

**CHINA-SRI LANKA: TRADE AND DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS**  
**INCLUDING THE VOYAGES OF CHENG-HO**

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Sri Lanka, placed as she is in the Indian Ocean strategically on the great sea routes of the days of old and today between the Western world and India and the Far East, and on the route to Australia as well, naturally attracted a number of sea farers and seafaring vessels from ancient times.<sup>1</sup> Sailing ships of older and medieval times found a haven in the port of Trincomalee, known as Gokanna in those days, or in one of the several smaller bays, anchorages and roadsteads of the island, which are abundant. From about the second century when Sri Lanka became known to Greek and Arab sailors she became a port of call and an emporium of the maritime trade between the West and the East.<sup>2</sup> Contacts with China too can be traced back to an early date, and the Ambassadors who called on the Court of Claudius in the first century had commented on the commerce that generally prevailed between Sri Lanka and China.<sup>3</sup> Among the numerous foreign visitors to Sri Lanka who left behind records of their impressions which are so useful to reconstruct the island's history from ancient times are several accounts from China which give evidence of the early relations between Sri Lanka and China, so far away in the East.

Embassies often laden with gifts from the king of Sri Lanka visited China in the first and second centuries and such visits grew even more frequent after the fourth century.<sup>4</sup> The great traveler Monk from China, Fa Hsien, visited Sri Lanka in 411 and stayed on for two years in the Island. He left behind an account of his travels wherein he describes the island which he called the land of the lion.<sup>5</sup> His account of his sojourn in Sri Lanka is of great interest. He reached Sri Lanka after voyaging for fourteen days from Tamruk, situated at the

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<sup>1</sup> See for accounts University of Ceylon, Vol. 1 Part 1, (Colombo, 1959) pp. 89.

<sup>2</sup> See for trade *ibid.*, pp. 223-227.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

<sup>4</sup> See John M. Senaveratne, « China-Sinhalese Relations in the Early and Middle Ages » in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (Ceylon) Vol. xxiv, No. 68, 1915-16, (Colombo, 1916), pp. 74-105.

<sup>5</sup> See University of Ceylon, *History of Ceylon*, op. cit. pp. 15, 18, 103-4, 291-2, 378-9.

mouth of the Ganges River in neighbouring India. In his description, Fa Hsien notes that the island was fifty *yojanas* from East to West and thirty *yojanas* from North to South. Around the island were a nearly hundred small islands, all subject to the main island, and there were no difference of summer and winter noticeable. The vegetation was luxuriant and cultivation was not confined to seasons. Fa Hsien travelled back to China from Sri Lanka voyaging in a large merchant vessel which carried over 200 people. This account of Fa Hsien has been of perennial interest to scholars of Sri Lanka's early connections with China because Fa Hsien had spent sometimes the island and had been a careful observer.

Sri Lanka's link with China continued throughout the early centuries in a constant but uninterrupted manner. Four Embassies from Sri Lanka had called at the Chinese court during the first half of the fifth century along.<sup>6</sup> Eight Bhikkunis from the island reached Nanking in 426 and three more in 429. And for the first time in China an ordination of women was held in 434. It is reasonable to assume that the visits of Bhikkunis to China from Sri Lanka had indeed connection with this ordination. In 456 five Sinhalese monks, one of whom was reputed to be a famous and eminent sculptor, called on the Chinese Emperor. These visits were of a religious and cultural nature obviously.

By the second quarter of the sixth century clearly Sri Lanka had emerged as the Centerport of the sea trade between the West and the Far East. Chinese vessels, and ships from other lands of the Far East, came into the harbours of Sri Lanka conveying their cargoes of silk especially while from the West to arrive vessels and the merchandise of the Persians and the Axumites. In the ports of Sri Lanka these mariners from distant lands as well as merchants from India exchanges their goods and also purchased the products of Sri Lanka. The Christian Topography of Cosmos Indicopleustes written around this time affords a long description of Sri Lanka called the Island of Taprobane.<sup>7</sup> Because of her central position Sri Lanka had developed into a great emporium and was receiving wares from all the trading marts and in tum distributing them all over the world. Sri Lanka was indeed a mercantile exchange and a busy resort of ships from diverse parts of India, Persia, Ethiopia and from China in the distant Far East By the middle of the seventh century the Arabians had gained a domination over the ocean routes to the west and handed all that trade but the Chinese continued to retain control of the seaborne traffic to the Far East. Sri Lanka however, lay at an

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<sup>6</sup> See on Embassies *ibid.*, pp. 302, 362, 379, 383, and in Vol. I, Part II, pp. 5-7.

<sup>7</sup> See for summary of account *ibid.*, pp. 18, 63, 292, 362-36.

intermediate point in the trade route from the East to the West and trades coming from both directions met in the island and sold and exchanged their wares and goods.

The exchange of Embassies between the Sinhalese and the Chinese continued to take place during the seventh and eighth centuries too. In fact contact with Sri Lanka was constant and a Chinese text mentions the visit to Sri Lanka of a learned Indian monk of princely status called Vajrabodhi 718/798.<sup>8</sup> He visited Anuradhapura and then proceeded to Rohana in Southern Sri Lanka and thereafter to Adam's Peak in the Central region, which was then a wild area.

Between neighbouring India and distant China from very early times there had been continuous intercourse both through the land route and the sea route, and this intercourse had soon extended to Sri Lanka as well.<sup>9</sup> Till the gradual spread of Buddhism into China and neighboring lands provided, however, a further incentive which spurred the development of a friendly and continuing relationship between Sri Lanka and China. Not only did the religious minded in pursuit of the eternal verities and salvation from earthly woes come to Sri Lanka from China but there were also more material minded traders and travellers in the pursuit of their various more mundane interests. Similarly, there were monks and nuns from Sri Lanka and South Asia who wended their way on spiritual missions in spite of the haggard and perils of travel over the ocean in those days.

The record of this intercourse has been inscribed in numerous Chinese words from very early times.<sup>10</sup> Some of these records furnish only incidental references while other supply significant and valuable information on religious, cultural, economic and political matters. These records and references can be categorized into four different classes. The well-known are records bequeathed by the religious minded travellers. For example, there are the popularly known accounts of the travellers, Fa Hsien in the fifth century and Hsuan Tsang and Tsing in the seventh century. But of these the last two did not visit Sri Lanka and the third does not say anything very much about the island. Of course, comparatively the account of Fa Hsien is so useful.

A matter of special interest is that three monks from India, Gunavarman, Vajrabodhi and his pupil Amoghavajra passed through Sri Lanka on their way to China. The Chinese

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., pp. 18, 64.

<sup>9</sup> See Henry P. Abayasekera, « A History of long, fruitfulties » in *Daily News*, Monday, October 01, 1990.

<sup>10</sup> See on records *University of Ceylon, History of Ceylon*, op. cit., pp 4-5, 288, 296-2, and Part II, pp. 32, 650-1, 664-9.

accounts of the lives of these monks mention their visits in the seventh century to the island and were written by Yuan Chao. Another Chinese account entitled "The Biography of Bhikkunis", written in the sixth century, refers to the nuns who went out from Sri Lanka to China in order to inaugurate an order of nuns there. For any study of the early contacts between Sri Lanka and China in the religious and cultural fields these records, although at times not exhaustive prove useful and are indispensable. Moreover, such records illustrate the great interest in Sri Lanka to Chinese.

There are also accounts handed down by travellers, merchants, geographers and soldiers from China which embody references to Sri Lanka. Some of the principal works are "The Itinerary of Ke Nee's Travels in the Western Regions of the tenth century, a "General Account of the Island Foreigners" by Wang Ta-Yuani in the Fifteenth century, "Description of the Western Countries" of the fourteenth Century, "Foreign Geography" and "A History of Foreign Nations". Two Chinese works deal with the campaigns of Cheng Ho, the eunuch sent to Sri Lanka by a Ming Emperor, entitled "Description of the Star Raft" by Fei Hsin who himself was with the expedition, and "Description of the coasts of the Ocean" by Ma Huan, a Chinese Muslim who was attached to the expeditions as an interpreter. Another important and similar type of work was compiled by Chau-Ju-Kua, a Chinese inspector of foreign trade, which sheds light on the trade of the Asian regions. But more valuable are the works of those who had accompanied the expeditions of Cheng Ho.

Additionally among Chinese records which inform the scholar of Sri Lanka's connections with China are the official records that were maintained by the Chinese emperors. Those compilations refer to Embassies dispatched and received as well as other political connections. From these records, which exist from the fifth century onwards are some of used for students as they are helpful in the synchronisms they provide. Apart from these arrivals of dynasties, there are found other works of history: some of these are merely compilations but references to Sri Lanka appear among them occasionally. The Cyclopaedia of History, "The Taiping Digest of History", "The Great Depository of National Archives", "Antiquarian Researcher" by Ma Tuan tin in the Fourteenth century, "The Ocean of Gems", "Miscellaneous Record", a supplement to the "Antiquarian Researchers" called, "History of the Middle Ages" with yet a supplement to it, and "A topographical Account of the Manchu Dynasty" are works of history which, prove to be value to the scholar. Evidently, there are as we can see, a fair number of records of varying importance which enlighten the scholar engaged in tracing the

links between China and Sri Lanka in the early centuries. Furthermore, such references in these records in faraway China indicate the Chinese interest in Sri Lanka.

Well authenticated records from a large number of sources, mainly Chinese, some Greek and Roman, others Italian and Indian and a few from Sri Lanka too contribute to provide a story of a long and fruitful relationship between Sri Lanka and China.<sup>11</sup> The relations between the two countries were more often of a religious, cultural and commercial nature while politically China seems to have wielded suzerainty over the island of Sri Lanka for about half century during the later period. This is singular in the relations with Sri Lanka. Moreover, local evidence in the form of rock inscriptions and coins illustrates that Sri Lanka had relations with China from very early times and bear out the evidence from China.

It may be pertinent to examine in detail some of the instances where Sri Lanka and China have had inter-country relations so as to understand in a fuller way the Sino-Sri Lanka links over the ages of the past. During the reign of Mahanama who ascended the throne in 406 the celebrated pilgrim Fa Hsien from China visited the island.<sup>12</sup> In his search of Buddhist scriptures, Fa Hsien travelled to many countries and when he broke journey in Sri Lanka he stayed on for nearly two years which shows his remarkable interest in the land. From the account of his travels, the reader gains valuable information about the state of Buddhism in the island and about the conditions of this country and especially of Anuradhapura. Furthermore, from the visit of the Chinese pilgrims it becomes clear that China knew much of Sri Lanka as a Buddhist island and had a great interest in it.

Chinese sources demonstrate that there had been contact between China and Sri Lanka even earlier during the reigns of Buddhadasa (337-365) and his two sons Upatissa I (365-406) and Mahanama (406- 428).<sup>13</sup> One account tells us that an Embassy with an image of the Buddha from the king of Sri Lanka to the Emperor Hiao-ou-ti of the Tsin dynasty arrived in China during the period 405-418, after ten years delay on the way. Again the King of Sri Lanka, Ksatriya Mahanaman, has sent a letter along with gifts to the Chinese court in 428 while two Embassies from Sri Lanka bearing articles from the island reached China in 430 and 435 respectively. Reference is also made to the arrival of nuns from Sri Lanka for the ordination of Chinese women. The relations between Sri Lanka and China, however, were not merely cultural or on account of religion.

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<sup>11</sup> Henry P. Abayasekera, op. cit.

<sup>12</sup> *University of Ceylon, History of Ceylon*, op. cit., pp. 290-2

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*,

The indications are that there was a fair amount of trade too. At this time, Sri Lanka was the focus of an extensive entre port trade stretching on one direction as far as China and on the other direction towards Persia and beyond. From China was received for distribution in the outer parts Silks, aloes, clove wood and sandalwood among other similar goods. Gifts taken from Sri Lanka to China consisted mainly of pearls, precious stones, filigreed gold and valances: and these articles could well have been traded too to other lands. Fa Hsien refers to a Chinese merchant who gave an offering of a fan of white silk at the Abhayagiri monastery,<sup>14</sup> which illustrates how prized silk from China had been.

Moreover, as noted earlier, Sri Lanka played an important part in the transactions of international trade from the early centuries. Cosmos Indicepleustes at the beginning of the sixth century, as we have already seen, recorded that Sri Lanka received imports from all seats of commerce and exported articles to them in return. It was in the emporia of Sri Lanka that sea faring vessels coming in from Western lands received the merchandise that had been brought to the island in Chinese junks. Sri Lanka while serving as a distributing centre for goods of other lands, also exported her own produce to the East as well as to the West in turn, and as Cosmas mentions ships from Sri Lanka sailed in all directions across the Ocean.

In such a context, naturally the series of Embassies which the King of Sri Lanka dispatched to China between 405 and 762 would have had trade too as one of their objectives. Such an Embassy was sent during the reign of Silakala (518-531) to China, according to Chinese texts. Among the “tribute” given by Sinhalese kings to Emperor of China are pearls, filigreed gold, gems for necklaces, ivory and valances. An impediment to this rather regular trade and continuing cultural relations between China and Sri Lanka came after the mid eighth century when the Malay empire of Sri Vijaya rose up and then maintained regular commercial contacts with China cutting off the links with Sri Lanka which were, again resumed only in the fifteenth century.<sup>15</sup>

The records of the Chinese pilgrim visitor, Fa Hsien, a reference to which has been made already provide useful information on the religious practices in Sri Lanka, particularly of those which specially appealed to foreigners such as the Chinese. Fa Hsien arrived in the island a century after the tooth relic had been received and his record furnishes a graphic

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 363

description of the festival associated with the reverence paid to the sacred relic.<sup>16</sup> The cult of the tooth relic had gripped the minds of the Buddhists in the island and the king displayed remarkable enthusiasm in the worship of the relic during this time. More significantly, other Buddhist countries appear to have envied Sri Lanka for her possession of this Sacred Relic, and the Embassy to China from the island during the reign of King Mahanama presented to the Chinese Emperor a model of the shrine of the tooth.

While Sri Lanka sent from time to time embassies to China forging both cultural and commercial links the island was also in the cultural sphere as much as in the commercial sphere a conduit of relations between other countries and China. Eminent Mahayana teachers visited Sri Lanka on their journey to the Far East from India.<sup>17</sup> Gunavarman from the royal family of Kashmir and Vajrabodi who arrived in the island after having sojourned in the South Indian Pallava Court and visited Sri Lanka again were two of the religious personalities who after being enriched by their experiences in Sri Lanka went to China. Again Amoghavajra, a pupil of Vajrabodhi; presumed by some to be a native of Sri Lanka was sent as an envoy to China by King Aggabodhi VI in 746. Such emissaries took into China what they had gathered about Buddhism and Buddhist practices in Sri Lanka during their itinerary and their missions were evidently cultural as well as religious. Interest at times of the Chinese scholar pilgrim monks coincided with a ferment of Mahayana Buddhist activities in Sri Lanka and South Asia, India in particular.

In respect of commerce an interesting detail can be gleaned from the *Manasollasa*, an encyclopedic work composed either by or during the reign of the Hoysala king Somesvara III (1126 - 1138).<sup>18</sup> This record while detailing a long list of fabrics suitable for use by royalty along with their places of origin, mentions textiles of Sri Lankan origin together with stuffs which came from China. This juxtaposition can be better comprehended when it is known that during these centuries' merchants from foreign countries such as India, Arabia and China frequented the shores of Sri Lanka, and some of them established their trading posts in the island and traded in the articles of diverse lands. Moreover, according to the account given by Edrisi, the Arab Geographer, who wrote in 1154 in the reign of Parakramabahu, ships from China and other distant lands used to call on the island bringing in the wines of Iraq and Fars, which were purchased by the king and sold again to his subjects. The state itself was involved

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p. 379

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 383

<sup>18</sup> *University of Ceylon, History of Ceylon*, op. cit. Part II, p. 550

in commercial undertakings and Sri Lanka was a veritable mercantile mart and from the island could be got not only indigenous products but also exotic articles.

Around the year 1287 there is again evidence of the great interest in the Eastern lands in the veneration of the Buddhist relics found in the island. From Chinese sources it becomes evident that Kublai Khan had sent an envoy to Sri Lanka asking for the alms bowl of the Buddha, but he failed to get it.<sup>19</sup> In 1282, the bowl relic and the Tooth Relic were in Sri Lanka but the king of Sri Lanka was naturally unwilling to part with the Bowl relic even to please the mighty Kublai Khan, as much as the Chinese. Kublai Khan too might have recognized the value of the sacred relics of Buddhism, and wanted them.

Among the connections that had prevailed in the past between Sri Lanka and China the remarkable episode dealing with the arrival of Cheng Ho assumes special significance in the history of the island.<sup>20</sup> Most of the Sinhalese chronicles seem to have overlooked this important event in the history of the island and it is worthwhile dealing with this visit of Cheng Ho at a little length and in some detail. As a visit of the Chinese in those days and owing to what took place as a consequence the episode itself is unusual.

The Ming rulers of China had engaged themselves in despatching maritime expeditions from the East. These ambitious oversea undertakings of the Chinese aimed to reach into the littoral states of the Indian Ocean where one could garner most of the commodities of the world trade of those days since all these goods were then being carried across the Indian Ocean. Under the Chinese emperors seven such great maritime expeditions were sent to the Indian Ocean beginning in 1405 sometime after the third Ming Emperor, Yung-Ho or Cheng Tsu had ascended the Chinese imperial throne. The despatch of expeditions during this period was probably an aspect of the foreign policy pursued by the Chinese emperor Yung-Lo. Yung-Lo was endeavoring to expand the prevailing system of tribute payment and an objective of these expeditions was to draw more countries into this tribute system. Moreover, Emperor Yung-Lo was keen on seeking out new areas for Chinese trade and hence used these expeditions as exploratory missions. Cheng Ho is credited with having travelled as far even up to Africa and brought back strange animals and other treasures which show that the voyages of Cheng Ho did have an exploratory mission behind them.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., pp. 632-3.

<sup>20</sup> G.P.V.Somararatna, "Grand Eunuch HO and Ceylon" in the *Journal of the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, New Series, Vol. XV. (Colombo, 1971) pp. 3- 47 and K.M.M.Werake, "A Re-examination of Chinese Relations with Sri Lanka during the 15th century A.D." in ed. C.R.de Silva and Sirima Kiribamune, K W. Goonewardene Felicitation Volume, (Peradeniya, 1989) pp.89-102.

In China, as a rule, foreign trade came under the close supervision of the Emperor and the officials of the inner court. Cheng Ho was attached to the inner court and it is likely that he set out on these westward sea voyages and missions motivated by the desire to expand commerce. This understanding is further strengthened when it becomes evident that the Chinese bureaucrats influenced by Confucius who were not favorably disposed towards commerce opposed the expeditions of Cheng Ho.

But a more important factor, and one vital for us to understand these expeditions better, which influenced the decisions of the Ming Emperor to send out Cheng Ho across the seas was the desire to spread the power and prestige of the Ming Empire abroad. Chinese (Han) rule over China had been reestablished with the Ming dynasty, after almost a century of subordination to Mongol suzerainty, and a prestigious and novel venture such as that performed by the great maritime expeditions of Cheng Ho would revive the national fervour and consciousness of the Chinese people. The Mongols had built up huge armad invaded Japan and Java, and demonstrated their naval strength. In turn, Chinese emperor Yung Lo seems to have pursued a similar foreign policy in his time designed at surpassing the maritime achievements of the Mongols. Therefore, a grand demonstration of Chinese sea power was utilized not only to instill a sense of pride and confidence among the Chinese but also to demonstrate to foreign powers that it would be precedent for them to forge friendly relations with the Ming Empire. In Sri Lanka, the Chinese version of the trilingual inscription of Galle makes clear that the missions of Cheng Ho were despatched to proclaim the Ming mandate to foreigners and hence this idea of asserting the Chinese emperor's eminence is obvious in these oversea missions.

It is in the light of what has been inferred above in regard to the Chinese expeditions and Chinese policy that we have to study the Sino-Sri Lankan relations of the fifteenth century. Viewed in such a context, it becomes obvious that the visits of Cheng Ho to Sri Lanka were not unconnected and ordinary episodes carried out in the course of sea faring abroad, but these visits formed a deliberate and integral aspect of the foreign policy of the Ming dynasty.

Most of the Chinese sources which refer to the first voyage of Cheng Ho do not mention Sri Lanka by name among the other countries visited by him; two of the sources however, clearly mention that Sri Lanka was visited by Cheng Ho on his first voyage in 1405 AD. These two sources are the Pien-i-tien and the Hsi-yu-chi Fu-chu, and both give more or

less similar accounts about the visit. The Pien-i-tien says that Cheng-Ho attempted to dissuade the king of Sri Lanka from observing heretical practices and tried to persuade him to adhere to the teachings of the Buddha while the Hsi-yu-chi Fu-chu states that Cheng Ho's objective in coming to Sri Lanka was to take away the Tooth Relic. Finally, however, both accounts agree that as the king of Sri Lanka adopted a hostile attitude towards Cheng Ho he had to leave the island in despair, his mission having got frustrated.

It is evident that Cheng Ho undoubtedly visited Sri Lanka on his first expedition. Furthermore, the Ming Shih in recording the second expedition of Cheng Ho in 1409 to Sri Lanka uses the word again (*tsai*) which clearly shows that Cheng Ho had come to Sri Lanka before during his first voyage. In addition, if Cheng Ho had come to take away the Tooth Relic the unfriendly attitude of the Sri Lankan ruler towards him is easily understood because the ownership of the Relic would have given one the right to rule over the island. Any attempt to take away the Tooth Relic would have meant to the King of Sri Lanka a hostile act and a move to deprive him of the right to rule and also to usurp the sovereignty of the island.

From an inscriptional record it is known that in the seventh year of Yung-Lo, (1409) Cheng Ho went in charge of the Chinese fleet to the countries he had visited before, and that his route had been via Sri Lanka. The record further states that the king of Sri Lanka was guilty of disrespect towards the Chinese and plotted against the Chinese fleet but providentially the plot was discovered and the king himself captured. Thereafter, the unfortunate king was conveyed to the Chinese Emperor in the ninth year of Yung Lo (1411) as a prisoner. Later, however, the king was pardoned by the Emperor and returned to Sri Lanka. This account in the inscription is borne out by the account in the Ming-Shih but in regard to the commencement of this second voyage of Chong Ho there is a slight difference in the dates given in the two accounts. This discrepancy in the dates could well have occurred because the Ming-Shih might have recorded the date of the imperial order given to undertake the expedition as the date of the commencement of it, and the discrepancy in dates does not detract the validity of the rest of the accounts.

Again a contemporary Chinese work, mentions that during the seventh year of Yung-Lo (1409), Cheng Ho visited Sri Lanka, made offering to a temple in the south of the island, bestowed gifts on the king and chiefs of Sri Lanka and set up an inscription. This would mean the Galle trilingual inscription which refers to some offerings by Cheng Ho at the shrine of Upulvan of Devundara, which was a place of worship to both Buddhists and Hindus.

During the third expedition of Cheng Ho in 1409-1411, two important events seem to have taken place in the history of Sri Lanka. Cheng Ho bestowed gifts on the king and chiefs made offerings to a Buddhist temple, and had set up an inscription in 1409. Afterward, there had been a confrontation with Alagakkonara in 1411.

From Chinese sources, it is evident that during the two visits of Cheng Ho to the island prior to his encounter with Alagakkonara, the activities of Cheng Ho had aroused the suspicion of Alagakkonara. The unsuccessful attempt of Cheng Ho to gain the Tooth Relic, the distribution of gifts to the chiefs, and the setting up of an inscription are all acts which Alagakkonara could consider as interference in the internal politics of Sri Lanka by Cheng Ho. By offering gifts to chiefs, Cheng Ho could have endeavored to buy over the allegiance of the local chiefs while inscriptions are normally set up only by the king of Sri Lanka or his closest officials and here a foreigner has dared to do it. The setting up of an inscription could have implied the wresting of control over the island. Moreover, according to the scholar Joseph Needham, Cheng Ho had personally handed over the gifts to representatives of Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims which would have meant an attempt to wean them and win over their friendship. Considered in the above light, Alagakkonara had enough suspicion and fear to be hostile to Cheng Ho and he cannot be blamed altogether for his attitude in the way in which the Chinese sources seem to do.

Cheng Ho was obviously endeavouring to persuade Sri Lanka to accept the supremacy of the Ming Emperor of China. His action falls in line with the foreign policy that was being pursued then in China. But the manner in which Cheng Ho attempted to establish the supremacy of the Chinese emperor was provocative and in spite of the fact that gifts were bestowed on the king of Sri Lanka understandably and naturally, he showed an unfriendly disposition to the Chinese admiral. Unfortunately, however, Alagakkonara did not anticipate the dangers that could follow from his actions.

The Ming Emperor while using as a rule peaceful and friendly means of persuading neighbouring rulers and foreign countries to pledge their allegiance to China did not eschew the use of force if necessary to assert suzerainty over unwilling potentates. Alagakkonara's attempt to capture Cheng Ho was viewed as a challenge to Chinese imperial power and as an affront to the Ming Emperor. Under similar circumstances elsewhere the Chinese adopted firm and coercive measures to assert their authority. Cheng Ho had fought and defeated a powerful Chinese pirate who had robbed merchants and obstructed Cheng Ho's fleet at Sri

Vijaya. Likewise, while on his fourth expedition Cheng Ho militarily overcame Sui-Kan-La who had forcibly overthrown a pro-Chinese ruler of Simatra. Even against Japan, the Ming rulers had employed threats and force to make Japan submit to Chinese suzerainty, and the use of coercion against Sri Lanka was not strange.

Accordingly, Cheng Ho encountered and confronted Alagakkonara in early 1411. From the account in the Pien-i-tien the forces of Alagakkonara followed a clever battle strategy in this encounter but his plans were informed to the enemy by those on his own side and this enabled Cheng Ho to preempt him and gain victory. Alagakkonara had failed to contend with enemies within his ranks: it is evident that foes could well have been in his own camp because of the severe power struggle among members of the Alakeswara family.

Alagakkonara was taken captive to China along with his family and court. The Chinese Emperor pardoned Alagakkonara but decided to replace him with someone else as ruler of Sri Lanka. Accordingly, the Chinese Emperor wanted the captives from Sri Lanka to select a virtuous person from among their tribe or race to be appointed king. All these captives chose a person identified by Professor K. M. M. Werake as Parakramabahu VI<sup>21</sup> who was later displaced by Parakramabahu VII.

After ascending the throne, Parakramabahu decided to establish relations with China: a mission headed for China in 1416 to appease the Emperor, to win his support and to ingratiate himself with the Chinese Emperor since he had overthrown in a struggle for power the appointee of the Chinese Emperor. The Chinese record, Ming-Shih, states that in the fifth. Year of Hsuan-te (1430), Cheng Ho was again despatched to Sri Lanka on a pacifying mission. Once in power, Parakramabahu VII when he was secure in the saddle was not keen in continuing relations with China and it is because of this withdrawal evidently that the Ming Emperor had to despatch Cheng Ho to Sri Lanka once more. Cheng Ho wanted to impress upon Parakramabahu the benefits he could gain by maintaining continuous cordial relations with China. Cheng Ho also sought to convince Parakramabahu (by an exhibition of naval might) of the need to resume the despatch of Embassies to China. The Liu-Chia-Chiang inscription speaking of the expedition of 1430 stated that Cheng Ho came to Sri Lanka along with his fleet "to make known the imperial commands". Nevertheless, Cheng Ho's mission still seemed to have been unsuccessful because he had to undertake yet another trip to Sri Lanka again in 1432 to realize his objective.

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<sup>21</sup> K. M. M. Werake, op. cit.,

The Nan-Shan Temple Slab inscription records a detailed account of the lands visited by Cheng-Ho. He arrived in Sri Lanka on 28 November 1432. The Lin-Chia-Chiang inscription corroborates this mentioning the expedition but does not mention the countries visited. Obviously, it was only after two attempts that Cheng Ho was successful in impressing on the king of Sri Lanka the wisdom of maintaining a friendly but subordinate relationship with China. The Ming-Shih mentions that a mission carrying tribute from Sri Lanka called on China in the eighth year of Hsuan-te (1433). Cheng Ho seems to have successfully compelled Parakramabahu VII of Sri Lanka to realize the perils of ignoring the wishes of the Chinese Emperor to assert his suzerainty over the island. Parakramabahu had to yield.

From 1433 relations between Sri Lanka and China grew more regular and cordial. The Ming-Shih informs us that tribute carrying missions from Sri Lanka were received in China in the first and tenth year of Cheng T'Sung (1436 and 1445); and in the third year of Tien Shun (1459). From the Chinese sources it is generally clear that Sri Lanka did not despatch missions with tribute after 1459. Sri Lanka was by then firmly united under Parakramabahu VII and there was no noticeable threat to the security of Sri Lanka from external sources and it is likely that Parakramabahu VII had grown more confident and saw no purpose in sending any more missions to China. The despatch of tribute to the Chinese Emperor from distant Sri Lanka, however, implied in no way any real or practical subservience to the Chinese sovereign nor did it lessen the prestige of the ruler of Sri Lanka. It was a mere nominal acknowledgement of suzerainty and seemed to have on the other hand helped the Sri Lankan ruler to gain commercial and political benefits that accrued to him from an alliance with the powerful ruler of China.

It is interesting and informative to note that the items of tribute sent by Sri Lanka to China consisted of pearls and precious stones taken by minister Jayapala in the mission of 1445. In 1449, the Sri Lankan envoys offered precious stones and crystals. From a Chinese record Hsi Yang Chao-Kung Tien lu which gives detailed accounts of the tribute offered to the Chinese emperor by countries in the western ocean it is known that among the several articles taken to China by the emissaries of Sri Lanka were precious stones, coral, gold, crystals, baby elephants, various kinds of fragrance, sandalwood, myrrh, fine cotton cloth, rattan ware, aloes, golden orioles, black pepper, small bowls and medicine. Although, they are referred to as indigenous produce some of them were exotic and would have been brought into Sri Lanka for exchange in commercial transactions. However, the list of articles make

clear that there was a thriving mercantile trade life in the island and that there was a wide variety of marketable produce to be got.

Parakramabahu VII had despatched to the court of the Ming Emperor of China altogether six missions beginning in 1416 and continuing through 1421, 1433, 1436, 1445, and 1459. No other single king of Sri Lanka had sent so many missions to China alone. The remarkable and renowned Chinese admiral Cheng Ho visited Sri Lanka on at least five occasions; first in 1406, and then in 1409, 1414, 1430 and 1432. The period from 1400 to 1460 was indeed an era during which there had prevailed exceptionally close and constant political contact between Sri Lanka and China. Sino-Sri Lankan contacts, had occurred more frequently during this time than ever before and more significantly for the first time the Chinese had decisively and effectively intervened in the political relations between the two countries, although so far apart had become closer than ever earlier. The voyages of Cheng Ho thus accord to Sino-Sri Lankan relations then before the arrival of the Portuguese to the island a singular significance in Sino-Sri Lankan links.

While references has been made often to Chinese records as they enlighten the student amply on Sino-Sri Lankan relations there is enough evidence found in Sri Lanka too to illustrate these contacts and connections. Even later writers like Emerson Tennent and John Still have referred to the relations that had existed between China and Sri Lanka.<sup>22</sup> It has been said that Sri Lankan craftsmanship in gold, silver, jade and gems was so highly esteemed by the Chinese that their craftsman once came over here to learn the art. Another exceptional event in the relations between the two countries was noted when Sri Lanka imported swords and musical instruments from China in the seventh century, while from a reference in the Kavyasekera others have concluded that Chinese soldiers served in the army of Parakramabahu III.<sup>23</sup> However, the intercourse that had prevailed over the centuries before the fifteenth, illustrates that Sri Lanka and China were engaged usually in religious, cultural and commercial relations and the relations in the fifteenth century which were more political were an exception.

Over the centuries, beginning from the early times up to the fifteenth century, there had prevailed between the little island of Sri Lanka and the great imperial power of faraway China close and constant relations. The connections were on the whole conducted in a

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<sup>22</sup> Henry P. Abayasekera, *op. cit.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

peaceful and amicable manner and as relationships between equals. This was a time when both Sri Lanka and China experienced in general a rich cultural tradition, a tradition enhanced by lively commercial, cultural and religious contacts. In the fifteenth century occurred the unusual interlude or interjection when the grand admiral Cheng Ho embarked on a different venture, a venture that was more markedly less friendly and pronouncedly political. But even this aberrant enterprise did not fundamentally or substantially alter the nature of the connection between Sri Lanka and China, if would have been a transient, ephemeral and evanescent experience. The arrival of the European powers into the Indian Ocean and the East however, proved to be a more permanent and enduring impediment to the continuance of the older and traditional customary relations between Sri Lanka and China. Episodes like that of the pilgrim monk's barefoot journey along the ancient silk routes from China to the West through cold mountainous and hot desert tracks and to Sri Lanka in the quest for hoary and holy texts of Buddhism despite the Great Wall enabling cultural cross fertilization became truly a tale of the past.