

The Sri Lanka-China Nexus - A Snapshot

A Lay Person's Voyage of Serendipity Into A Few (certainly not all), Noteworthy Sino-Lanka Relations

Background: Sri Lanka has held a prized location in the Indian Ocean in relation to sea borne commerce since time immemorial - it was the halfway point between the great empires of Rome and Beijing. News of our great, prosperous, ancient cities had also reached those empires. The Chinese, Arabs, Greeks, South Indians, Persians, Romans, Malays, Siamese, Phoenicians, Burmese, Indonesians, Egyptians, French, Portuguese, Dutch and British coveted what SL had to offer and valued her location as a critical staging post. The "Silk Road of The Sea" was an international trade emporium and the ancient sea ports of Mantai (Mannar) and Tiriyaya (east coast) connected the Silk Road across the Island. Beruwela, Galle, Gokkana (Trincomalee), Weligama, Dondra and other ancient ports dotted around SL also played their part. Sri Lanka too, had large sea going vessels and merchant navies that facilitated transnational trade and cultural exchanges. There is ample numismatic evidence to show ancient trade was not limited to a primitive barter system alone. 9th century Chinese coins (and coins from other civilisations) found in Sri Lanka, point to currency based trading systems as well.

Fact: Any analysis of Sri Lanka's international relations (historical or current) cannot disregard her geopolitical strategic value to transnational sea commerce and military dominance in the region.

Note 1: To keep these notes to one page the editing was brutal and each point is restricted to minimum words. **Note 2:** On a few issues, expert opinions did vary on precise details & the year

The Ancient Years

- **412 AD;** A Chinese cultural ambassador/monk Fa-Hisen arrives in SL and spends about two years in Anuradhapura. He lived in the Abayagiri Monastic complex. Some years later Sri Lankan embassies are sent to China in **428, 430 and 435 AD.**
- **426, 429 and 434 AD;** Sri Lankan *Bikkhunis* (Buddhist nuns) established the *Bikkhuni Sasana* in China. The Sri Lankan nuns arrived in Nanking; the first batch was led by nun Nandi and the second by nun Devasara. The Sri Lankan nuns learned the Chinese language as a part of their mission. About 300 Chinese nuns were ordained.
- **456 AD;** Four Sri Lankan male monks go to China. Amongst them is a sculptor named *Nante* (probably Nanda). Nante, a master craftsman, went to China to teach/tutor the Chinese craftsmen. Apparently the serenity and smile of the Sri Lankan Buddha statues was much sought after by the Chinese. In **527 AD** Sri Lanka sends an embassy to China.
- **607 AD;** A Chinese Embassy led by the Director of Military Lands Chang Chuan arrives in Sri Lanka and he was received with great ceremony and a flotilla of local ships. Sri Lanka sends embassies to China in the years **670, 711, 742, 746, 750 and 762 AD.** The cultural and trade relation between the two nations is continuous. There is a gap thereafter when Arab traders dominated trade between the Middle East and China. However, there is some reference to Sri Lanka in the records of *Ke Nee's Travels in the Western Region* for that period. The Arab-China trade more than likely included commodities from Sri Lanka. Chinese 9th century coins discovered in Yapahuwa, Galle and Beruwela might indicate there was some trade with China.
- **(1153-1168)** in the reign of Parakramabahu 1, Chinese vessels were once again docking in Sri Lanka. The importance of good relations, trade and commerce with the Far East with Parakramabahu is also indicated by another incident where the King literally invaded Burma (by sea) to rescue a Sri Lankan princess taken hostage by the king of Burma. The Burmese King was defeated and fair treatment and safe passage was restored to Sri Lankan emissaries and agents passing through the region.
- **(1287 -1293);** In the time of Parakramabahu 111. Chinese soldiers are said to have served in the King's army. It is also stated that the *Kaviya Sekhara* records the importation of swords and musical instruments from China.
- **1405 -1407 AD;** A Muslim by faith, the eunuch Admiral Cheng Ho (a.k.a. Zeng He) probably visited Sri Lanka for the first time. On his second visit in **1411**, the SL King Vira Alakeswara, was hostile towards the Chinese admiral and after a six day battle the King was taken captive and taken to China. Eventually the deposed King was returned. The Chinese asked the people (or the captives they had) to choose a "worthy member of your tribe" to be king and another King was anointed. But that new King was under Chinese suzerainty. One version is that the new king was murdered on arrival and his successor is thought to be Parakramabahu V1, (1412 – 1467). References state that this King visited China on two occasions in **1416 and 1421 AD.**
- **1432 AD;** Cheng Ho visited SL again. It is said that he had a harbour base in Beruwela. A tri-lingual stone slab created in China, in the Chinese, Persian and Tamil languages, found in Galle in 1911, records gifts to the Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim faiths. That slab now rests in the Colombo Museum. Chinese trading vessels frequented the old ports of Mantai (Mannar), Gokanna (Trincomalee), Galle, Weligama, and Beruwela.
- **1433, 1436, 1445 and 1459 AD;** saw more tributes from SL dispatched to China and relations between the two nations seem strong and regular.

The Colonial Era & Proposals To Import Chinese Labour

- **1505 – 1948;** Sri Lanka is under colonial rule. Any interaction with China (or any other nation) was through the colonial office and government. However, the British did trade in commodities from Sri Lanka through their Far East consuls in China. Of particular interest is the proposal to import Chinese labour by the British in 1866. Importation of Chinese labour was recommended by the *Irrigation Commission Report – Govt: of Ceylon 1866.* The coffee planters (and later tea planters) needed labour. There was correspondence between the Governor of Ceylon and the Colonial Office in London and correspondence between the Gov: of Hong Kong and British consuls in mainland China. There is reference to the importation of Chinese labour in the *Report of the Commission on immigration into Ceylon-* by Sir Edward St. J Jackson. However, Indian labour was closer and cheaper and by 1870 that labour had started to flow into Ceylon (*Navaratne.SI China Connexion*). The twentieth century history of Sri Lanka would have been quite different if the proposals to import Chinese labour had been implemented.

Post Independence

- 1948 onwards;** Relations with China has had its ups and downs. Sri Lankan pro-west governments (if they could) steered away from Chinese trade & aid looking to the West for support. The direct opposite applied to pro-China governments. The 26 year war (1983-2009) had its own trade & aid issues and post war aid from China was tangible and multidimensional. Post tsunami aid was also significant. The Reality: China is an Asian regional powerhouse and this realism was aptly illustrated by Indian Prime Minister Nehru in 1950 who said (at a time of existing border tensions with China), "India, because of many factors is certainly entitled to a permanent seat in the Security Council. But we are not going in at the cost of China." Nehru was responding to a deal put by the USA to oust China from the UN Security Council seat and put India in its place. Nehru's stance is well known as the 'Not at the Cost of China' stance and many references are easily found.
- **1948** February; Sri Lanka is granted independence. In October 1949 Mao Zedong declares the communist Peoples Republic of China in power. Sri Lanka's exports to China in **1949** include dessicated coconut, mattress fibre, coir yarn, citronella oil, plumbago and rubber. Rubber exports in **1949** totalled Rs 1,75 million (1300 tons). A general trade agreement is also signed that year to the value of Rs 250 million. Sri Lankan rubber, coconut oil, cocoa, cow hides, buffalo hides, cinnamon leaf oil, arecanut oil, caradamoms etc: would be traded for rice, sulphur, coal, green beans, sesame seed, wheat flour, green peas, raisins, garlic and dry ginger. A separate agreement was signed to receive 80,000 tons of rice due to a rice shortage in the country.
- **1950** January; Sri Lanka officially recognizes the Peoples Republic of China (barely 3 months after Mao's declaration) thus becoming one of the first countries to do so (so did Britain). However, Sri Lanka does not grant China a diplomatic mission in Colombo as the (SL) government's position was a pro western democracy and still not weaned from British hegemony.
- **1952** December; The all-important 'Rubber for Rice' agreement with China was finalised by the pro west democratic UNP Government in Peking (a 5 year agreement). The 'rubber for rice' trade agreement was a 'saviour' to Sri Lanka. If China had no rice surplus they would source rice from Burma to honour the agreement. Sri Lanka exports 30,000 tons of rubber to China in 1952-a huge increase from previous years. At a time when about 500,000 people were dependent on the rubber industry and when Sri Lanka was in an acute food shortage and a foreign exchange crisis, the actions by our 'friend' and ally' the USA is disturbing. Arguably, the US attitude and actions steered Sri Lanka into a stronger, longer lasting relationship with China. The US tried unsuccessfully to get that trade agreement abrogated for many years thereafter - **see next page for a few important background points.**
- **1957;** Chinese Prime Minister Chou En Lai visits Sri Lanka in January. At an after dinner speech in Polonnaruwa he formally apologises for the invasion of Kotte in 1412. Sri Lanka grants official diplomatic recognition to China in **1957.** One result of Chou En Lai's visit was a *Technical Co-operation Agreement* - and a Rs 75 million grant. Another Rs 50 million loan followed shortly after. Sri Lanka openly supports the Peoples Republic of China being admitted to the United Nations. The Chinese Government's gratitude for that support is on record. Between **1957 - 1965** (8 years)- China provided Rs 195 million aid to Sri Lanka in the form of outright grants, loans, joint services and technical services. Most of the aid in **1957, 1958 and 1962** was aimed at rubber replanting, some for the Veyangoda textile mill and some for the BMICH construction.
- **1959** March; The *Air Transport Agreement* was signed in Peking. Reciprocal air transportation agreements and rights were agreed upon between our fledgling national airline - Air Ceylon and the Civil Aviation Administration of China.
- **1961** August; The Chinese sacred tooth relic is brought to Sri Lanka for public worship. That relic has only left China twice over centuries. At the time Sri Lanka's Prime Minister played a successful role in mediating the India-China border dispute. Our Prime Minister's visit to China (**1961**) raises opposition claims of a Chinese naval base in Sri Lanka. It was possibly the first time this issue was made public.
- **1963** February; The USA suspends economic aid to Sri Lanka and blocked funding from the International Bank of Reconstruction and Development over the nationalisation of the petroleum industry. Sri Lanka looks to China once again for support and progress. In that same year Sri Lanka takes the position that Taiwan is a part of mainland China.
- **1963:** Sri Lanka enters into a *Maritime Transport Agreement* with China. The agreement platformed the maritime industry, merchant shipping and the purchasing (gifts/donations) of ships. It was a step towards weaning an independent Sri Lanka away from western maritime dominance, manipulation, non-negotiated increases in freight charges, sudden increases in export tariffs etc.

"Over two thousand years ago, when some of the great nations of today were yet unborn or mere toddlers, there were cultural and commercial interchanges between Sri Lanka and China" - Gamini Navaratne B.sc (Econ London-author, The Chinese Connexion-A study of Sri Lanka-China relations in the modern era -Sandesa publication 1976

The attempts to stop rubber exports and threats to the rubber yield

(the following points are primarily extracted from Navaratne's study of the SL-China Connexion)

- At the time of Sri Lanka's food/rubber crisis the US was stockpiling synthetic rubber their companies were required to produce under the *Rubber Act 1948*. By rotating the natural rubber product and their stockpiled synthetic product they controlled the rubber market.
- Sri Lanka's attempts to get a fair price (market price) at the London Rubber Conference in 1950 and the Rome Conference 1951 failed because the consumer countries led by the US refused to pay a fair market price. Prices they were already paying Singapore and Thailand.
- In 1951 the US pushes a UN resolution through to ban 'strategic materials' to China and North Korea, rubber was one of those products. In that same year the US enacted the "Kem Amendment" – the *Foreign Assistance Act* – which stated that any country contravening that act will not be given aid. That same year the US enacted the *Mutual Defence Assistance Control Act 1951 (The Battle Act)*. These actions had adverse consequences for the rubber industry in Sri Lanka who was considered the 'loyal friend of America', led by the pro West democratic D.S. Senayake government.
- Sri Lanka had offers from China and Russia to purchase rubber at market prices but could not trade with communist countries under the US embargo. However, the US gave exemptions to Britain, France, Italy, Denmark and Norway to ship 'banned strategic items' to the Soviet Bloc countries. Britain's rubber sales to the USSR in 1952 totalled \$91 million and in 1953 - \$17 million. In effect Britain bought Sri Lanka's rubber and sold it on to the Communist bloc. It is unlikely they sold it for an inferior price.
- A more sinister move by the US was to ban the supply of sulphur to Sri Lanka. The US was the principal supplier at the time. The US also put pressure on Japan, Italy and France to cut off sulphur exports to Sri Lanka and a shipment destined for Sri Lanka was off loaded en-route at Marseilles (suspected to be under US pressure). Sulphur was used to control a fungal leaf disease known as *Oidium heveae stein*. In 1925 this fungal disease started in Kalutara and spread across most rubber plantations threatening to cripple the rubber yield. Hardly any sulphur was available from 1951-1952 placing our rubber industry at great risk.
- Efforts by the USA to abrogate the rubber for rice agreements were unsuccessful and the agreement held into the late 70's (at least). It was not all smooth sailing either and Sri Lanka had its internal critics and political changes, but even pro-west democratic governments held to the agreements, even expanding trade relations with China due to the economic situations in the country. One reason for the expanded trade with China over the past decades was the failure of the West to meet the full needs of Sri Lanka in terms of trade and aid.

What does history reveal?

In the ten centuries prior to colonisation historical records evidence multiple dealings between Sri Lanka and China. Chinese records comment on Sri Lankan customs (e.g. chewing betel), family life, and aspects of the Sinhalese culture. It appears that there were deeper interactions between the peoples which were not just contained to rigid commerce and trade links within the boundaries of wharfs and ports. Chinese, Indians, Greeks, Persians, and Abyssinians settled in towns as merchants. The Chinese developed ornamental Gold Fish. The famed 'Ranmasu Uyana' (Goldfish Park) of Anuradhapura was stocked with Gold fish most likely originating in China (9th-10th century AD)

It is noteworthy that maritime trade with China and other nations over the centuries continued in spite of our internal Royal feuds, feudal power-plays, Pandyan and Chola invasions, a Javanese invasion, internal wars, extensive building works, irrigation & hydraulic work, the rise and fall of ancient cities and the rise and fall of Sigiriya. There is a suggestion that income from our transregional trade helped build/fund our ancient cities adding to their wealth, finery and prosperity. Fine Chinese silks and textiles for e.g. provided finery for the costumes and trappings of the Royal Court, the Royal maidens and the aristocracy.

There are other links between the two nations too; for e.g. both countries have a hydraulic and irrigation culture, both countries have a natural medicine culture, an agricultural culture. Buddhism is an ancient link and both nations are the only two that claim to have a sacred tooth relic.

Over the twentieth century years and the early twenty first century years, aid from China encompassed; farm machinery, fisheries projects, reconstruction of fishery harbours post 2004 Tsunami, train carriages and engines, maritime industry support, educational scholarships, technical training and expertise, agricultural industry support, aviation industry support, modern medicine and supplies, roads, bridges, the Gin Ganga Project, textiles, hotel constructions, an airport, upgrading the Colombo port facilities, a new port, and in more recent times Chinese tourists, to a significant degree, contributed to our tourism industry.

Clearly; since independence, Sri Lanka and China have different political ideologies and political systems. Clearly; there are continuous geopolitical agendas and international power plays jostling for supremacy in the Indian Ocean and South East Asia that impacts on Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka will continue to go through election cycles and elect governments. Successive governments will be compelled to act in tune with the geopolitics of the Indian Ocean and South East Asia and balance superpower alliances. Those alliances are bound to change (as they have) over the decades. Local controversies will swirl and strong opposition voices will be heard on aid and trade with China. However, what history shows us is: whether Sri Lanka has looked to the West or to the East for support, our nexus with China has continued. If history proves right, those relations will ebb, flow and move on - just as they has done for about two thousand years.



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These bibliographical references are NOT even close to the vast range of material available on the subject. Furthermore, there is bound to be studies in the Sinhala and Tamil language on this subject. The bibliography listed is merely a starting point for apolitical, curious minds.

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The Purpose Of This Document

The events and information collated was to satisfy my own curiosity on issues that are regurgitated by politics of the day and people I meet, who with monotonous regularity, espouse opinions lacking pragmatism, basic historical knowledge and whose opinions are mired in an unshakeable, deep rooted, political loyalty handed down (or formed) over generations. Whilst loyalty and passion is accepted, even admired, it is best prevented from spiralling downwards into gnosiophobia and sinophobia.

I was looking for clarity and fact to develop an informed opinion - hence my serendipitous stroll down history's road allowing history to pave the way to opinion.

This is not an academic document written for an academic journal or any newspaper. It is not written to allay legitimate fears of the genuine patriot or to allay fears on what might impact on Sri Lanka as superpowers battle for our political alliance in the sphere of the Indian Ocean. This is merely a short synopsis of a very few historical events and facts focused on the bilateral relations of two nations over two thousand years.

If one has a curious mind and seeks to advance/expand personal knowledge a little further than the political trolls' phobic, distorted, loosely perpetrated 'news' (freely flowing in the 'sewer' of social media) this snapshot may well satisfy some curiosities - I hope!!

Cheers

Stefan.

May 2020



Kudirimalai Point



Dondra Harbour



Galle Harbour