

**AN ANALYSIS OF HISTORICAL REFERENCES ON THE
MILESTONES OF SINO-SRI LANKA RELATIONSHIPS BASED ON
THE SACRED TOOTH RELIC OF THE BUDDHA**

Iromi Ariyaratne

**Editor in Chief
Dr. Iromi Ariyaratne**

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Abstract

With reference to Chinese and Sri Lankan historical records, it is said that the first diplomatic mission from Sri Lanka reached China in the governing period of ancient Sinhalese king Bhātikābhaya (19 BCE-9 CE). Thereafter, the nature of religious, diplomatic and economic relationships between China and Sri Lanka have been continuing in a friendly manner. Observing the history of Sino-Sri Lankan relationships, it can be pointed out that a major cause for the successful and strong relationship between the two countries has been the sharing of Buddhism.

Sri Lanka, as a Theravāda Buddhist country is famous not only for preserving the Buddha's own discourses, but also it is known as the Buddha being alive in the country due to the presence of sacred relics of his physical body. The sacred Tooth Relic is believed to be the most significant relic among all relics. On the other hand, Chinese Buddhists believe that another Sacred Tooth Relic of the Buddha is present in China. Moreover, it could be seen that there are many special historical evidences to prove that both countries have attempted to maintain a healthy relationship between each other because of the devotion to the Sacred Tooth Relic.

Hence, doing an academic analysis on the historical milestones of Sino-Sri Lanka relationships based on the Sacred Tooth Relic is the prime objective of this article. The Sri Lankan Chronicles, records of Chinese travellers and secondary sources directly related to the topic are meant to promote the message of this research article.

Keywords

Sacred Tooth Relic, Sri Lanka, China, Relationships

¹ Iromi Ariyaratne (PhD), Senior Lecturer, Department of Buddhist Culture, Postgraduate Institute of Pali and Buddhist Studies, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka. e-mail: iromiariyaratne@gmail.com

The Sacred Tooth Relic in Sri Lanka

The Theravāda *Suttantapīṭaka* has evidence to prove that the sacred relics remained after the cremation of the Buddha, and they were distributed among eight territories of India.¹ Pali Chronicles have stated that only four Tooth Relics among the all relics were found² after the cremation and those four Tooth Relics are available in the universe as follows.

- 1' Tāvatiṃsa heaven
2. Nāga world
3. Gandhāra country
4. Sīhala country (Sri Lanka)³

The *Dāṭhāvamsa* further says that the fourth of the above tooth relics which was taken by *arahant bhikkhu* Khema has been given to King Brahmadatta who was ruling the country Kāliṅga. After eight hundred years had passed, in 311 C.E. when the King Kīrti Sī Meghavarnābhaya was governing the country, the Sacred Tooth Relic was brought to Sri Lanka by princess Hemamālā and her husband Danta from Dantapura in Kāliṅga. The reception of the Sacred Tooth Relic is well described in the *Cūlavamsa* which is a Sri Lankan chronicle. From that time on, the Sacred Tooth Relic became the major religious object of Sri Lankan Buddhists.

Although the Theravāda and Sri Lankan sources have stated that only four Tooth Relics of the Buddha were left over after the cremation of the Buddha, Chinese Buddhists also believe that one of the Tooth Relics survived and is also available in China. According to the Chinese sources, after the passing away of the Buddha, the cremation left two Tooth Relics and one of those were brought to Sri Lanka by his disciples, and the other one was brought to Uddiyana (in Pakistan). Eventually, it was brought to China and now it is placed in the Buddha's Tooth Relic *Stūpa* of Lingguang Temple.⁴ It seems that the Chinese view about the two Tooth Relics of the Buddha and their placements in both countries may have contributed to the significant relationship between two countries since the first century B.C.E. up to now.

Historical Milestones of Sino-Sri Lanka Relationships based on the Sacred Tooth Relic

Although the Sino-Sri Lanka diplomatic visits started before the first century C.E.⁵, religious connections based on the Sacred Tooth Relic began in the period of Ancient Sri Lankan King Mahānāma who ruled the country from 410-431 C.E.⁶ Even though the Sri Lankan Chronicles or historical records are silent on this regard, Chinese records provide evidence to prove that the King Mahānāma has sent a Sri Lankan delegation to Chinese Court with a model of the Temple of Tooth Relic among the other gifts which was sent to the contemporary Chinese emperor' The model which is sent to Chinese emperor could be the *Dhammacakkageha* (*Dhammacakkappasāda*) situated in the royal territory

which had been built by the Sinhalese King *Devānampiyatissa*⁷ It took three years for embassies reach China by land and sea. The Chinese emperor at that time was Cuti (Couti) of the Sung Dynasty (420-423 C.E.)⁸

During the same ruling period of Sri Lanka, a Chinese traveller, a Buddhist monk Faxian⁹ visited the country in 413 C.E. He stayed on the island for over two years in search of Buddhist texts and paying homage to the sacred places including the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic" Sacred Bodhi Tree, Adam's Peak and other Buddhist Sanctuaries.¹⁰ During his Sri Lankan stay, he was able to find some Mahāyāna texts including the *Mahīsāsakavinaya*, the *Dīghāgama*, the *Samyuttāgama* and a collection of the miscellaneous *Piṭaka* (*Sannipāta*) from monasteries to carry China.

Although the main objective of Chinese monk Faxian's Sri Lankan visit is not related to the Sacred Tooth Relic, his travel record is very important on the literary history of the Sacred Tooth Relic. He is the first foreign traveller who stated a significant account on the Sacred Tooth Relic and the rituals related to it. On the other hand, the statement on the Tooth Relic in his travel record is very much helpful in confirming the historical evidences included in the Sri Lankan Chronicles. We will move forward to the discussion on the travel record of Faxian in the next sub topic of this paper, and this explanation will be turned back to the main topic of this article regarding the Buddhist exchanges based on the Sacred Tooth Relic.

Another important Chinese traveller is Xuanzang (Hsuan Tsang) who visited India in 7th Century C.E., Even though he did not visit Sri Lanka, he has written a substantial account on Sri Lanka in his travel record. He mentions that, a number of pilgrims, both monks and laity visited Sīhaladīpa (Sri Lanka) for the purpose of worship. The travellers were: Ming Yuen, I Lang, Ta Cheng Teng, Hiueng Yio and Au Hing. Among these travellers, Ming Yuen stayed in Sri Lanka for some time engaged in religious activities and paying homage to the Sacred Tooth Relic.¹¹ I Lang was also a Buddhist monk who visited Sri Lanka with his younger brother. One of the purposes of his visit was also to worship the Tooth Relic. The other two monks, Ta Cheng Teng and Au Hing also visited Sri Lanka to pay homage to the Sacred Tooth Relic.

Bhikkhu Yijing (I-tsing) who also visited to India has also included a significant account of the Sacred Tooth Relic in his travel record. He obtained the facts about the Tooth Relic from the above said monk Ming Yuen. Saving the content of his record for later in our discussion, at this point it is more important to emphasize another significant fact pointed out by Bhikkhu Yijing. There are some references for another statement of his on the Sacred Tooth Relic in Sri Lanka. Weerasinghe, S. G. M. has stated that some Chinese references on Yijing (I-tsing) have pointed out that the Sacred Tooth Relic must reach China one day through *Iddhi* power. But he has observed that it cannot be taken by force although those people do not consider it as a duty to bring this about.¹²

During the period of 10th Century A.D. to 13th Century A.D. the Tooth Relic had been stored in several places in the country due to the unstable political situation of the country. As a result of an invasion of Pāṇḍyan army led by Āryacakravarti, the Sacred Tooth Relic was carried back to India. The army chief Āryacakravarti presented the Tooth Relic to the Pāṇḍyan King Kulaśekara who ruled the Pāṇḍya kingdom from 1268 to 1308 C.E.

The Sri Lankan King Parākramabāhu II after having a friendly visit to Pāṇḍyan kingdom, negotiated with the King Kulaśekara to return back the Tooth Relic to Sri Lanka. The mission was a success and the Tooth Relic was brought again to Sri Lanka.¹³ It is noteworthy that the above incident was a popular story in the mediaeval period in the South East Asian countries. Though Sri Lankan Chronicle the *Cūlavamsa* stated the incident as a friendly negotiation as a result of the great effort of King Parākramabāhu II, Chinese record related to the story stated that the Chinese court offered help to get back the Tooth Relic from the Pāṇḍyan kingdom.

King Parākramabāhu VI (1412-1467 C.E.) built up a splendid mansion in Jayawardenepura and placed the Sacred Tooth Relic in it. It can be seen that the Chinese interest in Buddhism and the Sacred Relics of the Buddha increased in this period. Kublai Khan, the great Moghal Emperor of China was also interested in the Tooth Relics. He sent a mission in 1284 to Sri Lanka asking for the Tooth Relic along with the Bowl Relic and Hair Relics. The prudent Sri Lankan king who was ruling the country at that time was able to satisfy the emperor without granting any of the requested relics.

At a later date the third Ming Emperor of China, Cheng Tsu¹⁴ who ascended the throne in 1403 C.E. provided Admiral Cheng Ho with a fleet of sixty two vessels and appointed him to explore the southern regions. In his first expedition which happened from 1405 to 1407 Cheng Ho landed in Sri Lanka. Although the *Cūlavamsa* is silent on this regard, Geiger explains about the incident in his translation. The Sri Lankan ruler was A-lie-kou-nai-eul in Chinese who is described as a cruel tyrant who did not respect the law of the Buddha.¹⁵ In his Sinhala translation of Xuangzang's Book on Buddhist Records of the Western World, Ven. Polwatte Buddhadhatta Thera explains that the purpose of the expedition of Cheng Ho was to advise the Sri Lankan King Alagakkonāra. The Sri Lankan king tried to murder him by an intrigue. Knowing the king's idea, the army commander got away from the country due to the charisma of the Sacred Tooth Relic.¹⁶ W. Pachow says that the Sinhala king at that period was Alagakkonāra or Vijayabāhu VI.¹⁷ Weerasinghe S. G. M. says that it is seen in the Chinese sources that one of the reasons of Cheng Ho's visit to Sri Lanka was to pay the homage to the Sacred Tooth Relic on behalf of the Chinese Emperor.¹⁸ In the second instance, the Chinese commander came back to Sri Lanka in 1408 with 27000 well equipped soldiers and captured the capital city. At that time, he performed a great ritual to the Sacred Tooth Relic. Thereafter, the Sri Lankan king was made a prisoner and was taken back to China where he was eventually released.¹⁹

Despite the above said incident, overall the religious and diplomatic relationship between the two countries has been conducted in a friendly manner. As a result of colonialism, Sri Lanka faced many problems for several centuries. Later on, after having gained freedom in 1948 from the Great Britain, Sri Lanka has again started to have relationships diplomatically and economically with China. It is said that Sri Lanka was in the first set of a few countries which accepted the People's Republic of China in 1950.²⁰ "Sri Lanka" Magazine has reported about the Chinese Prime minister's visit to Sri Lanka in 1957. In that visit, the Chinese Prime minister visited the Temple of the Tooth Relic and granted a cash donation to it.²¹ As a historical practice, if any supreme leader visits the country, it has been a custom to visit and pay homage to the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic situated in Kandy. Moreover, a separate location has been established for Chinese Buddhism in the recently opened International Buddhist Museum at the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic in Sri Lanka.

The above-mentioned evidences can be pointed out as milestones of the history of Sino-Sri Lanka relationships based on the Sacred Tooth Relic. In addition, the Chinese travellers who visited South Asia also have made a remarkable contribution to the literary history of the Sacred Tooth Relic. Specially, those records supplied the world with a significant picture of the Tooth Relic and the Rituals pertaining to it. Therefore, we will next discuss the records of Chinese travellers regarding the Sacred Tooth Relic.

Chinese Travels Records on the Sacred Tooth Relic

In this section of the paper we will highlight the following travel records of Chinese travellers.

1. *A Record of Buddhist Kingdoms* by Bhikkhu Faxian
2. *The Records of the Western Regions During the Great Tang Dynasty* by Bhikkhu Xuanzang
3. *The Record of Buddhism as Practiced in India Sent Home from the Southern Seas* by Bhikku Yijing

The all three were Buddhist monks. Among the three of them, Faxian is the only traveller who has visited Sri Lanka in person. The others travelled to India and got to know about Sri Lanka (Sīhaladīpa) from the others and have compiled those facts in their travel records. The three of voyagers used the both land and sea routes for their tours.

Among all three of the travel records, Faxian's *Record of Buddhist Kingdoms* is very significant as he has stated all factors through his own observations. Faxian's account on the Tooth Relic seems to be genuine as it is very much similar to the records included in the Sri Lankan chronicle, the *Cūḷavaṃsa*.

Doing a careful observation of all three travel records, this discussion will to pay attention to the following sub topics.

1. The Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic
2. Exposition of the Sacred Tooth Relic

3. Rituals Pertaining to the Sacred Tooth Relic

1. The Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic

According to the chronological analysis, when Faxian visited Sri Lanka in 411 C.E., the Sacred Tooth Relic was situated in the *Dhammacakkageha* (*Dhammacakkappasāda*) located in the royal territory which had been built by the Sinhalese King Devānampiyatissa. Although the Sri Lankan chronicles have included a beautiful explanation of the temple, Faxian has not mentioned any substantial account of the place where the Sacred Tooth Relic was stored in the Royal territory in his record.

However, the Tooth Relic was still situated in the same mansion when Ven. I Lang who informed about the details of his journey to Bhikkhu Xuanzang, came to worship the Tooth Relic even in the 7th Century C.E. Xuanzang gave a brief description about the Temple of the Tooth Relic in his record as follows,

By the side of the King's palace is the vihāra of the Buddha's tooth, which is decorated with every kind of gem, the splendour of which dazzles the sight like that of the sun. For successive generations worship has been respectfully offered to this relic...²²

The *Cūlavamsa* says that, when the Sacred Tooth Relic was received from Kāliṅga, the king Sirimeghavaṇṇābhaya,

...paid it the highest honours, laid it in an urn of pure crystal, and brought it to the building called Dhammacakka built by Devānampiyatissa on the royal territory. Henceforth, this building was the Temple of the Tooth Relic.²³

After King Sirimeghavaṇṇābhaya, the *Dhammacakkageha* may have been decorated from time to time by the kings who ruled the country.

Bhikkhu Yijing (I Tsing) who got the information from one of the Chinese travellers, named Ming Yuen has included a short description about the Temple of the Tooth Relic in the 7th century C.E. into one of his travel records.

The people of *Sīhaladīpa* guard the Tooth Relic with extraordinary care. They have placed it in a high tower. The doors of the shrine are fastened with complicated safety locks. These locks bear a seal with the marks of five great officers in the service of the state. If a door of the shrine is opened the creak of the door resounds the city.²⁴

The above statements included in travel reports of Chinese travellers are very important to confirm how the Sinhalese protected the Tooth Relic as a wealth of royalty. Further, these records can be counted as evidences which prove the literary history of the Sacred Tooth Relic.

2. Exposition of the Sacred Tooth Relic

Faxian has added a valuable explanation on the exposition of the Tooth Relic which was held in Sri Lanka in the 5th Century A.D. As he mentions, the Tooth Relic of the Buddha is always brought forth in the middle of the third month for public exposition.²⁵ Before ten days of this national festival, the king sends a public notice through a man who wears a royal dress with all the ornaments and

wanders beating a drum with a caparisoned elephant over the city. The message is carried by the notice to invite devotees for the exposition of the Tooth Relic.²⁶

Thereafter, both sides of the processional road were decorated with the five hundreds of different bodily forms of the Bodhisattvas with reference to the *Jātaka* stories. All those pictures were brightly colored and grandly executed and they were made to look as alive. He has further mentioned that after decorating the road as stated above, the Sacred Tooth Relic was brought alone along the middle of the road. Everywhere on the way, offerings were presented by devotees.²⁷

After carrying the Tooth Relic to the Abhayagiri Vihāra, it was placed in the hall of the Buddha. Then the monks and laities gathered everywhere burning incenses, lighting lamps and performing prescribed services day and night without ceasing until ninety days were completed. Finally, the Tooth Relic was returned to the Vihāra through the city.²⁸

The above religious performance is definitely similar to the description as given in the *The Cūlavamsa*. The King Sirimeghavaṇṇābhaya, after receiving the Tooth Relic into the country held a huge ceremony, spending 900000 *kahāpanas*, to pay homage to it, and decreed that an annual sacrificial ceremony should be observed.²⁹

Therefore, the account on the above ceremony included in the Faxian's record can be counted as a historical report of an eye witness.

3. Rituals Pertaining to the Sacred Tooth Relic

Although there is a particular set of rituals practiced pertaining to the Sacred Tooth Relic in Sri Lanka, it is noteworthy that the general ritual pattern was established during the period of the King Kīrti Sri Rājasinghe (1747- 1781) in the Kandyan Period. However, after receiving the Sacred Tooth Relic into Sri Lanka, the Sinhalese kings have paid homage to the Tooth Relic by forming and adding several rituals. The above said Chinese travellers have mentioned about the rituals which they have observed (or heard from others) in their records.

Apart from the above content on the Exposition of the Tooth Relic, Faxian has stated that:

‘On fast-days the door of that vihara is opened, and the forms of ceremonial reverence are observed according to the rules.’³⁰

According to his explanation, it is proved that there were regular rules concerning the rituals conducted in the Temple of the Tooth Relic even in the 5th century, as Sri Lankan chronicles have stated.

Although Xuanzang has not mentioned anything about rituals pertaining to the Tooth Relic, Yijing has added a little description on it in his record. In accord with his written account, contemporary Sinhalese pay homage to the Tooth Relic daily. Those who yearn to see the Tooth Relic offer flowers to it with great devotion.³¹

When compared with the *Cūlavamsa*, the above descriptions are not sufficient enough to understand about rituals related to the Sacred Tooth Relic. But, it is clear that they have done a commendable service to prove the historical facts and to convey the message regarding the Tooth Relic to the world.

After illustrating a substantial account on the travel records of Chinese voyagers, the discussion has to come up with the following conclusion.

Conclusion

This article basically attempted to do an analysis on the historical milestones of Sino-Sri Lanka relationships based on the Sacred Tooth Relic as it is the prime objective. The Sri Lankan Chronicles, records of Chinese travellers and secondary sources were carefully observed and tried to analyze in an academic manner without harming the facts that were included in the sources. Hence, as the final conclusion of this paper, it can be clearly pointed out that there are remarkable milestones that can be identified in the history of both countries. In concluding, it is noteworthy that the Sacred Tooth relic has been a significant bond in the Sino-Sri Lankan relationship, strengthening the mutual understanding between the two countries.

Abbreviations

C.E.	Common Era
A.D.	Anno Domini
B.C.E.	Before Common Era
D.	<i>Dīghanikāya</i>
Ed.	Edition
J.P.T.S.	Journal of Pali Text Society
P.T.S.	Pali Text Society
St.	Stanza
Tr.	Translation
Vol.	Volume

Endnotes

- ¹ See. *D. II, Mahāvagga, Mahāparinibbānasutta*, P.T.S. p. 72
- ² According to the *Dāṭhāvamsa*, “*Dāṭhā*” means four canine tooth of the Buddha. *The Dāṭhāvamsa by Dhammkitti & Additional Material and Index by Ānandajoti Bhikkhu*, Edited by R.D. Rhys Davids & R. Morris, JPTS 1884, p. 32
- ³ “*Ekā dāṭhā tidasapure - ekā nāgapure ahu ekā gandhārisayā - ekā 'si puna sīhale*”
Narada, U, (1994), *The Dāṭhāvamsa Vyākhyāva*, 56-60 Verses, pp. 52-54.

- ⁴ Hujiang, Li, *Exploration of Cultural Exchanges in Buddhism between China and ASEAN*, file:///E:/InternetFiles/Exploration_On_The_Cultural_Exchanges_In_Buddhism_Between_China_And_ASEAN%20(1).pdf, p. 2.
- ⁵ According to the Chinese records, the first Chinese mission has sent in the period of King Bhātikābhaya (019 BC- 009 AC). Thereafter, there were three missions had been done in 97 A.D., 210, A.D. 405-410 A.D., consecutively. All the missions were significant Buddhist missions to China.
See: Weerasinghe, S. G. M., (1995) *A History of the Cultural Relations between Sri Lanka and China*, pp. 118-119.
- ⁶ Although many authors state that the king Mahānāma's ruling period is from 409 or 410 to 432 A.D., Geiger says that he ruled the country from 400 to 432 A.D.
See: *Cūlavamsa, Part II*, Translated by Geiger, Wilhelm (1930), p. xi.
- ⁷ See: *Cūlavamsa, Part I*, Translated by Geiger, Wilhelm (191929), p. 8.
- ⁸ Weerasinghe, S. G. M., (1995) *A History of the Cultural Relations between Sri Lanka and China*, p.119.
- ⁹ In Sri Lankan records his name is written as "Fa-Hien".
- ¹⁰ See: Legge, James (1965) *A Record of Buddhist Kingdoms: Being an account by the Chinese monk Fā-Hien of his travels in India and Ceylon (A.D. 399-414) in Search of Buddhist Books of Discipline*, pp. 101-110.
- ¹¹ Weerasinghe, S. G. M., (1995) *A History of the Cultural Relations between Sri Lanka and China*, p.49.
- ¹² Weerasinghe, S. G. M., (1995) *A History of the Cultural Relations between Sri Lanka and China*, p. 50.
- ¹³ *Cūlavamsa, Part II*, Translated by Geiger, Wilhelm (1930), p. 205.
- ¹⁴ He also referred to as Yung Lo.
- ¹⁵ Weerasinghe, S. G. M., (1995) *A History of the Cultural Relations between Sri Lanka and China*, pp. 52-53.
- ¹⁶ Buddhadatta, Polwatte., (2000) *Hsuan Tsang Bramana Vṛtāntaya*, pp. 389-390.
- ¹⁷ Pachow, W., (1954) *Ancient Cultural Relations between Ceylon and China*, *University of Ceylon Review*, Vo. XII, p. 188.
- ¹⁸ Weerasinghe, S. G. M., (1995) *A History of the Cultural Relations between Sri Lanka and China*, p. 53.
- ¹⁹ Pachow W. (1954) *Ancient Cultural Relations between Ceylon and China*, *University of Ceylon Review*, Vo. XII, p. 188.
- ²⁰ Weihua, Wang., *China-Sri Lanka Friendly Relationship: Historical Tradition, Realistic Dynamics and Bright Future*, p. 1.
- ²¹ *Sri Lanka Magazine*, Vol. 9.3, February, 1957, p. 17.
- ²² Tsiang, Hiuen, (0629), *Buddhist Records of the Western World*, Vol. II, Tr. Beal, Samuel, (1884), p. 249.
- ²³ *The Cūlavamsa, Part I*, Translated by Geiger, Wilhelm (191929), p. 8.
- ²⁴ Weerasinghe, S. G. M., (1995), *A History of the Cultural Relations between Sri Lanka and China*, p. 5.
- ²⁵ Fa-hien, *A record of Buddhist Kingdoms*, Tr. Legge, James, (1886), p.105.
- ²⁶ "The Bodhisattva, during three Asankhyeya-kalpas, manifested his activity, and did not spare his own life. He gave up kingdom, city, wife, and son; he plucked out his eyes and gave them to another; he cut off a piece of his own flesh to ransom the life of a dove; he cut off his head and gave it as an alms; he gave his body to feed a starving tigress; he grudged not his marrow and his brains. In many such ways as these did he undergo pain for the sake of all living. And so it was, that, having become Buddha, he continued in the world for forty-five years, preaching his Law, teaching and transforming, so that those who had no rest found rest, and the unconverted were converted. When his connexion with the

living was completed, he attained to pari-nirvana (and died). Since that event, for 1497 years, the light of the world has gone out, (and all living beings have had long-continued sadness. Behold! ten days after this, Buddha's tooth will be brought forth, and taken to the Abhayagiri-vihara. Let all and each, whether monks or laics, who wish to amass merit for themselves, make the roads smooth and in good condition, grandly adorn the lanes and by-ways, and provide abundant store of flowers and incense to be used as offerings to it."

Fa-hien, *A record of Buddhist Kingdoms*, Tr. Legge, James, (1886), pp.105-106.

²⁷ Fa-hien, *A record of Buddhist Kingdoms*, Tr. Legge, James, (1886), p.106.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ *The Cūḷavaṃsa, Part I*, Translated by Geiger, Wilhelm (1929), p. 8.

³⁰ Fa-hien, *A record of Buddhist Kingdoms*, Tr. Legge, James, (1886), p.106.

³¹ Weerasinghe, S. G. M., (1995), *A History of the Cultural Relations between Sri Lanka and China*, p. 50.

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