

A New Date for the Beginning of Sino-Sri Lankan Relations¹

According to most writings on ancient Sino-Sri Lankan relations, the earliest known contact between China and Sri Lanka belongs to the beginning of the 5th century A.D. However, a close scrutiny of the Chinese sources, particularly the Dynastic Histories, reveal some references which point to a different date. For instance, the *Han shu*, the Dynastic History of the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 220), carries a reference which suggests a much earlier date, than hitherto believed, for the beginning of diplomatic relations between China and Sri Lanka.

The Han period in Chinese history is notable for its outward political expansion, which occurred for the first time in China. The political unification of China and the administrative re organization that followed, seem to have given the rulers of the Han Dynasty a new confidence to embark upon adventures beyond the borders of the "Middle Kingdom." In fact, the determined efforts made by the Han Chinese to explore the strange lands outside China and to open the doors of China to the "barbarians" for the first time are remarkable features of the history to the Han Dynasty.

The relevant passage in the *Han shu* belongs to the reign of Emperor P'ing (A.D. 1-6). It can be translated as follows :—

1. This article originated as part of one of the research papers entitled, "An analysis of Sino-Sri Lankan diplomatic relations during the ancient times," submitted for M.A. in East Asian Studies at the University of Washington Seattle, U.S.A. The writer wishes to express his gratitude to Professor Jack L. Dull, the present Head of the Chinese Program, University of Washington, who guided him in this research on the subject, and to Professor R.A.L.H. Gunawardene, University of Peradeniya, for the comments and suggestions on the present paper.
2. James Emerson Tennent, *Ceylon*, Vol. I., London, 1859, pp. 583-602. New edition, Tisara Prakasakayo, Dehiwala, 1977 pp. 514-529; W. Pachow, "Ancient Cultural Relations Between Ceylon and China.", *University of Ceylon Review*, Vol. XII, no. 3., July 1954, pp. 182-191; John. M. Seneviratne, "Chino-Sinhalese Relations in the Early and Middle Ages," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society (Ceylon Branch)*, Vol. XXIV, no 68, 1915-1916, p. 106, lists three missions sent to China by the king of Sri Lanka in A. D. 97, and 121 In a footnote Seneviratne states that he has taken the information from an article by T. W. Kingsmill, entitled, "The Mantses and the Golden Khesnese," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society (North China Branch)*, New Series, Vol. XXXV, 1903-1904, p. 99 However, it should be noted that the references used by Kingsmill from the *Hou Han shu* in his article about the three missions mentioned above, clearly show that the missions were despatched by a country named 'Tan' (No. 20). In archaic Chinese the Chinese character (No. 20) was pronounced as "D" an (See Bernhard Karlgren, *Analytic Dictionary of Chinese and Japanese*, Paris, 1923, p. 280). Therefore, it is not at all possible to read it as 'Shan' and equate it with 'Sinhala' (Sri Lanka) as King-smill does. Accordingly, the three missions attributed by Seneviratne to Sri Lanka were in fact despatched by some other country.

In the middle of the Yuan-shih period of Emperor P'ing (A.D. 1) Wang Mang was assisting the administration. (He) wished to spread power and virtue. (Accordingly), (he) made handsome presents to the king of Huan-chih and commanded him to send envoys presenting live rhinoceroses. From Huan-chih, (by) sailing for eight months (one) can reach P'i-tsung. (From there), sailing for two months, (one) reaches the borders of Hsiang-liu in Jih-nan. To the south of Huang-chih lies the country of Ssü-cheng-pu. The Han interpreter envoys³ returned (home) from there.⁴

There has been much discussion regarding the identification of these places. While there is unanimity among scholars concerning the identification of Jih-nan as upper Annam, Paul Wheatly has correctly argued that P'i-tsung was probably in the Malayan Peninsula or a neighbouring island.⁵ G. Ferrand, Fujitha Toyohachi, and Feng Ch'eng-chün have shown that Huang-chih is the same as Chian chih which appears in the *Sung kao-seng ch'uan* and Hsüan Tsang's *Hsi-yü chi*. They have identified Chian-chih as Kāncipura which was the capital of the Pallavas.⁶ The *Han shu* further says that Huang-chih sent rhinoceroses in the second year of P'ing-ti (A.D. 2).⁷ It is worth noting that India was famous in China for its unique rhinoceroses with an extraordinary bulky body and a long horn (different from the species found in South-east Asia).⁸

3. They were members of the Department of Eunuchs, and served as interpreters to the Emperor.
4. *Han shu* (hereafter abbreviated as HS), Chung-hua shu-chu edition, Shanghai, 1936, 28 b, 32 b.
5. Paul Wheatley, "The Malay Peninsula as Known to the Chinese of the Third Century A. D.," *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. XXVIII, pt. 1., 1955, pp. 1-23.
6. G. Ferrand, "Le Kouen-loen et les anciennes navigations interocéaniques dans les mers du sud." *Journal Asiatique*, Vol. XIV, 1919, pp. 45-46. Fujitha Toyohachi-Chung-kuo nan-hai ku-tai chiao-tung shih, (Chinese translation of the original Japanese work), Shanghai, 1936, pp. 83-117. Feng Ch'eng-chün, *Chung-kuo nan-yang chiao-tung shih*, Hong Kong, 1963, pp. 2-3. They have taken into account the travel description given in the *Hou Han shu* and the *Han shu ti-li-chih* as well as the phonetic factors in identifying Huang-chih with Kānci. The reference given in Hsüan-Tsang's *Hsi-yüchi* concerning Chian-chian-pu lo (Kāncipura) is also used to prove their case. In addition to the arguments used by these scholars, there are two factors that can be used to substantiate the view that Huan-chih should have been Kānci. Firstly, it appears that Kānci had become an important city and an administrative centre as far back as the time of Asoka. (See, R. Gopalan, *History of the Pallavas of Kānci*, Madras, 1928, pp. 27-28.) Therefore, it is conceivable that Kānci attracted the attention of the Chinese. Secondly, the ancient pronunciation of Huang-chih (No. 21) was Yang-t' sie (see Bernhard Karlgren, *Analytic Dictionary of Chinese and Sino-Japanese*, Paris, 1923, p. 63 & p. 34), which bears a close phonetic similarity to the word Kānci.
7. HS., 12, 4a.
8. Su Chi-ching, "Han shu ti-li-chih Shi-cheng-pu-kuo Hsi-lan-shan shuo." *Nang-yang Hsueh-pao*, Vol. V., Pt. II., 1948, Singapore, p. 2.

However, the identification of Ssŭ-chen-pu remains a baffling question among historians. It has been identified with (a) Ethiopia, (b) Kitur (northeast of Calicut Bay), and (c) Sri Lanka, by different scholars. Prior to a discussion of these views, it is appropriate to reconstruct the ancient Chinese pronunciation of Ssŭ-chen-pu. According to Bernhard Karlgren, the eminent philologist who has done extensive research on the development of the Chinese language, in archaic Chinese Ssŭ-chen-pu (Fig. 1) was pronounced as Siæg-d'ieng-piüg.⁹

Identification of Ssŭ-chen-pu with Ethiopia seems unlikely.¹⁰ In the first place, if we accept the supposition that Huan-chih was in South India, then, locating Ssŭ-chen-pu in Africa is impossible. For the *Han shu* clearly states that Ssŭ-chen-pu was situated to the south of Huang-chih. As we know, Ethiopia is situated to the north-west of South India. Moreover, the geographical description given in the *Han shu* concerning these places suggests that Ssŭ-chen-pu was not located very far from Huang-chih. On the other hand, Ethiopia is a far distant place from South India than Sri Lanka. Secondly, in most editions of the *Han shu*, the first of the three characters for Ssŭ-chen-pu appears to have been written as 'ssŭ' (Fig. I, No. 2) and not as 'i' (Fig. I, No. 3) which is used by those who propose the Ethiopian theory. Thirdly, the Amoy pronunciation of the three Chinese characters (Fig. I, No. 4) as Ee-thenf-put does not represent the archaic form which was likely to have been used in China around 1st century A.D. The archaic form of the three Chinese characters reads as 'I-d'ieng-piüg.¹¹ Although I-d'ieng-piüg bears some phonetic similarity to the word Ethiopia, as shown above, reading the first character as 'i' (Fig. I, No. 3) may not be accurate.

The Second view that Ssŭ-chen-pu should be identified with Kitur (Kittapura or Kirtipura)¹² has similar weaknesses. Firstly, as mentioned above, the first Chinese character has to be read as 'Siæg' and not as 'Ki' as Toyohachi does. Secondly, the geographical location of Kitur is rather to the West of Kāncipura, and not to the south as mentioned in the *Han shu*. Thirdly, it is difficult to explain the reason why Wang Mang's envoys who were interested in securing treasures and curiosities for the imperial court, were attracted to a region which was neither famous for such treasures nor can be reached without sailing all the way around the Peninsula by passing Sri Lanka, which was famous for precious stones, ivory and pearls, from very early times.

9. Bernhard Karlgren, *Grammata Serica Recensa*, *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities*, no. 29., Stockholm, 1957, pp. 222, 258, 263.

10. This is the view of Chang Hsing-lan, See, *Chung-hsi chiao-tung shih-liao hui-pien*, Book VI, Peking 1930, pp. 39-40.

11. Karlgren, *Grammata Serica*, pp. 222, 251, 258, 263; *Analytic Dictionary*, p. 78.

12. Toyohachi, op. cit., p. 235., 240., and note 2.

The third probability that Ssü-chen-pu should be identified with Sri Lanka, has been strongly advocated by Professor Su Chi-ching.¹³ He argues that the proper pronunciation of Fig. I, No. 1 is Ssü-dien-pi. Professor Su states that archaic form of Fig. I, No. 2 was 'ssü', and that Fig. I, No. 5 is similar to Fig. I, No. 6 which had the same meaning and same pronunciation. In the Fukien dialect which still preserves a great deal of the archaic style, Fig. I, No. 6 is pronounced as 'dien', and therefore, Fig. I, No. 5 is read as 'dien'. He further believes that Fig. I, No. 7 is similar to Fig. I, No. 8 which is pronounced as 'pi'. Thus he renders the correct reading of Fig. I, No. 1 as Ssü-dien-pi and takes it to be the Chinese transcription of the Sihadīpa or Simhadvīpa.

Even though Professor Su's main argument sounds more convincing than the other two theories, it contains some shortcomings. Because, according to Karlgren, the ancient pronunciation of the Chinese character Fig. I, No. 2 was 'Siæg' and not 'ssü', and the correct rendering of Fig. I, No. 7 was 'piüg'. Su's reading of Fig. I, No. 5 as 'dien' comes closer to Karlgren's reconstruction of the same as 'd'ien'.

Based on Karlgren's reconstruction, the archaic pronunciation of Fig. I, No 1 should thus be 'Siæg-d'ien-piüg', which, bears a close phonetic similarity to Sihadīpa or Simhadvīpa. Therefore, 'Siæg-d'ien-piüg' should be a transliteration of the Sanskrit word Simhadvīpa or the Pāli word Sihadīpa and not a Chinese translation of the meaning of the word such as Shih-tzukuō (Lion country), which is used frequently in later Chinese sources such as the Dynastic Histories when referring to Sri Lanka. As shown by Paul Pelliot, similar Chinese renderings were used to denote Simhadvīpa or Sihadīpa in the second and third centuries A.D. as in the case of 'Siar-xā-d'iep' in the *Tsa-p'i-yü-ching* (*Samyuktāvadāna*), and, 'Siar-xā-g'iat' in another Chinese translation of the same work by an unknown author.¹⁴ Therefore, it is quite likely that the reference to Ssü-cheng-pu in the *Han shu* is to Sri Lanka.

There are other reasons one can adduce to substantiate such a notion. The contemporary king of Sri Lanka, Bhātika Abhaya (19 B.C.-A.D. 9), sent ambassadors to the court of the Roman Emperor Augustus.¹⁵ According to the Roman historian Pliny, who incorrectly attributed the Sri Lankan mission to the period of Emperor Claudius,¹⁶ the ambassadors spoke about trade relations between China and Sri Lanka and the father

13. Su Chi-ching, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-4.

14. Paul Pelliot, "Bulletin Critique" (F. Hirth and W. W. Rockhill's Translation of *Chu-fanchih*, *Toung Pao.*, Vol. XIII, 1921, pp. 462-463.

15. *Concise History of Ceylon*, 1961, p. 8., *University History of Ceylon* Vol. I, Pt. 1, 1959, p. 225.

16. According to the data found in an inscription discovered in the eastern desert of Egypt and a reference in the commentary to the *Mahāvamsa*, it is now agreed that this mission was sent during the time of Augustus. See, *Concise History*, *op. cit.*

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| 1. 巳程丕 | 11. 楛 |
| 2. 巳 | 12. 斯言周 |
| 3. 巳 | 13. 斯 |
| 4. 巳程丕 | 14. 楛言周 |
| 5. 程 | 15. 邑 |
| 6. 秩 | 16. 悒 |
| 7. 丕 | 17. 巴 |
| 8. 丕 | 18. 便 |
| 9. 葉言周 | 19. 便人 |
| 10. 葉 | 20. 擲 |

Fig. 1. Chinese characters relevant to the study of references to Sri Lanka in *Han shu* and *Hou Han shu*.

of one of the ambassadors had been to China.¹⁷ If Pliny's account is taken to be true, then, Sri Lanka was undoubtedly known to the Chinese; and, the possibility of Wang Mang's envoy's visiting Sri Lanka appears to be a reasonable supposition. Further, if the Chinese mission visited Kāñci in South India, it is quite possible that they touched at Sri Lanka which is situated along the sea route from India to China.

The purpose of Wang Mang's mission, according to the *Han shu*, was "to display the power and strength of the Chinese Emperor" and search for precious objects.¹⁸ Since Wang Mang had become really powerful by this time, it is quite possible that he initiated the mission to elevate his own image as well. Incidentally, both purposes of the mission could have been accomplished by visiting Sri Lanka. For, besides being famous for various treasures from early times, Sri Lanka also pursued an active foreign policy as seen by the despatch of envoys to Rome.

Another reference which merits our attention is found in the *Hou Han shu*, the succeeding volume to the *Han shu*. It mentions that during the sixth year of Yung-chien (A.D. 131) of Emperor Shun's reign, a tribute mission from Yeh-tiao appeared at the court.¹⁹ There are two interpretations concerning its location, i.e. (a) Java or Java-Sumatra,²⁰ and (b) Sri Lanka.¹⁹

Before embarking upon the discussion of the two views, as in the previous case, we should attempt to reconstruct the archaic rendering of Yeh-tiao. According to Karlgren, the two Chinese characters Fig. I, No. 9 were pronounced as 'Diap-diōg'²² However, it appears that Fig. I, No. 10 can be a copyist's error for Fig. I, No. 11, which was also pronounced as 'diap'; yet, unlike No. 10, No. 11 had another pronunciation—'siap'.²³ Therefore, it may be that the copyist, by mistake, replaced No 10 for No. 11 since he saw no difference in pronunciation of the two characters. If we accept the possibility of such an occurrence, then, we can reconstruct the archaic name appearing in the *Hou Han shu* as Diap-diōg or Siap-diōg.

17. Pliny's *Natural History*, trans. by H. Rackham, Vol. II, Book VI, London, 1938, p. 405.

18. HS 28 b, 32 b. In fact it is worth mentioning that the *Han shu* account mentions that the chief interpreter envoys of Huang-men who went on the sea journey to Ssu-chien-pu brought back to China with them large pearls slightly below two inches in circumference. As we know, some of the best natural pearls in the world were found in the north-western coastal belt of Sri Lanka.

19. *Hou Han shu*, (hereafter abbreviated as HHS), Chung-hua shu-chu edition, Shanghai 1936, ch. 116, p. 6 b.

20. G. Ferrand, "Ye-tiao Ssu-tiao et Java," *Journal Asiatique* Nov-Dec, 1916, pp. 523-54. B. Laufer, "Asbestos and Salamander," *Toung Pao*, Vol. XV, 1915, pp. 351-352. Paul Pelliot, "Deux itinéraires," *Bulletin de l' Ecole Française de Extrême-Orient*, tome. IV, 1904, pp. 226-229.

21. Toyohachi, op. cit., pp. pp. 541-578.

22. Karlgren, op. cit. p. 169, 280.

23. Karlgren, op. cit., p. 169.

The view that Yeh-tiao should be identified with Java is based on the phonetic similarity of Yeh-tiao to Yavadvipa, the ancient Sanskrit form for Java. Nevertheless, according to Karlgren, the reading of No. 10 as 'yeh' is a later one, and, during ancient times it was read as 'diap'. Accordingly, it does not bear any phonetic semblance to 'yava'. The same is true even if No 10 is replaced with No. 13. Therefore, the very basis of the thesis that Yeh-tiao is Java seems to be incorrect. Since the other arguments used to substantiate the Java theory are based on the modern reading of No. 9, they need not be discussed here.

The second proposition that No. 9 is a copyist's error for Ssü-tiao Fig. I, (No. 12)²⁵ is also unacceptable. For, the possibility of copying No. 10 for No. 13 is very remote. It may well be that sometimes in modern Chinese No. 10 is also pronounced as 'she' in reference to place names, and therefore it could be a misprint for No. 13; yet, as shown above, reading No. 10 as 'she' in archaic Chinese is not feasible. Thus, it is superfluous to go along with that argument.

On the other hand, if one accepts the reconstruction suggested above that No. 10 should be a copyist's error for No. 11, it can be argued that it is somewhat synonymous with No. 12. Because, the second pronunciation of No. 11 as 'siap' has a close phonetic resemblance to the archaic rendering of No. 13 as 'sieg.'

The description given in the Chinese work the *I-wu chih* concerning Ssü-tiao mentions plains which light up with fires in the Spring and Summer but die away during Autumn and Winter. It further says that the fires do not destroy the trees.²⁶ The *Lo-yang-chia-lan-chi*, another Chinese source, also mentions that there is a kind of tree in Ssü-tiao which does not get destroyed by the fires there.²⁷ Ferrand identified these fires with volcanoes of Java. Yet, the important thing here is that neither do volcanoes erupt seasonally, nor would any trees be left after a volcanic eruption.

On the contrary, in some parts of the Dry Zone in Sri Lanka, even up to the present day, farmers light up fires to burn the weeds in the Dry Zone forests for chena cultivation, generally during Spring and Summer seasons, as it was done in the past. During Autumn and Winter, the fires are not seen since crops are cultivated. In ancient Sri Lanka the Chena cultivation existed along with irrigated cultivation.²⁸ The Chinese reference

24. Toyohachi, op. cit. pp. 541-578.

25. Karlgren, op. cit.; p. 230.

26. B. Laufer, op. cit., Chinese text and English translation. The passage from *I-wu*, ch h is quoted in *T' ai-p' ing yü-lan*, 1812 edition. ch. 820, p. 9. and in *Wei-chih* ch. 4., p. 1.

27. M. Cheyannes, 'Bulletin Critique - P. Pelliot's Le Fou-nan', *Journal Asiatique*, Nov-Dec. 1903, p. 531.

28. *Concise History*, pp. 95-97. *University History*, Vol. 1, pt. 1, pp. 216-217.

to the fire-proof or fire-hardy trees, the bark of which, according to the *I-wu chih*, was used to make clothes, could be attributed to some tree grown in the Dry Zone of Sri Lanka.²⁹ Therefore, it is possible that the reference to *Ssü-tiao* (No. 12) can be taken as being synonymous to *She-tiao* (No. 14) in the *Hou Han shu*.

If we accept the contention that 'Siap-diög' is same as 'Sieg-diög', then it follows that Sino-Sri Lankan diplomatic relations which seem to have begun in the 1st century A.D. continued during the second century A.D. Some details of the mission from *She-tiao* are found in the *Tung-kuan han chi* which can be translated as follows :

"In the sixth year (of Yung Chien),³⁰ the king of the *She-tiao* country, sent envoy Shih Hui, who reached the imperial gates to offer tribute. The Han (ruler), (in order) to make I (Fig I, No. 15), the king of *She-tiao*, return to righteousness, bestowed upon Shih Hui, his envoy, a purple silk cord."³¹

The *Hou Han shu* itself mentions that the Chinese Emperor bestowed on the envoy from *She-tiao* a purple coloured silk cord.³² Here, it should be noted that the account given in the *Tung-kuan han chi* must have omitted the reference to the gold seal, for, according to the Chinese custom it is very unlikely that only a purple silk cord was bestowed on the envoy by the Emperor.

It seems that the Chinese character Fig. I, No. 15 in the *Tung-kuan han chi* is a copyist's error for No. 16³³ or No. 17.³⁴ No. 16 was read as 'iep' in the same way as No. 15, and a meaning of 'being forceful'. No. 17 was pronounced as 'pa'. Both these reconstructions make sense when we identify the contemporary king of Sri Lanka as Gajabāhu I who was also known as Gajabā (A.D. 112—134). As we know, the word Gajabāhu or Gajabā means "the one whose arms are as strong as an elephant." If the correct Chinese character was No. 16, then, it was a translation of the meaning of Gajabāhu. On the other hand, if the correct rendering was No. 17, it was a transcription of the final syllable of Gajabā—'ba'.

A *Hou Han shu* commentator takes 'pien' (No. 18) as the name of king of *Shè-tiao*.³⁵ It should be taken, however, to mean "convenient" one of the original meanings of the word. If that is accepted, it can be

29. The writer wishes, to thank Mr. W. R. H. Perera, the former Conservator of Forests, who enlightened him on this matter. According to Mr. Perera, the *Atalu*, *Eulu*, *Fucum-beriya*, *Kuhata* and *Nelli* found in the Dry Zone forests are extremely fire hardy and survive fires. It is also worth noting that the bark of the *Kahata* tree is used even today to make ropes and weave baskets etc.

30. 131 A. D.

31. *Tung-kuan han chi*, ch. 3, p. 3a.

32. *HHS*, ch. 116, p. 6b.

33. Karlgren, op. cit., p. 181.

34. Karlgren, p. 29.

35. *HHS*, op. cit.

considered as a shortened form for 'pien-jen' (No. 19), which means "a convenient person" (substitute). Because, the Chinese sources quoted above specifically mention that the king of Shê-tiao was substituted by his envoy; and, the name of the king was either 'Iep' or 'Pa'.

Moreover, if we accept the earlier mentioned thesis that the Chinese mission despatched by Wang Mang visited Sri Lanka as early as the beginning of 1st century A. D., then it is not surprising that the Sri Lankans sent a mission to the Chinese imperial court a century later. It is also worth noting that Gajabāhu I, who was one of the powerful king of Sri Lanka, had a strong army at his command, He is even described having invaded South India in retaliation for an invasion by the Cōlas during his father's reign.³⁶

Further, it may also be that Gajabāhu sought the friendship of the Emperor of China in an effort to increase his stature and impress his people. It is reasonable to assume that by this time, the Indians and Sri Lankans had acquired a considerable knowledge about China. There is evidence to show that there were trade relations between China and India, particularly with South India,³⁷ via the sea route during the 1st century A. D. According to one scholar, "it is beyond doubt that in later Han times Sino-Indian economic intercourse often resorted to the sea route."³⁸

It should not have been a difficult task for a powerful king such as Gajabāhu I to send an embassy to China. The fact that the tribute mission from Shê-tiao is mentioned more than once in the *Hou Han shu*, itself indicates that it was considered as an important one by the Chinese. The reason would have been that it was sent by a powerful king of South Asia.

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36. *University History*, Vol. I., pt. 1., p. 184. See also, Ranaweera Gunawardana, "Dakṣiṇa Bhāratiya Akramana," (South Indian Invasions), in Amaradasa Liyanagemage and Ranaweera Gunawardana ed. *Anurādhapura Yugaya*, Second revised edition, Colombo 1965, p. 118.
37. Wang Chung-wu, "Nanhai Trade" *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. XXXI, Pt. 2, pp. 20-24. K. A. N. Sastri, "The beginning of intercourse between India and China," *Indian Historical Quarterly*, Vol. XIV, 1938, pp. 286-287.
38. Ying Shih-yu, *Trade and Expansion in Han China*, Berkely, 1967, p. 176.