

Ancient Cultural Relations between Ceylon and China

'Missions were constantly despatched charged with an interchange of courtesies between their sovereigns; theologians and officers of state arrived in Ceylon empowered to collect information regarding the doctrine of the Buddha; and envoys were sent in return bearing royal donations of relics and sacred books'.

J. E. Tennent.

THIS remark made by J. E. Tennent, a recognized authority on Ceylon history, very aptly shows the cordial and intimate cultural relationship that existed between Ceylon and China in ancient times. Indeed, the ancient Chinese travellers to the shores of the Indian Ocean and Lañkā Dvīpa were not allured by treasure or riches but prompted by religious devotion in search of the True Dharma. The common link which brought China and Ceylon together was obviously Buddhism. Through Buddhism there came into existence a cordial friendship between these two countries for over 1,500 years. The very fact of this lengthy duration makes us believe that there must have been something extraordinary in this relationship which stood the test of time. We shall, in the following sections, endeavour to illustrate the historical factors which cemented the cultural ties between the two countries.

I. The Visit of Fa Hien

Buddhism was formally introduced into China in 67 A.D. From that time onwards a chain of Indian Buddhist sages and scholars continued to pour into that country for the spread of Buddhist doctrines and the translation of Canonic literature. It might appear to have been a 'one way traffic' had Fa Hien not been able to pay a return visit to India on behalf of the Buddhists in China. The primal urge which prompted him to undertake this journey was, as is stated in his famous work *The Travels of Fa Hien*, that he had felt the imperfect condition of the *Vinaya Piṭaka* in China. Being desirous of making improvements on it, he had agreed with his friends to go to India for the purpose of seeking the original Vinaya texts.¹ This noble mission in quest of truth had far-reaching consequences. He was the first Chinese who visited India and Ceylon in such early a time as 401 A.D. and left behind him an invaluable record concerning his journey as well as the social, political, religious and

1. Cf. Beal: *Buddhist Record of Western World*, p. xxiii.

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other conditions of the countries he had visited. This record of his not merely inspired hundreds of Chinese Buddhists including Hsuan Tsang and I-Tsing who at a later period (in the 7th century A.D.) also went to India and wrote *Travels*, but also received universal recognition as a documentary on the general conditions in ancient India and Ceylon.

Having spent over thirteen years in India Fa Hien came to Ceylon in the Winter of 413 A.D. by sea. The last port whence he boarded the ship was Tāmralipti in Bengal. He stayed in the Island for over two years in search of Buddhist texts and paying homage to the sacred places including Adam's Peak, Anuradhapura and other Buddhist sanctuaries. Among the Scriptures he acquired from the monasteries in Ceylon² were a copy each of the *Mahīśāsaka Vinaya*, the *Dīrghāgama*, the *Samyuktāgama* and a collection of the Miscellaneous Piṭaka (Sannipāta). All these were introduced into China for the first time and some of them were later on translated into Chinese. Probably these were the original texts which constitute the Hīnayāna section of the Chinese Tripiṭaka.

Regarding the general condition, both religious and secular, in Ceylon at that time, he informs us in detail about the exposition of the Tooth Relic of the Buddha, the ceremony of cremating an Arhat, the donation of land to the Saṅgha by the Ruler, the magnificent ornamentation of the Abhayagiri Saṅghārāma, the deep veneration shown to the Bhikṣus and the blooming prosperity of the people who were wealthy and free from famine and starvation, and other particulars. This information is indeed very valuable to the student of history.

II. The Ceylonese Bhikṣuṅīs Visited China

It appears that both the Bhikṣu and Bhikṣuṅī Saṅghas were well-established from the time when Buddhism was first introduced into Ceylon, because we know that these Orders had been represented by Mahendra and Saṅghamitrā. Comparatively China was not so fortunate as Lañkā with regard to the Bhikṣuṅī Saṅgha and that is why there was the necessity in inviting Ceylonese Bhikṣuṅīs to China. According to the 'Biography of the Bhikṣuṅīs',³ in the year 429 A.D. there was a captain of a foreign ship, Nandi by name who brought Bhikṣuṅīs from the Siṃhala-Country (Shih-tzu-kuo) to the Capital of the early Sung Dynasty (420-477 A.D.) at Nanking. They were staying in the Chin Fu Monastery and their purpose in coming to China was to form a Bhikṣuṅī Sangha so that under this Body the higher ordination would be given

2. Ibid., lxxix. *Fo-Kwo-Ki*, Ch. xl.

3. *Pi-chiu-ni-chuan*, compiled by Pao Chang in 526 A.D., Nanjio's Catalogue of Chinese Buddhist Tripiṭaka, No. 1497.

to the nuns as hitherto they had been ordained by the Bhikṣu Sangha. It seems that the first batch of Sinhalese Bhikṣuṇīs was small in number and that a fresh batch of 11 Bhikṣuṇīs from Ceylon led by Theri Triśaraṇa (Tiehsa-ra) had to be invited. The new arrivals landed in China in 433 A.D. and consequently over 300 nuns were ordained by them under the able guidance of Saṅghavarman, a prominent Indian Śramaṇa who came from India in the same year.

This event took place just thirteen years after Fa Hien's visit to Ceylon (he went back to China in 416 A.D.). As he took residence in Nanking and devoted himself to the translation of Sanskrit manuscripts into Chinese, especially Vinaya literature, we think he had a large share in bringing about this mission of Sinhalese nuns to renovate the Bhikṣuṇī Sangha there, although his biographers were silent on this point.

With regard to Nandi, the captain of the foreign vessel, we presume that he might be a Ceylonese. How far the statement made by Tennent: 'the Sinhalese, though most expert as fishers and boatmen, never embark in foreign vessels⁴', is justifiable, we cannot say yet. But in this case it might be a Sinhalese captain. If he were an Indian, why should not he bring Bhikṣuṇīs to China from India on both the occasions?

III. The Visit of Amoghavajra and Tantrism in Ceylon

Buddhism in the 8th century A.D. began to drift towards Tantrism. This is proved by the practices among the Buddhists in India in general and the Tantric works of that period translated into Chinese in particular. Among the prominent teachers of the Tantric cult who went to China from India in the 8th century A.D. the names of Vajrabodhi,⁵ a graduate of Nālanda University and Amoghavajra may be specially mentioned here. The relation between these two is that of a Guru and a pupil and both had been to Ceylon. While in Ceylon Vajrabodhi climbed Adam's Peak, and from there he went to China sometime after 713 A.D. The case with Amoghavajra is a little different. He was a Brahmin from Northern India and had become a disciple of Vajrabodhi when he was fifteen years of age. In all probability he proceeded with his teacher to China. And when Vajrabodhi was about to pass away in 733 A.D. he had been instructed to pay a visit to Ceylon and India for the purpose of collecting Tantric scriptures.

Amoghavajra reached the Siṃhala-Kingdom in 742 A.D. and was accorded a royal reception, including a guard-of-honour by the royal forces. The King,

4. Tennent: *Ceylon*, Vol. I, p. 441.

5. *Sung-Kao-Sheng-Chuan*, Ch. 1. The life of Chin-Kang-Chih and the life of Pu-K'ung, Nanjio, No. 1495.

Śilāmegha by name, saluted him by⁶ touching his feet and invited him to stay in the palace for seven days. To express his deep veneration, the King bathed Amoghavajra everyday with scented water pouring from a golden Hu or can.⁷ From the crown prince downwards—namely the Queen, the ladies in the harem and the ministers—all showered on him great respect in exactly the same degree as the King did.

During his sojourn in Ceylon Amoghavajra met Samantabhadra Ācārya, a great master of the Tantric cult, for the first time. He requested this master to perform the ceremony of the two Maṇḍalas, viz., the Vajradhātu and Garbhadhātu, which consist of the 18 central objects of worship. When the request was granted he gave permission to two of his Chinese disciples namely Han Kuang and Hui Kung to join him in learning the secrets of the five Abhiṣecanī baptisms from the great Ācārya. Later, he collected more than 500 volumes of Tantric texts, Sūtras and Śāstras in addition to the detailed information concerning the mudras, images, colours, and flags of the guardian deities in a Maṇḍala. To prove his mastery over the esoteric art he gave a demonstration of his power by subduing a number of mad elephants in the presence of the King. He also visited India and returned to China in 746 A.D. He presented to the Emperor the official message sent by King Śilāmegha of Ceylon along with jewels, pearls, white⁸ fine muslin, Sanskrit manuscripts and other valuable presents.

We find in the Nikāya Saṅgraha, a book written in the 14th century A.D. dealing with the history of the Buddhist Saṅgha, a reference to the introduction of Tantric Buddhism in Ceylon in the form of Vajriya Vāda or Vajrayāna⁹ in the 10th century A.D. by King Matvala Sena. However, judging by the above-mentioned evidences and the Dharaṇi 'Om tare, tu tare, ture svāha¹⁰' discovered near the Vijayārāma monastery at Anuradhapura¹⁰ as well as the Tisā Veva lithic Diagram which was also found in that ancient capital,¹¹ we have reason to believe that Tantrism was introduced to Ceylon in 8th century A.D. if not earlier. Moreover, the names known as Nilapaṭa, or Nīla Sādhana

6. There is no mention of a King bearing this name in the Sinhalese Chronicles. From 729 to 769 A.D. the King who ruled the Island was Agrabodhi III or Akbo whose capital was at Pollonnaruwa. See Tennent: *Ceylon*, Vol. I, p. 322.

In *Cūlavamsam*, Ch. 44.63, we have 'Silāmeghavaṇṇa' who was King of Ceylon and Anuradhapura was his capital, though the author was silent on this point.

7. Hu, a Chinese corn measure, nominally holding ten pecks. In this case, it may be a kind of big can for pouring water.

8. *Sung-Kao-Sheng-Chuan*, Ch. 1. The life of Pu K'ung.

9. *The Ceylon Historical Journal*, Vol. I, No. 4, p. 288.

10. *The Buddhist Studies*, ed. by B. C. Law, p. 486.

11. *The Ceylon Historical Journal*, Vol. I, No. 4, p. 287.

and Vajrayāna or Vajriya Vāda¹² mentioned in the Nikāya Saṅgraha invariably indicate that Tantrism was popular and prevalent in the Island in its various forms. We are sure that it had some influence on Chinese Buddhism when Amoghavajra returned to China.

IV. The Mission of Cheng Ho and its Political Consequence in Ceylon

Judging by the fact that Fa Hien went home by sea from Ceylon via Java, we may assume that sea communication between different countries in South-East Asia and the Far East in ancient times must have been well-established. Presumably the regular service was maintained by merchants for their commercial purposes. Any official expedition armed with huge marine corps from China was never heard of until the Ming Dynasty (1368-1628 A.D.). General Cheng Ho at the command of Emperor Cheng Tsu led expedition forces to the ports in the region of the South Seas and the Indian Ocean including Ceylon on several occasions.¹³ The motive behind this was threefold: Firstly, it served as a good-will mission from the Emperor so that friendship and closer contact between China and her neighbouring countries may be brought about. Of course, this did not mean any ambitious imperialism. Secondly, Emperor Cheng Tsu suspected that his opponent Hui Ti (ex-Emperor) from whom he had snatched the throne had escaped and taken asylum in one of the countries in these regions.¹⁴ To satisfy himself, he directed Cheng Ho to keep this matter in mind during his missions abroad. Thirdly—probably this is a more reasonable explanation—the founder¹⁵ of the Ming Dynasty, that is the father of Emperor Cheng Tsu, had cherished the idea of developing sea communications and making contact with foreign nations. This is consequently proved by the fact that he had established a Royal institute for foreign languages and had ordered government agents to collect materials for ship-building including large scale plantation of Tung-oil trees, the oil of which is usually used for varnishing. He could not realise this dream during his life time. What Cheng Tsu did was just to pick up the thread where his father had left. We believe, these were the essential factors which prompted Cheng Ho to undertake the journey abroad.

The official position of Cheng Ho, according to *Ming Shih*, or the *History of the Ming Dynasty*, was that of an eunuch in the palace. This does not sound

12. *Ceylon Journal of Science*, Vol. II, pp. 53-54. *The Ceylon Historical Journal*, Vol. I, No. 4, p. 289.

13. *Visva-Bhārati Annals*, Vol. I, p. 103.

14. *Ming Shih* or *History of the Ming Dynasty*, Ch. 304.

15. *Ibid.*

attractive, but he was the right-hand man of the Emperor. It was through his ability, sagacity, courage and judgement he helped his master to the throne and achieved great success in his hazardous missions abroad. From 1405 to 1430 A.D. he had seven voyages to his credit. It was in his second voyage in 1408 that he landed in Ceylon and shortly afterwards an encounter took place between Alagakkonāra (A-lee-ku-nai-erh) or Vijaya Bāhu VI, the Ruler of Ceylon¹⁶ and his armed forces. The cause for this unpleasant incident according to one version was that earlier in 1405 A.D. there was a group of Chinese Buddhist pilgrims who went to Ceylon to pay homage to the Tooth-Relic of the Buddha.¹⁷ They were ill-treated by King Vijaya Bāhu VI. Taking it to be an insult and desirous of righting the wrong, the expedition force was sent. The other version¹⁸ was that earlier during his first voyage in 1405 Cheng Ho brought with him incense and flowers to be offered to the Buddhist shrines in Ceylon and called on the King requesting him to show respect to Buddhism and its followers. The King was apparently a Hindu.¹⁹ He not merely rejected the visitor's advice but threatened him with dire consequence. Cheng Ho did not wish to pick a quarrel with him but quietly went away. In the second voyage in 1408 Cheng Ho had 27,000 well-equipped soldiers with him who were conveyed by 48 big vessels. Being aware of the fact that he was discourteous to the Chinese envoy on his previous visit he feared that the visitor's army might bring him destruction. Therefore, he conspired with his ministers to entrap Cheng Ho by trickery. This is how it was worked out. In the beginning, the King pretended to be friendly with him and his party was decoyed to the interior. While the envoy and his party were well on their way to the capital, the King secretly despatched an army of 50,000 strong to welcome the main body of Chinese forces at the port with a surprise attack, and at the same

16. Tennent: *Ceylon*, Vol. I, p. 599.

17. Yule: *Cathay*, I, p. 76.

18. A later insertion printed at the end of the 11th chapter of Hsuan Tsang's *Si-yu-ki* in the Chinese Tripitaka.

19. This is proved by the following evidences:

(a) At the beginning of the 15th century A.D., 'the glory of Buddhism had declined, and the political ascendancy of the Tamil had enabled the Brahmans to taint the national worship by an infusion of Hindu Observances'. Tennent: *Ceylon*, Vol. I, p. 598.

(b) According to *Se-yih-ke-foo-choo* or *Description of Western Countries* that Vijaya Bāhu VI was a native of Sollee (Soli) in South India and an adherent of the heterodox faith . . . tyrannised over his followers.

(c) In *Yin-ya-sheng-lan*, it is said that King Vijaya Bāhu VI used to burn cow-dung and smear his body with it . . .

All these sources indicate that he was a Hindu and was not very friendly towards Buddhism.

time stockades were thrown up with a view to their capture so that a ransom might be obtained from them.²⁰ This plan was, however, revealed to the envoy, and by a dexterous movement, Cheng Ho led an infantry of 2,000 strong and captured the Capital. After the fall of the city, the King was made a prisoner, and the members of his family including officials were taken to China. Later on they were released and sent back to their home land.

From 1410 till 1459 A.D. the relationship²¹ between China and Ceylon became very cordial. The reason for this is that King Parākrama Bāhu VI, known in Chinese as Seay-pa-nai-na,²² was recommended for the throne by the Chinese Emperor. As a sequel, the new King sent envoys and gifts to China on three occasions in 1433, 1435 and 1459 A.D. After 1459 there was no official communication between the two countries because King Parākrama Bāhu VI passed away in 1462 on the one hand, and on the other, the Portuguese appeared on the scene by showing their presence in Goa in 1496. Finally they had the monopoly of sea trade and the Eastern nations were no longer able to maintain their former contact.

Regarding the hostility between Cheng Ho and King Vijaya Bāhu VI, we would like to quote a passage from the Rājāvali, a Sinhalese historical record which presents a different picture.²³ The relevant passage runs as follows:—

‘In the reign of King Vijaya Bāhu, the King of Mahā Chīna landed in Ceylon with an army pretending that he was bringing tribute; King Vijaya Bāhu, believing his professions, acted incautiously, and he was treacherously taken prisoner by the foreign King. His four brothers were killed, and with them fell many people, and the King himself was carried captive to China’.

This is another version of the story. Of course it is not our intention to investigate the original cause of the unhappy event and deliver judgement as to who was right or wrong. From the standpoint of a student of history, this piece of information is very important because it confirms that this event

20. Tennent: *Ceylon*, Vol. I, p. 599.

21. The view expressed by J. E. Tennent in his work *Ceylon*, Vol. I, pp. 600-601 appears to be misleading and partial. Because the exchange of gifts between China and other countries does not necessarily mean humiliation to a country which is less powerful. It was the policy of the Chinese emperors to maintain close contact by meeting or sending envoys from or to other lands and exchange presents with them.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 600.

23. The 1459 mission was sent by Ko-li-sheng-hsia-la-hsi-li-pa-hu-ra-ja, its original form may be ‘Kulīna Siṃhala Sri Bāhu Rāja’.

really occurred, as historical annals of both the countries agree²⁴ on this point.^{24a}

V. Other Interchange of Arts and Culture

Ever since the beginning of the 1st century A.D. Chinese ships and merchants have been calling on the ports of Ceylon, especially Galle where, it is said ‘Ships anchor and people land’.²⁵ It is obvious that the relation between the two countries in the initial stage was through commerce and gradually it rose to a diplomatic level. Envoys were sent to China by the Rulers of Ceylon and return visits were paid by the Chinese ambassadors. According to Chinese historical annals, from 97 to 762 A.D. there were altogether sixteen trips²⁶ of Ceylonese missions to China carrying with them presents and commercial commodities for trade. Among the articles known to have been imported from Ceylon were: gold ornaments, jewelry, pearls, coral, crystal, rubies, sapphires, amethysts, carbuncles, topazes of four distinct tints, models of the shrines in which were deposited the sacred relics of the Buddha and other valuables.²⁷ In return, the Chinese merchants brought to the shores of Laṅkā silk, variegated lute strings, blue porcelain, enamelled dishes and cups, and large quantities of copper cash wanted for adjusting the balances of trade.²⁸ As of particular interest it should be mentioned here that a Ceylonese artist of the highest rank was deputed to produce a Buddha-image in China. It is recorded in the *History of the Wai Dynasty*, 386-556 A.D. that Kings in Central Asia were requested to send sculptors to China to make images of the Buddha. Many artists came from that region but none could rival the productions of Nandi,²⁹ a Bhikṣu from Laṅkā in 456 A.D. His unique skill was exhibited in the fact that the images made by him appeared truly brilliant when placed at a distance of about ten paces, but the lineaments gradually disappeared on a nearer approach. On another occasion, we are told by *Liang Shu*, or the *History of the Liang Dynasty*, 502-556 A.D. that the King of Ceylon sent an ambassador carrying a jade image of Buddha to China which was unique in workmanship

24. Tennent: *Ceylon*, Vol. I, p. 600 f.n.

24a. According to the statement of Fee Hsin, author of *Hsin-chia-sheng-lan*, in 1409 Cheng Ho set up an inscription in Ceylon. In 1912, this inscription was found in Galle. It is inscribed in three languages, viz., Chinese, Tamil and Persian. All of them recorded the event of Cheng Ho's second visit to Ceylon. *J.R.A.S. (North China Branch)*, 1914, pp. 171-2.

25. *Shu-wen-hsien-tang-kau*, b, ccxxxvi, p. 19.

26. *J.R.A.S. (Ceylon Branch)*, Vol. 24, No. 68, 1915-16, p. 106ff. Also *Ceylon Historical Journal*, Vol. I, No. 4, pp. 306-7.

27. Tennent: *Ceylon*, Vol. I, pp. 590-591.

28. *Sung Shu*, b, lxxx, p. 3. Tennent: *Ceylon*, Vol. I, p. 592.

29. *Chieh-fu-yuan-kuei*, b, li, p. 7.

and appeared to be a work of super-human skill. Thus the art of image-making in Ceylon seems to have reached a very high standard in the 5th century A.D. It is no wonder that the Chinese historians paid glowing tributes to the creators of this art.³⁰

Later in the early part of the Yuan Dynasty, 1260-1341 A.D. we are informed that Kublai Khan sent three successive envoys to Ceylon who were empowered to negotiate the purchase of the sacred alms bowl of the Buddha. This was confirmed by Marco Polo in his *Travels*.³¹ The compliment paid to the craftsmanship of that piece of art is as follows:—

‘ In front of the image of the Buddha is a sacred bowl which is neither made of jade, nor copper, nor iron ; it is of a purple colour and glossy, and when struck it sounds like glass ’.

Tao-yi-chih-lueh.³²

The Grand Khan's desire in obtaining the bowl may have been inspired by religious sentiments. If that article was also produced in Ceylon (though we are not sure), then it is a further proof of the great achievement attained by Ceylonese artists.

However, besides commercial exports, China made certain contributions to the cultural life of the people in the Island, namely, in 1266 A.D. Chinese musical instruments were imported into Ceylon and some Chinese soldiers took service in the army of Parākrama III. A description concerning this point is found in *Kāvya-Sekara*, a work³³ in Sinhalese written about 1410 A.D.

The details enumerated in the foregoing paragraphs would convince one of the close cultural relationship which China and Ceylon have had for over 1,500 years since the beginning of the first century A.D. The cultural ambassadors of both the countries came and went not so much for material gains as for carrying incense and offerings to the shrines of the Tooth-Relic, paying homage to the Buddhist sanctuaries and copying the Sanskrit Sūtras for the sake of propagating the religion of the Blessed One. This cultural interchange was naturally turning round the pivot of Buddhism. It is because of co-reli-

30. Tennent : *Ceylon*, p. 596.

31. Marco Polo : *Travels*, Ch. xix.

32. This means : ‘ A brief record of the Island foreigners ’. See Tennent : *Ceylon*, Vol. I, p. 598.

33. Tennent : *Ceylon*, Vol. I, p. 597.

gionist feelings that the Buddhists in China, from the Emperor downwards, used to send greetings to the Buddhists in this Island. They have sincerely regarded Laṅkā as sacred a sanctum as that of Buddha-gaya or Sarnath in India. This crystallization of cordial friendship and sympathetic sentiments between these two countries is a phenomenon which had no antecedence, except perhaps in the ancient Sino-Indian relations.

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