

# SRI LANKAN SHIPS IN CHINA

## A Note on a Passage in a Chinese Literary Work from the Period of the T'ang Empire

A Chinese literary work called *T'ang Kuo Shih Pu*<sup>1</sup> written by a mandarin named Li Chao throws valuable light on Sri Lankan shipping and the relations that prevailed between the island and China during the period of the T'ang empire. It is evident from this extensive work consisting of three volumes that the author had access to an unusually wide variety of information. Certain parts of this work are devoted to such predictable topics reflecting the predilections of the bureaucrat as the system of civil service examinations and the organization of the Chinese empire in the time of the T'ang dynasty. Li Chao also drew upon what appears to have been a full social life to describe vividly salons, parties and costumes. He was remarkably well-informed about opinions held by high dignitaries of his time as well as on biographical information concerning them. In addition to this wealth of material on political and, especially, social conditions, the *T'ang Kuo Shih Pu* contains valuable information on influential literary schools of the time, on products typical of various regions of China, and on the internal and external trade of China under T'ang rule. The reference to Sri Lanka, which is called the Lion Kingdom (師子國) occurs in the description of trade contacts with the lands of the Southern Sea (南海).

Li Chao mentions that he was holding office in the IIB degree of the Fifth Rank in the Chinese bureaucratic hierarchy. Noboru Koga has drawn attention to the fact that, according to the *T'ang Shu Yan* of Wang Ding Bao, Li Chao held office at this particular level during the period between A.D. 806 and 825.<sup>2</sup> Since the *T'ang Kuo Shih Pu* contains information on dignitaries from the time of Chang Qing (A.D. 821-825), it seems likely that the work was completed in the third decade of the ninth century. It was most probably begun a long time earlier. It is noteworthy that Li Chao also presents information on dig-

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1. Li Chao, *T'ang Kuo Shih Pu*, New edition, Shanghai: Ku Chi Publishers, 1979.
  2. Noboru Koga, *Azia Rekishi Jiten*, Tokyo: Heibonsha Publishers, Vol.7. 1961, p.42.

tly, they are arrested and put in prison. From departure till the time of return, all through the period spent on the sea routes, white pigeons are kept on board these ships for sending messages. If a ship were to be wrecked, these birds are able to fly several thousand *li* and return."<sup>9</sup>

It is noteworthy that Li Chao speaks of a time when ships from the Southern Sea, including those from Sri Lanka, called at the ports of the T'ang empire "every year" (每歲). The Chinese annals record the arrival of six different embassies from Sri Lanka at the court of the T'ang emperors, four of them within two decades.<sup>10</sup> These missions reflect an intensification of diplomatic effort on the part of Sri Lankan kings, especially Aggabodhi VI (A.D. 733-772) who ruled at the time when the four embassies mentioned above reached the T'ang court. These kings probably had the improvement of trade relations as their objective. The *T'ang Kuo Shih Pu* reveals that, parallel to the development of diplomatic relations, commercial contacts between the two countries improved to reach such a high level by the time of Li Chao that the arrival of ships from Sri Lanka had become an annual event. These ships visited China as well as regions within the northern parts of the modern state of Vietnam. It is clear that this trade was subject to strict official control. Some rare goods were evidently reserved for the emperor and his court, and the sale of such goods to private individuals was not permitted. Foreign merchants who tried to "act fraudulently," probably including both those resorting to trade malpractices and those who tried to circumvent official

南海舶，外國船也。每歲至安南、廣州。師子國船最大，梯而上下數丈，皆積寶貨。至則本道奏報，郡邑爲之喧闐。有蕃長爲主領，市舶使籍其名物，納舶脚，禁珍異，蕃商有以欺詐入牢獄者。舶發之後，海路必養白鴿爲信。舶沒，則鴿雖數千里亦能歸也。

9. Li Chao, *op.cit.*, Vol.2, p.63.

10. Sylvain Lévi, "Les missions de Wang Hiuén-ts'e dans l'Inde: Ceylan et Chine," *Journal Asiatique*, serie 9, tome 15, 1900, pp.416-8.

restrictions, were severely punished. However, it would also seem that the Sri Lankan ships were eagerly received by many people besides members of the imperial court.

In the sixth century Cosmas Indicopleustes observed that Sri Lankan ships played an active role in the trade of the Indian Ocean. "As its position is central, the island is a great resort of ships from all parts of India, and from Persia and Ethiopia," he noted, adding, "and in like manner it despatches many of its own to foreign ports."<sup>11</sup> The information that Li Chao presents reveals that the Sri Lankan ships were prominent among the vessels that plied the Asian seas two centuries later. It is interesting to note that in one respect the *T'ang Kuo Shih Pu* agrees with an earlier account by the Roman writer Pliny who also noted that Sri Lankan mariners took birds on board their vessels. However, according to Pliny, these birds were used not for purposes of communication, but to help the mariners to steer their ships towards land.<sup>12</sup>

Ships from several different lands came to China during the time of the T'ang dynasty. The Chinese were aware of Persian and Indian vessels and what they termed K'un-lun ships ( 崑崙船 ).<sup>13</sup> As Needham has pointed out, by this time the Chinese were themselves building large vessels which were "nearly 600 'tuns and tunnage' " in burthen.<sup>14</sup> The K'un-lun ships had enjoyed the greatest prestige among the Chinese well into the period of the T'ang empire, and there are several references to Chinese travellers taking

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11. J.W. McCrindle, *Ancient India as Described in Classical Literature*, Westminster: Archibald Constable, 1901, pp.160-1,

12. *Ibid.*, p.103.

13. Needham, *op.cit.*, p.451.

14. *Ibid.*, p.452, note b.

berths on these ships.<sup>15</sup> When considered against this background, Li Chao's testimony acquires a special significance. Wolters remarked that Sri Lankan ships "had a reputation for being large" but he noted that modern research undertaken by Sri Lankan scholars did not suggest that the island had been a "shipping centre in its own right."<sup>16</sup> It is noteworthy that, according to the *T'ang Kuo Shih Pu*, Sri Lankan ships were not merely large vessels but "the largest" (最大) among those which came from the lands of the Southern Sea. This observation was accepted by Wang Tang who repeated it in his *T'ang Yu Lin*.<sup>17</sup> Li Chao was not making a casual remark and his observation appears to be a considered and deliberate statement, for he goes on to comment that the stairways for loading and unloading these ships were "several 'd' *i*ang" (數丈) in height.<sup>18</sup> This observation carries the implication that Sri Lankan ships were large-hulled vessels with decks located at a considerable height above the water level. Li Chao's statement seems to suggest that, by his time, Sri Lankans were building ships which were larger than the famous vessels of the K'un-lun people. It underlines the need to resume the task of studying the nautical traditions

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15. Gabriel Ferrand, "Le Kouen-louen et les anciennes navigations interocéaniques dans les mers du sud," *Journal Asiatique*, serie 11, tome 13, 1919, pp.239-33, 431-92; pp.6-68, 21-41; O.W. Wolters, *Early Indonesian Commerce*, Ithaca: Cornell University, 1967, pp.146, 153-4; Needham, *op. cit.*, pp.459-60; Pierre-Yves Manguin, "The Southeast Asian Ship: An Historical Approach," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Singapore: University of Singapore, Vol.11, No.2, 1980, pp.566-576.

16. Wolters, *op. cit.*, p.148.

17. See Needham, *op. cit.*, p.453.

18. The 'd' 'i'ang 丈 was equal to 10 t *śi*ak 尺. The length of the latter measure varied between 20 and 35 cm. See Bernhard Karlgren, *Analytical Dictionary of Chinese and Sino-Japanese*, Taipei: Ch'eng-Wen Publishing Company, 1966, pp.331, 349.

of pre colonial Sri Lanka begun by Hornell<sup>19</sup> many decades ago.<sup>20</sup>

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19. See James Hornell, *The Origin and Ethnological Significance of Indian Boat Designs*, *Memoirs of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Vol.7, 1918-1923 (publ. 1923), pp. 139-256.
20. This note is based on studies carried out by the two authors during a period of stay in Japan by R.A.L.H. Gunawardana as Visiting Research Scholar at the Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Kyoto. The authors are thankful to Professor Yoneo Ishii for useful comments.