

## 150 Years of Oriental Studies at Ca' Foscari

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# Mongolian Studies at Ca' Foscari University of Venice

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**Abstract** This essay offers an overview on Mongolian Studies carried out at the Ca' Foscari University of Venice focusing on teaching activities, research outcomes as well as outreach events and cooperation with Mongolian institutions.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Teaching and Didactic Materials. – 3 A New Tool for Mongolic Studies: the Critical Digital Edition of Giovanni Battista Ramusio's *Dei viaggi di messer Marco Polo* (1559). – 4 Outreach Activities. – 5 Cooperation with Mongolian Institutions.

**Keywords** Mongolian Studies. Silk Road Studies. Marco Polo Studies. Italian philology. Travel literature. Textual criticism.

## 1 Introduction

Venice, the hometown of Marco Polo (1254-1324), one of the most famous Europeans who travelled on the Silk Road and visited the Mongols in the Middle Ages, has a special legacy with the Mongol world. Just by evoking the name of Marco Polo the historical relations between Venice and the Mongol world come to everyone's mind. In keeping with Venice's legacy with the Orient, Ca' Foscari has a tradition in Mongolian Studies.

## 2 Teaching and Didactic Materials

Since 1982, Ca' Foscari has been offering a wide range of academic courses and seminars focusing on Mongolian Studies.

From 1982 till 1998, Giovanni Stary was Professor of Mongolian language and literature at the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures. Starting from the following academic year, however, he started to hold the teaching of Manchu language and literature. In the following years,

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Figure 1. Marco Polo statue  
in the centre of Ulaanbaatar  
(© Elisabetta Ragagnin)

namely from 1998 till 2005, Mongolian language was taught by Mrs Jargal Molomjamts. This course was as an ancillary teaching activity flanking the seminar Uralic and Altaic Philology held by Professor Andrea Csillaghy. An important outcome of this teaching activity was the publication of *Introduzione alla lingua mongola: mongol xelnij oršil*, authored by Jargal Molomjamts and Professor Andrea Csillaghy (1998), the first introductory course book in the modern Khalkha Mongolian language published in Italian. After the retirement of Professor Csillaghy, the course Uralic and Altaic Philology was assigned to Elisabetta Ragagnin, presently Adjunct Professor at Ca' Foscari. In her classes she regularly dealt with Mongolic philology with special regard to Middle Mongol sources (XIII-XV c.). Furthermore, in 2014 she was in charge of the course in Mongolian Language, which was attended by a large number of students majoring in Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Turkish and Persian as well as students of Religious Studies. Finally, since 2015, Elisabetta Ragagnin has been teaching the Master course Linguistic Research Topics, which provides learners with

overviews and insights on several linguistics topics such as comparative and typological linguistics, sociolinguistics, writing systems and endangered languages, with regard to the language families of Eurasia, including Mongolic languages.

Presently, Elisabetta Ragagnin, in cooperation with Bat-Ireedui Jantsan, Professor of Mongolian Studies at the National University of Mongolia (MUIS), is preparing a new Mongolian language textbook.

### **3 A New Tool for Mongolic Studies: the Critical Digital Edition of Giovanni Battista Ramusio's *Dei viaggi di messer Marco Polo* (1559)**

Since February 2015, Giovanni Battista Ramusio's (1485-1557) work *Dei viaggi di messer Marco Polo* (On Travels of Sir Marco Polo) is available online and publicly accessible on Edizioni Ca' Foscari's website (Ramusio [1559] 2015). It is the first digital critical edition of Marco Polo's *Devisement du monde* (The Description of the World), prepared by the Venetian humanist Ramusio for the second volume of his work *Navigazioni et viaggi* (Navigations and travels), published posthumously in 1559. This edition is the result of a research project funded by Ca' Foscari University of Venice jointly developed by a group of romance philologists and orientalists coordinated by Eugenio Burgio, Marina Buzzoni and Antonella Ghersetti. The following scholars, in alphabetic order, participated in the project: Alvisè Andreose, Alvaro Barbieri, Giampiero Bellingeri, Eugenio Burgio, Marina Buzzoni, Angelo Cattaneo, Marco Ceresa, Giacomo Corazzol, Simone Cristoforetti, Daniele Cuneo, Paolo De Troia, Mario Eusebi, Antonella Ghersetti, Giuseppe Mascherpa, Laura Minervini, Martina Modena, Maria Piccoli, Elisabetta Ragagnin, Irene Reginato, Fabio Romanini, Vito Santoliquido, Samuela Simion, and Federico Squarcini. Besides, Francesca Anzalone (Netlife s.r.l) and Damiano Bulzoni were in charge of the IT infrastructure. Characteristics and goals of the project are described in the presentation page:

The digital object which is now available at this website displays the characteristics of a hypertext edition, since it focuses on Ramusio's text and the sources he had at his disposal, without aiming at going back to the manuscripts. The main goal of this edition is to represent Ramusio's alleged 'desk' in a virtual hypertext environment. In the electronic Ramusio's *Marco Polo*, the modal windows allow the user to visualize a chapter of Ramusio's text (R) in parallel with its major sources (Z, V, VB,

L, P, VA, and F),<sup>1</sup> three of which are given in new born-digital editions. Furthermore, each section of the text is accompanied by a philological commentary made accessible through pop-up windows which present the relevant interface to the user. Finally, it is possible to display (and superimpose) the entire text of the other *Milione* redactions, and access the records containing the information on the Eastern *realia* both through the “Lemmario” button in the main Menu and through the internal page links. The simultaneous opening of different windows in an online environment permits to visualize: (1) the main text (Ramusio’s *Dei Viaggi*); (2) the comment apparatus (containing the identified sources; an analysis of their manipulation; some informative notes); (3) the complete version of the text from which the source extracts are taken, also in parallel with the Ramusian text. An edition as such allows the readers to create their own path within the text(s) provided. (Ramusio [1559] 2015)

As just briefly mentioned, the digital edition of Ramusio’s *Marco Polo* also offers a rich lexicological section dealing with the oriental *realia* occurring in Polo’s travelogue. Such terms – among which several are of Mongolian origin – mostly are toponyms and personal names, but also lexemes describing institutions, religious and administrative offices, ethnonyms, everyday objects etc. This section aims at updating and integrating existing materials, such as Pelliot (1959-73) and Cardona (1975). This lexicological section resulted from the close cooperation between romance philologists and orientalists. Each pop-up includes the list of the word’s occurrences in Ramusian text as well as the list of the corresponding forms documented in other versions, essential references, philological, linguistic and historical comments to the entry. Identified toponyms are provided with a link to Google maps. Thus, this digital edition can be used by a wide variety of users. Moreover, this is the first step towards a broader project that will consist of the whole edition of *Devisement dou monde* as well as a translation into English of the critical text and all the related comments. This project will thus represent an authoritative tool for historians, archaeologists, geographers, anthropologists, orientalists, etc. (Burgio, Eusebi, Simion forthcoming).

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1 Z = Latin version handed down by the Zelada ms. 49.20 (second half of XV c.) preserved in the Archivo y Biblioteca Capitulares of Toledo (Barbieri 1998); V = late XIV c. Venetian version handed down only by the manuscript Hamilton 424 held in the Staatsbibliothek Berlin (Simion 2008-09); VB = XV c. Venetian humanistic rehash handed down by two codices and one fragment (Gennari 2009-10); L = XIII c. Latin summary handed down by 6 manuscripts (Burgio forthcoming); P = Francesco Pipino OP’ early XIV c. Latin translation of VA; it is handed down by around 60 versions (Prášek 1902; Simion 2015); VA = Medieval northern vernacular Italian version, handed down by five manuscripts (Barbieri/Andreose 1999) and F = XIV c. Franco-Italian version, handed down by the manuscript fr. 1116 of the Bibliothèque nationale de France (Eusebi, Burgio 2018) and by a fragment, signed f, in a private collection (Concina 2007; Ménard 2012).

On the base of these digitally available materials, Elisabetta Ragagnin, Samuela Simion and Anna Rinaldin, in cooperation with Bat-Uchral Ganzorig, lecturer of Italian language at the National University of Mongolia (MUIS), the Institute of Mongolian Studies at MUIS, and the Department of History of the Mongolian Academy of Sciences, are preparing a critical translation in Mongolian of the Ramusian *Devisement dou monde*. This monograph will be jointly published by Ca' Foscari University and the National University of Mongolia at Soyombo Printing (Ulaanbaatar).

Last but not least, Elisabetta Ragagnin and Samuela Simion have been working together on Marco Polo's manuscripts and other medieval sources, and, combining their respective Mongolian and Romance philological skills, are yielding new important insights on medieval Mongolian material and spiritual culture. Forthcoming are, in this respect: "Marco Polo's *Boodog* Recipe"<sup>2</sup> to appear the journal *Mongolica Pragensia* (Ragagnin, Simion forthcoming a) and "A New Tool for Mongolic Studies. The critical digital edition of Giovanni Battista Ramusio's *Dei Viaggi di messer Marco Polo* (1559)" (forthcoming b). Various aspects of their joint research were presented at several universities in Europe and in Asia, among others in Shanghai, Dunhuang, Ulaan Baatar, Berlin and Saarbrücken. A workshop on Marco Polo studies will be held at the National University of Ulaanbaatar in the next academic year. Finally, forthcoming are also the proceedings of the conference *Giovan Battista Ramusio. Nuove indagini filologiche e linguistiche* held at the Department of Romance Philology, Saarland University, Saarbrücken, on 23 June 2017 (Crifò, Rinaldin forthcoming).

#### 4 Outreach Activities

In 2014, on the occasion of Veneto Night, the Department of Asian and North African Studies organised a multidisciplinary programme focused on Mongolia. For this special event, a yurt – the traditional round tent with cap cover, typical of the Mongols and other nomadic peoples of Central Asia<sup>3</sup> – was mounted in the small yard of Ca' Foscari's main building. The

2 *Boodog* is a traditional Mongolian cooking method, consisting of meat cooked within the abdominal cavity of a deboned animal (e.g. marmot, goat or sheep) using preheated stones to cook the animal in its own skin.

3 'Yurt' is the term used in English and in other European languages (cf. Russian *юрта*, Italian *yurta/iurta*, German *Jurte*, French *yourte/iourte*, Dutch *joert*, etc.) to refer to this kind of tent. Its etymology is Turkic: in Old Turkic, the word *yurt* referred to 'an abandoned camping site', and in later periods it came to mean 'dwelling place, abode' with several successive semantic developments ranging from 'residence', to 'a specific kind of felt tent', 'community' and 'country' (Clauson 1972, 958). The word *yurt* entered European languages through Russian. In Mongolian, this traditional circular tent is called *mongol ger* 'Mongolian dwelling place/home' or simply *ger*, whereas present-day denominations among Turkic



Figure 2. Veneto Night 2014: the yurt is almost ready (© Elisabetta Ragagnin)

yurt was kindly provided by Gianluca Beggio, owner of a yurt-producing company in Italy. Transporting the yurt's components by boat from Piazzale Roma to the venue of Veneto Night was a great and unique experience both for the students, who actively participated in mounting the yurt, and for the Mongolian colleagues and friends who expressively came from Mongolia to attend the event. In Mongolia and in the rest of Central Asia, yurt's components may be transported by camel, yak and other animals, as well as by tractor and other wheeled vehicles. Therefore, the Venetian transportation by boat was very special.<sup>4</sup> The event took place inside the

peoples include Kazakh *kijiz üy* 'felt house/home', Kyrgyz *boz üy* 'grey house/home' (because of the grey colour of the felt), and Tuvan *ög* 'house/home'. The words *üy* and *ög* are cognates of Old Turkic *eb* 'dwelling place' and correspond to Turkish *ev* 'house'. For a comprehensive view on yurts, see Andrews (1999).

4 Our colleagues in Mongolia enjoyed very much the video of the Venetian-style yurt-transportation we shot that day.

yurt and witnessed a large flow of visitors. The programme consisted of four lectures: 1) "The Turkic-mongolian Yurt: an Environmentally Sustainable Dwelling", 2) "The Mongols: Past and Present", 3) "The Turkic-Mongolian Steppe World" and 4) "Venice and the Mongols". The first three lectures were held by Elisabetta Ragagnin, whereas "Venice and the Mongols" was held by Prof. Eugenio Burgio (Department of Humanistics), who presented to the public the goals and results of the critical digital edition of Giovanni Battista Ramusio's *Dei viaggi di messer Marco Polo*. The event ended with an audio-visual talk of Elisabetta Ragagnin on the Turkic Dukhan of northern Mongolia,<sup>5</sup> the last reindeer herders of Mongolia, focusing on her linguistic and ethnographic researches in the field.<sup>6</sup>

This autumn, on 28 September, on the occasion of *Veneto Night 2018*, there will be an event centred on Mongolian oral literature that will take the public on a multimedia journey into the oral literary traditions of the Mongols. The event will consist of readings of selected passages of the *Secret History of the Mongols* – the national epic of the Mongols (cf. among others, de Rachewiltz 2013; in Italian, Kozin [1973] 2009; Grousset 2011) –, Buddhist and shamanic tales as well as legends on the origin of the enigmatic *xöömiy* 'throat-singing', and other Mongolian tales enclosing motives common to the European folkloric tradition resulting from the historical Silk Road connections. The event will be accompanied by a

5 The Dukhan people, approximately 500 people, are a Turkic-speaking group inhabiting the northernmost areas of Mongolia's Khövsgöl region. This area borders with Buryatia on the northeast and with the Tuvan Republic on the west. Presently, around 32 Dukhan families are reindeer herders in the surrounding taiga areas, on the southern slopes of the Sayan Mountains. They follow the so-called Sayan-type of reindeer breeding, characterised by small-size herds of reindeer used as pack and riding animals and as a source of milk products. The remaining Dukhan families have settled down in the village of Tsagaan Nuur and in neighbouring river areas, abandoning reindeer breeding. Some families, however, regularly rejoin the taiga in the summer months and tend to reindeer. Although the Dukhan people identify themselves as *dukha*, a variant of *tuba/tubo*, an ancient name of South Siberia that is common across Sayan Turkic speakers and various groups in the neighbouring areas, in Mongolia they are generally called *Tsaatan* 'those who have reindeer'. Concerning their spiritual world, Dukhan beliefs are animistic, i.e. they worship nature, and shamans play an important role as intermediaries between the material and the spiritual world. On Dukhan language and culture, see, among others, Ragagnin (2011). Furthermore, forthcoming is a new monograph in Mongolian on Dukhan language and culture authored by Oyunbadam Chuluu, director of the boarding school of Tsagaan Nuur and native Dukhan speaker, together with Elisabetta Ragagnin, *Mongol nutag dax' Tuxačuudyn xél ba soyol* (Language and Culture of Mongolia's Dukhan People). This monograph is specifically addressed to the younger generation of the local community and aims at helping them to preserve their native language and culture. The book will be published in cooperation with the Mongolian Academy of Sciences. In February 2017, Oyunbadam came to Venice and was a guest in Ragagnin's seminar Linguistic Research Topics as native speaker of Dukhan and Darkhat-Mongolian, the local Mongolian variety that differs in many aspects from standard Khalkha Mongolian, the official language of Mongolia.

6 The program of the event can be viewed at the URL <http://www.venetonight.it/2014/yurta-mongola-il-mondo-dei-nomadi-delle-steppe/> (2018-07-09).

Mongolian throat-singer playing the traditional horse-fiddle (Mong. *morin xuur*).<sup>7</sup>

Finally, the Italian ambassador in Ulaanbaatar, His Excellency Andrea De Felip, has already agreed to give a lecture at the Ca' Foscari University of Venice, focusing on the Italian mission in Mongolia.

## 5 Cooperation with Mongolian Institutions

In 2014, on the occasion of Veneto Night, Ca' Foscari University signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the National University of Mongolia, starting thereby a bilateral Overseas Mobility programme for students, researchers and professors that was active till December 2017. A new co-operation project with Mongolia was recently submitted within the framework of the new Erasmus+ International Credit Mobility Program (ICM), promoting international mobility of students, teachers and technical staff.

Last but not least, the Mongolian Ministry of Education has recently granted a financing to the Department of Asian and North African Studies for a further development of Mongolian Studies at Ca' Foscari University.

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7 Several workshops on Turco-Mongolian throat-singing were organised by Giovanni de Zorzi (Department of Philosophy and Cultural Heritage) and Elisabetta Ragagnin.



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