Table 2, 21) in providing all kinds of cloth by **Statutory labour service** (Table 3, 2) for charity purposes or for **Military equipment** (Table 3, 1) is evidenced in another passage of Ramusio’s version (R II 24):

⁴⁷ On Cacciar Modun see Dang Baohai 2024, 373-83.

⁴⁸ See Kinoshita 2016, 82-5, and especially 84.

Della grande et mirabile liberalità che 'l Gran Can usa verso i poveri di Cambalú et altre genti che vengono alla sua corte. Cap. 24. [...] [3] Provedesi anchora del vestir loro, conciosiacosaché il Gran Can ha la decima di tutte le lane et sede et canave delle quali si possono far vesti, et queste tal cose le fa tessere et far panni, in una casa a questo deputata dove sono riposte; et perché tutte l'arti sono obligate per debito di lavorargli un giorno la settimana, il Gran Can fa far delle vesti di questi panni, quali fa dar alle sopradette famiglie di poveri, secondo si richiede al tempo dell'inverno et al tempo della estate. [4] Provede anchora di vestimenta a' suoi esserciti, et in ciascuna città fa tessere panni di lana, quali si pagano della decima di quella.

Moreover, examples of products of **Metal work** (Table 2, 14) destined for the palace and **Leather work** (Table 2, 18) for equipping the army may be adduced. For the former, we may mention the large amount of tableware in gold and silver used during court dinners (F LXXXV) as well as the manufacture of the gold and silver tablets of authority (F LXXX) and the gold belts of his bodyguard of 12,000 men (F LXXXIX). In this respect, we have also to mention the rewards granted by Qubilai to his military commanders after his victory over Nayan which are enumerated in ch. 80 of Fr as follows:

Comment le Grant Kaam s'en retourna a la cité de Caiabalut. .LXXX. [...] [6] Celui qui estoit seigneur de .C. hommes, si le fist de .M., et qui estoit seigneur de .M. si le fist de .X.M. [7] Et einssi leur donnoit si comme il veoit qu'il l'avoient deservi, a chascun selonc ce qu'il estoit. [8] Et seur tout ce leur donnoit de belle vessellemente d'argent et d'autre beau hernois. [9] Il leur croissoit leur table de commandement; il leur presentoit aussi de beaus joiaus d'or et d'argent et de pelles et de pierres et de chevaus; et tant en donna a chascun que ce fu merveilles.

As for the leather destined for the army, one may refer to the chapter on how the Great Khan orders the population in the wider environment of Dadu to bring him animals from the hunt, but that from a certain distance onwards not the meat had to be delivered, but only the prepared skins. In, e.g., in LT II 17, this reads as follows:

De animalibus silvestribus que mittuntur ad curiam Mangni Kaam. Capitulum XVII^m. [...] [3] Et illi, quos vobis computavi, de triginta giornatis mittunt sibi omnes bestias sine interioribus, et illi de quadraginta non mittunt carnes sed coria, quia de ipsis facit Magnus Kaam fornimenta de exercitu et de armis.

And when we eventually turn to the military domain, it is clear that horses are a topic which are highlighted many times in *DM*, not only with regard to their importance in Mongol warfare (F LXIX), but likewise as providers of blood and milk. The milk of mares was used in religious rituals, but it was also preserved by drying or was fermented to become ‘chemins’ (*qumis*) (F LXIX and LXXIV). Qubilai is said to have owned 10,000 white mares, the milk of which was reserved for the imperial lineage and the Horiāt (Oirat). Although no explicit reference is made by the Venetian to **Horse policies** (Table 3, 3), a relevant administration of horses by the authorities is strongly implied in F XCVII, which deals with the *yam* postal relay system for which *DM* claims that more than 200,000 horses were to remain in the post stations to be used by the messengers.⁴⁹

1.3 Implicit References by Special Chapters

The third and fourth types of information concern topics which in *DM* were often described or mentioned, but rather for geographic, political, administrative, religious, economic or other reasons than because of their relevance for the political economy. The difference between the two would be that to the third type belong such themes in *DM* to which it dedicates specific chapters, while the fourth type are such items and topics for which no special chapters exist in *DM*, but which often crop up there.

The third type of information in *DM* has its correlatives in JSDD’s **Cities and towns** (Table 1, 1) and **Annan** (Table 1, 2) as well as **coal** (Table 1, 18), **Rivers** (Table 2, 6) and **Bridges** (Table 2, 5). Marco Polo dedicates many specific chapters to cities, towns, provinces, and ‘roiaimes’ (‘kingdoms’) and he also provides a special account of the ‘provence’ of Cangigu (Jiaozhiguo 交趾國, i.e. Annam), i.e. F CXXVI. He tells us among other things that the inhabitants are ‘yidules’ (‘idolators’) and have a language of their own, and that both women and men wear tattoos all over their bodies. In economic terms it is stated that a good deal of gold is found there, and that they have many elephants and other animals and a lot of game. The people are living from meat, milk and rice, and that they make a wine from rice and spices.⁵⁰ Stones that burn like logs are the topic of F CI, but with-

⁴⁹ F XCVII: “[10] [...] car sachiés tout voiremant que plus de .cc^m. chevaus demorent a cestes postes propemant por les seç mesajes”. Cf. Kinoshita 2016, 89.

⁵⁰ F CXXVI: “[2] [...] Les jens <sunt> ydules et ont langajes por elz. [...] [3] Il se treuve en cest provence or aseç. Il ont chieres especeries de maintes faites en grant habundance. Mes il sunt molt loinge dou mer, e por ce ne vailent gueire lor mercaandie, mes i ni a grant merchiés. [4] Il ont leofant aseç et autres bestes de maintes faisons. Il ont vene-sionz aseç. [5] Il vivent de char et de la<i>t et de ris. [6] Il ne ont vin de vigne mes le font

out mentioning their taxation. To the Pulisanghin river [and bridge] F CIV is dedicated, and to the Caramoran river, i.e. the Yellow River, F CIX, but river and bridges are also topics in other chapters. They no doubt fascinated the Venetian. The construction of bridges is not explicitly related to the domain of public works in *DM*, but it is interesting to note that in the case of the bridge of Sindanfu (Chengdufu 成都府) (F CXIII) a relationship to public finances is brought up, namely, that the rights to sell merchandise on this bridge brought the great lord large income.⁵¹

1.4 Implicit Individual References

Instances of the fourth category are those on that Marco Polo dwells more or less intensively within one or several chapters. Correlatives would be such JSDD subjects like ***Agriculture and sericulture, gold, silver, jade, bamboo, calendars, Government buildings, Buddhist temples, felt*** etc. Although not explicitly referred to public finances or public works in Polo's account, it is obvious from our hindsight perspective that due to their political, administrative, economic, and religious importance these themes were in many cases also related to the political economy.

While certainly the Venetian dedicated considerable space to describing trade and crafts, it did not go unnoticed that ***Agriculture and sericulture*** (Table 1, 5) constituted an important part of the Yuan economy. For instance, in the case of the great kingdom of Erginul (F VXXI: Liangzhou 涼州, Xiliangfu 西涼府) he mentions that the inhabitants of this province live from trade and crafts and have a lot of wheat.⁵² Another example, this time from Cathay, is from the great city of Quengianfu (F CX: Chang'anfu), the region of which is described as having many beautiful gardens and fields, and that there are plenty of mulberry trees for feeding the silkworms.⁵³ In the Southwest of China, in Caraian (F CXVII: Qarajang, i.e. Dali 大理), "[t]here is a lot of wheat and rice, but they do not eat wheat bread,

de ris et de especes molt bien. [7] Les jens toutes comunemant, masles et femes, {s}unt toutes lor charç pintes en tel mainere con je voç dirai: [...]". Cf. Kinoshita 2016, 115.

⁵¹ F CXIII: "[16] Et encore hi est le comerge dou Grant Sire, ce est celz qe recevent la rente dou seingnor, ce est le droit de la mercandie qe desus le pont se vendioient. [17] Et voç di qe le droit de cel pont vaut bien .m. beçanz d'or". Cf. Kinoshita 2016, 100.

⁵² F VXXI: "[15] Il vivent de mercandies et d'ars, et ont habundance des bles". Cf. Kinoshita 2016, 60.

⁵³ F CX: "[2] [...] toutes foies trovant maintes chastiaus et mantes cités de grant mercandies et des grant ars et maint biaux jardins et biaux chans. [3] Et encore voç di qe toute la contree et la tere est plantee de moriaus, ce sunt les arbres de coi les vermines qe funt la soie vivent de lor foies". Cf. Kinoshita 2016, 97.

because it is unhealthy; but they eat rice, [...]”.⁵⁴ And, eventually, for the Lower Yangzi region we may adduce the example of Cinghianfu (F CXLVIII: Zhenjiangfu 鎮江府), “where they have a lot of silk; they make many kinds of cloth of gold and silk”.⁵⁵ From this a link can be established to the promotion of agriculture and sericulture by the Yuan and the importance of grains and silk for public finances and public works, i.e. **grain taxes** (Table 1, 6), those part of household taxes (Table 1, 8) paid in silk, and **Silk and hemp work** (Table 2, 17).

The economic importance of such items as **gold, silver, pearls, jade, iron** etc. (Table 1, 12) for certain places is often mentioned by Marco, but he does not speak of the fiscal income generated by these metals and gems. We are told in ch. LV of F that in the province of Ciarcian (Qarqan, Qiemo 且末) there is a river from which they mine jasper and chalcedony which is then brought to Cata (Cathay) to be sold there with great profit,⁵⁶ but there is no mention in *DM* that **jade** (Table 1, 12) was monopolised or taxed⁵⁷ or that it was used in the imperial workshops (**Jade work**, Table 2, 13). From the *YS* we learn that the jade which is obtained in the Feilisha 匪力沙 region (i.e. near Khotan or Hetian 和田) by washing was transported to the capital by making use of the water postal-relay route (*shuizhan* 水站).⁵⁸

Many indications about ‘canne’, i.e. **bamboo** (Table 1, 12), can be found in *DM*, so, for instance, in the chapter of the Yellow River (F CIX), which reads in Ramusio’s (R II 32) words as follows: “[3] Per i luoghi circostanti di questo fiume nasce infinita quantità di canne grosse, alcune delle quali sono di un piè, altri di un piè et mezzo, et gli habitatori se ne vagliono in molte cose necessarie”. The Venetian, however, does not mention that it was a commodity that was also taxed.⁵⁹ Another interesting case are **calendars** (Table 1, 18). Ramusio’s text mentions in R II 25, “Degli astrologhi che sono nella città di Cambalù”, the sale of almanacs or ‘tacuini’ by the astrologers.⁶⁰ This we may link with the taxation of – probably official – calendars,

⁵⁴ F CXVII: “[7] Il hi a forment et ris aseç, mes il ne menuient pain de forment, por ce qe il est en cele provence enferme, mes menuient ris”. Cf. Kinoshita 2016, 104-5.

⁵⁵ F CXLVIII: “[3] [...] Il ont soie aseç. Il font dras dorés et de soies de maintes faisonz”. Cf. Kinoshita 2016, 131.

⁵⁶ F LV: “[5] Il hi a fluns qe moient diaspes et calcedon, les qualz portent a vendre au Cata et n’ont grant profit car il en ont aseç et bones”. Cf. Kinoshita 2016, 45.

⁵⁷ Cf. Schurmann 1956, 157.

⁵⁸ Schurmann 1956, 157.

⁵⁹ For some details cf. Schurmann 1956, 160-1.

⁶⁰ R II 25: “[4] Scriveranno adunque sopra alcuni quaderni piccioli quelle cose che hanno da [31v] venire in quello anno, et questi quaderni si chiamano tacuini, quali vendono un grosso l’uno a chi gli vuole comprare per sapere le cose future; [...]” Cf. Yule [1903] 1993, 1: 447.

of which more than 3 million were sold in 1328.⁶¹

For the public work domain let us eventually bring up **Buddhist monasteries** (Table 2, 8), the establishment and repair of which were supported by the Mongol rulers. That the Great Khan made lavish donations to the Buddhists and that these operated large monasteries caught the attention of the Venetian, as we can read, e.g., in ch. 60 of the VA version:

60 De Cianedai, dove si sfendono le chane e sì sse chuovre le chaxe. [...] [25] Quando se de' fa'r la festa de'le idole <de> questi inchantadori, eli domandano [a]l Grande Chaan per far i soi sacrifizii moltoni che abiano el chollo negro e inzenso e legnio d'aloë, aziò che 'l sacrifizio sia hodorificho. [26] E lui li fa dar tuto quel ch'i domanda, azò che le idolle diebano conservar le suo' biave e lle bestie e li fruti della tera. [27] E quando 'li àno queste chosse, i chuoxeno l[a] charne e la mete chusì chota dananzi dalle idolle, e sparze in l'aiera del'aqua dov'è chota la charne, e dixeno che le idolle àno la soa parte.

[28] I fano a zaschaduno idollo <per si la soa festa, come nui femo ali nostri santi, e zaschaduno idollo> à 'l so nome. [29] E àno molti monestieri de idolle; e in quella chontrà è uno monestier ch'è grande quanto una pichola zità, lo qual à ben doamillia monexi secondo la sua uxanza.

5 Conclusions

In this preliminary study I hope to have made clear that indeed in Marco Polo's work we can find many instances that reflect themes which we have defined as belonging to the Yuan political economy. This holds true for all the latter's three sub-domains, that is, public finance, public works, and the military economy. The reference of the Venetian to relevant topics varies in its degrees of explicitness and implicitness, but it is clear that *DM* provides information on a very substantial amount of subjects the importance of which for the political economy is also testified in Chinese sources of the Yuan period or of shortly thereafter. It is also important to note that the main Chinese sources that inform us rather systematically on the Yuan political economy were all finished long after the Polo's have left China. This especially concerns the JSDD and the YS. The compilation of

⁶¹ Cf. Schurmann 1956, 157.

the first was finished in 1332⁶² and the second was printed in 1370.⁶³ Marco Polo had certainly not the intention to provide a systematic account of the Yuan political economy, but as in his eclectic style he touched on many subjects of political, economic, social, military, cultural, historical and geographical nature of the Yuan empire these unconsciously also included many topics that were important for the political economy. Even though some themes were not mentioned by the Venetian, like e.g. 'Land surveys' (Table 1, 4), 'Maritime transport [of grain]' (Table 1, 9), the 'Tea [monopoly] system' (Table 1, 14) or '[Military] agricultural colonies' (Table 3, 4), one should highlight to his benefit that he included in his report items of the political economy to which no special chapter or section was dedicated, neither in the JSDD nor the YS. This concerns asbestos mining,⁶⁴ the production and taxation of sugar⁶⁵ and the planting of trees along the roadsides⁶⁶ which are not listed in Tables 1-3 proper, but for which we have information not only from the Venetian's report, but also from other passages in Chinese primary sources, thus both types of sources testifying the clear relationship of these subjects to the Yuan political economy. Another conclusion we can draw is that because of the Polo family's merchant background and its close relationship with the Mongol rulership, we find in *DM* less and rather unspecific information on themes related to agriculture *per se*. Though they were not absent, more space, specificity, and explicitness were dedicated to topics that had to do with commerce, manufacturing, politics, or matters related to the military domain. Given the fact that there is a good fit between topics of political economy as we can find them in Chinese sources and those described explicitly or implicitly by *DM*, I have no doubt that the Venetian's description reflects to a high degree realities as they existed in the Yuan empire and that they are based on his own observations or on information that he had obtained from others in China. That his perception of phenomena was not always objective, but was tainted by his admiration of the Great Khan and his rulership is a well-known fact. But even in this respect we can observe a parallelism between some of his highly positive evaluations and those in the Chinese sources. While with regard to the latter we can expect this in the case of the JSDD which was compiled during the Yuan period, this is less obvious for the YS which was put together at the beginning of the Ming dynasty. As we have

⁶² Schurmann 1956, x.

⁶³ See *ChinaKnowledge* (www.chinaknowledge.de/Literature/Historiography/yuanshi.html).

⁶⁴ On this topic see Simion 2019.

⁶⁵ See Daniels 1996, 91-2; Vogel 2013, 65-6.

⁶⁶ Cf. Dang Baohai 2013.

seen above, the YS maintained that with regard to public finances it was basically after Qubilai's reign that things went wrong.⁶⁷ Hence, apart from a reflection of a good deal of realities in the Venetian's account, also idealisations of the Mongol rule found their place therein, though this is not uniquely an issue present in the Venetian's account but also in Chinese sources.

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⁶⁷ That Confucian advisers were allegedly decisive for having softened Qubilai's stance and for having positively influenced his decisions is a permanent theme in Rossabi's 1988 book.

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