
China-Bengal Traditional Relations in the Pre-European Times: An Enquiry



Regional Studies
Vol XXXV, Issue 4
pp.3-28

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<http://irs.org.pk>

P-ISSN: 0254-7988

E-ISSN: 2959-5459

Date of Acceptance: 3 August 2017

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the nature of traditional relations between China and Bengal in the pre-European times. Cultural exchange, trade, and diplomatic relations between the two countries had existed since the ancient period, particularly, during the Han, Tang, Yuan, and Ming dynasties of China. The ancient Silk Road and Maritime Road facilitated them in establishing their cultural, commercial, and diplomatic relations. This paper finds out the nature of bilateral traditional relations between China and Bengal before European merchants came to Bengal. In particular, it explores cultural, diplomatic, and trade connectivity between the two countries in the period. The paper concludes that warm bilateral relations between China and Bengal prevailed in the period and that the regions were connected with each other through the ancient Silk Road and Maritime Road. Significantly, political and diplomatic relations between the two regions reached their highest level during the Ming dynasty of China and Muslim rule in Bengal.

Traditional relations between China and Bengal (present-day Bangladesh and West Bengal of India) have a rich heritage in the socio-cultural affairs of the two countries for the past two-and-a-half millennia. China's southern overland and maritime Silk Road, known as the Indian Northern Silk Road, resulted in commercial, cultural, and diplomatic relations between the two countries. Particularly, their cultural, diplomatic, and commercial relations had existed during the Han, Tang, Yuan, and Ming Dynasties. The Chinese Han Emperor Wu-di sent interpreter-envoys to the southern and south-eastern parts of Asia as far as Bengal (on the bank of the Ganges near present-day Tamruk) to open contacts with these places. Significantly, bilateral diplomatic relations

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between the two countries reached the highest level during the Ming dynasty in China and the Muslim rule in Bengal. The Ming emperor and the king of Bengal exchanged ambassadors almost every year. Most importantly, the diplomacy of the Ming emperor was very successful in solving the conflict between the kings of Bengal and Jaunpur. Furthermore, Chinese scholars and travellers visited Bengal and the people of Bengal also used to go to China to seek knowledge, preaching Buddhism, as well as for the purposes of trade. Besides, it is evident that Buddhist monks from Bengal have been going to China in order to preach Buddhism since the period of the Tang dynasty and Chinese silk was exchanged for Buddhist artefacts of Bengal.¹ Moreover, the early commercial exchanges involved Chinese silk, textile, gold, silver, satins, blue and white porcelain, copper, iron, musk, Vermillion, quick-silver, and grass mats and Bengali cotton, textile, coral, pearls, crystals, cornelians, and peacock feathers. Significantly, the silk cloth produced in China was famous all over the world, while cotton textile—first manufactured in South Asia, particularly in Bengal, known as pi-cloth—was famous all over the world.

This is, thus, a very interesting area of academic enquiry but still under exploration. Ray has focused on the nature of trade and diplomatic relations between China and India in the ancient and medieval period.² Dale has investigated the connectivity between China and India and the exchange of silk and cotton textile in their trade relations in these periods.³ Ray, in one of his later works, has found out trade network and cultural identities of Bengal in the ancient period based on archaeological data.⁴ The more recent work of Yang Bin emphasised the cultural influence of Bengal in Yunnan province of China and connectivity between the two regions.⁵ These sources explored connectivity between Bengal and Yunnan in terms of trade and cultural relations in pre-European times, but have hardly investigated the nature of overall relations between Bengal and China during the period. This paper will, therefore, find out the nature of bilateral traditional relations between China and Bengal in the period before European merchants came to Bengal. In particular, it will explore cultural, diplomatic, political, and trade relations, as well as connectivity between them in the period.

China-Bengal traditional relations

This section offers traditional cultural, trade, and political and diplomatic relations between China and Bengal before the arrival of European merchants in Bengal. It investigates the nature of these relations.

Cultural relations

The exchanges of religion, knowledge, and language were an important feature of the traditional cultural relations between China and Bengal. Chinese scholars and travellers visited Bengal of South Asian sub-continent and the people of Bengal also used to go to China for the pursuit of knowledge, preaching Buddhism, and trade since the ancient period. Their writings provided valuable data on the socio-economic and political conditions of the two countries. In particular, the Chinese monks, scholars, and traders of the Qing dynasty of China travelled by the south-western Silk Road to the ancient Vedic Kingdom of Pundra Vardhana of Bengal, located in the present-day Bogra in Bangladesh as early as the second century BC.⁶ Besides, famous Chinese scholar and traveller Fa Xian travelled to Bengal during the rule of the Bengal King Shashanka under the reign of Chandragupta II of the Gupta dynasty in the late fourth and early fifth century.⁷ Between fifth and seventh centuries, many Chinese monks, such as Yijing and Xuan Zang, travelled to the Buddhist monasteries of northern Bengal for gathering knowledge of the 'western heaven'.⁸ Moreover, during the reign of Ming-ti of the Han dynasty, Buddhist monks were invited to China from Bengal, since Buddha had received enlightenment in the northwest Bengal (Gaya).⁹ During this era, the emperors enthusiastically patronised Buddhism. The custom of Hindu people in India and Bengal is to cremate the dead on a pyre which is called *ch'a-pi*. This custom is prevalent even now in Buddhist communities, since the discipline of Buddha has followed the same custom. The ordinary people of China also imitate this and cremate their dead because a majority of the people of China converted to Buddhism. Tang emissaries and Buddhist monks exchanged silk in India and Bengal for Buddhist artefacts.¹⁰ In the early six dynasties era of China, the demand for such artefacts was enormous and traders exchanged Chinese silk for such artefacts.¹¹ Furthermore, during the Yuan period, the expanding maritime exchanges between China and Bengal,

especially the participation of traders from China in these interactions, can be observed from the work of Wang Dayuan. He sailed with Chinese traders to Bengal on two occasions: first from 1330 to 1334 and then between 1337 and 1339.¹² Wang Dayuan's account known as *Daoyi Zhilue* (Brief Records of the Island Barbarians) reveals that the rice fields and arable lands were spectacular and three crops were harvested in Bengal every year. He also related that the customs of the people of Bengal were extremely pure and honest.¹³

In 1405, during the Ming dynasty, the emperor ordered his emissaries to go to Bengal and other parts of the Indian sub-continent to invite some Buddhist monks.¹⁴ A Buddhist monk named Mahāratna Dharmaraja went to the then capital of China from West Bengal on Chinese invitation. He stayed in the Ling-ku-sse. He is reported to have possessed miraculous powers called *ṛddhi* that taught the people to recite *om maṇi padme huṃ* (*yang mo ni pa mi hung*). Then, all of those who believed in him began to recite it day and night. Additionally, a monk and scholar from Bikrampur of East Bengal (Bangladesh) named Atish Dipankar Srigyan travelled to Tibet in 1038 AD during the greatest Buddhist Pala Empire (750-1174 AD) and preached Buddhism there for 17 years.¹⁵ The teachings of his ideology spread to medieval China and resulted in the establishment of the Sarma school of Tibetan Buddhism.¹⁶ He died in Tibet and the Chinese government has returned his ashes to his place of birth in Dhaka as a mark of friendship between the two countries.¹⁷ Besides, the brick temples with terracotta decoration are a distinctive cultural feature in the history of temple building in the Indian sub-continent. There was a spike in temple construction in Bengal from the thirteenth century, especially, a marked concentration in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹⁸ The earliest recorded literary work of Bengali language is the *Charyapada*, found in the palace of Tibet, where it used to be the official language. In 1414, the King of Bengal Shihabuddin Bayazid Shah had presented a *sahala* (giraffe) to the Chinese emperor of the Ming dynasty Yongle (reign: 1402-24).¹⁹ Significantly, the giraffe was greeted with a tumultuous chorus of chants and panegyrics by senior officials at his court, affirming that the *qilin* (giraffe) had finally appeared as a proof that a great rightful emperor was indeed on the throne.²⁰ The giraffe was famous in China as the legendary auspicious 'unicorn' that prompted the composition of many

poems and paintings. The work of the famous Ming painter Shen Du on Giraffe as mythical *qilin* named *ruiying qilin song bing xu* (painting in praise of the auspicious unicorn) is preserved in the Palace Museum.²¹ This is one of the rare cultural proofs of the cordial historical relationship between China and Bengal during the Ming dynasty.

Historical records testify that cowries (*kauris*) were used as currency in Bengal from the fourth century to the thirteenth century. Fa Xian saw in the late fourth century during the reign of the Gupta dynasty that cowries were used as the currency of Bengal. The monetary system was vividly revealed in the second half of the thirteenth century when the Delhi Sultanate established an empire that stretched from Sindh to Bengal.²² In Pala, Bengal, trade was carried out by means of cowries, which were the then money of the country.²³ The cowries originated in the Maldives and were shipped to South Asia and Bengal, where they, therefore, began functioning as the monetary system. Many scholars have explored the cowrie monetary system in Yunnan from ninth to seventeenth centuries. But, where was the source of cowries in the landlocked Yunnan province of China located far from the sea? Tomè Pires observed that Bengal was the source of cowries in Yunnan.²⁴ Besides, both Ma Huan and Gong Zhen of the early fifteenth century recorded the word *kaoli* for the first time in their linguistic explanation. *Kaoli*, from its pronunciation, clearly refers to the transliteration of *cury* or *kauri*, suggesting the origin of cowries of Yunnan to be Bengal.²⁵ Likewise, in Bengal, the cowries were called *kaoli*.²⁶ On the other hand, in order to make silver coins known as *Tangjia*, silver was imported from China as there is no silver or lead mine in Bengal.²⁷ Coins were the symbol of sovereignty during the Muslim rule in Bengal. After announcing independence, every ruler issued coins in their name from their respective mints and trade was also conducted by the silver coin. Moreover, the knowledge of silk and cotton production from China and Bengal, respectively, transferred the opposite ways through the Silk Road. The Silk cloth production originated in China and the Chinese always produced certain varieties of silk cloth while the cotton cloth was first produced in South Asia, particularly, in Bengal. One of the routes for the transfer of cotton cultivation to China was East Bengal (Bangladesh), Assam of India, and Burma to western Yunnan and this may have also occurred during the Han dynasty.²⁸ *Gossypium Arboretum*, one of the

varieties of cotton cloth, which originated in East Bengal, became the basis for the Chinese cotton industry.²⁹ This has been attributed to the development of a new ginning frame in the late twelfth and early thirteenth century and to the Mongol of Yuan dynasty's (1271-1368 AD) encouragement of cotton cultivation in which the Mongols demanded cotton cloth for their troops.³⁰ Under the Mongols, five provinces paid a cotton tax in kind and later, during the Ming era, peasants with certain-sized holdings were required to use part of their land to produce cotton.

A host of tribal communities of extra-Indian origins, the Kambojas, infiltrated into Bengal from the northern and the north-eastern direction at different times of the ancient period. The Kambojas settled in the north-eastern hill tracts and, in due course of time, moved downwards into the plains of Bengal.³¹ For understanding the ethnic origin of the Kambojas, linguistic sources of the term Kamboja need to be discussed. Levi thinks that the term Kamboja is derived from 'Kam+bhoja'. It is a Sanskritised form of a Tibeto-Burmese word.³² Put differently, the Singhalese and Tibetans have shown the word Kamboja as derived from 'Kam+vuja', as transcribed form of *San-fo-tsi*, i.e., *Sam-bu-jay* in Chinese and *Samboja* in Javanese.³³ The word, thus, appears to be a Sanskritised form of a foreign word of Tibeto-Chinese origins. However, Sircar argues that the term Kamboja is a Sanskritised form of Koch, a group of people of north Bengal.³⁴ The Bengali term Koch is, thus, said to have come from Kawocha or Kamocha that may be Sanskritised into Kamboja. The analysis of the term, thus, reveals its non-Aryan derivation and indicates extra-Indian origin. Besides, the Koch and the Mech, other allied peoples of Bengal were originally of the Mongoloid ethnic-racial stock. The ancient Kambojas were also of the Mongoloid ethnic-racial stock. Moreover, Smith refers to Tibet or the Hindukush as the land of the Kambojas.³⁵ By analysing all the available facts, Ray has argued that the conquerors of northern Bengal might have come from the north-east of Bengal.³⁶ Similarly, in the Tibetan work, *Pang-Sam-Jon-Zang*, there are references to the Kambojas of both north-western and north-eastern region.³⁷ The ancestors of Kambojas were, therefore, of Tibeto-Chinese origin and came to Bengal from the region. Gradually, the Kambojas mixed up with the peoples of Bengal and their original physical features might have, thus, undergone considerable changes.³⁸ The Kambojas were also integrated within the

Brahmanical fold of the people of Bengal. Even with respect to religion, the Kambojas were devoted to Siva as is proved by the epigraphic record. The Kamboja king had built temples in honour of Siva.³⁹ In addition, the Kamboja king adopted Buddhism and the Brahmanic religion and, thus, merged into the religious patterns of the Bengali people. Besides, it is found that Rajyapala, who was the crest of the jewels of the Kamboja family, was a Saugata, a worshipper of the Buddha. Rajyapala, who was a devotee of God Vasudeva, was granted land as a gift from his capital Priyangu. The gift was recorded in the grant of Irda copper plate of Nayapaladeva.⁴⁰ The Kambojas, assimilated into the people of Bengal and contributed to its religious and political pattern.

Trade relations

Chinese silk and cotton textile of Bengal was dominant in their trade relationship in the ancient and medieval period. Besides, other goods used by the Chinese in trading with Bengal were gold, silver, satins, blue and white porcelain, copper, iron, musk, Vermillion, quick-silver, and grass mats. On the other hand, the products of Bengal traded with China were corals, pearls, crystals, cornelians, and peacock feathers. China sold silk textiles to Bengal for nearly two millennia from the early years of the Han dynasty (206 BC to 220 AD) to the period of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) and continued so even though India/Bengal began producing the cloth in the early Gupta period.⁴¹ In particular, Chinese silk, in Sanskrit *cinapatta*, was imported via Burma into Bengal during Mauryan (322-183 BC) or early Han times. Similarly, certain kinds of Bengal cotton cloth continued to be sold in China well after Chinese cultivation of cotton in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries.⁴² There is no doubt that cotton textile production and trade were important features of the Bengal economy for a long time. However, in the Tang era, the Chinese imported drugs and medical texts from Bengal and other parts of Indian sub-continent, many of them also associated with flourishing Chinese Buddhist culture of the period.⁴³ Recent archaeological excavations around modern Tamluk in West Bengal have brought out hundreds of gold coins and Terracotta objects belonging to second century BC.⁴⁴ During the construction of the Farakka Barrage of West Bengal, numerous materials of daily use and structures of the Maurya period in the fourth century BC were found.⁴⁵ In addition to all these, there are numerous architectural and sculptural

remains dating from the fourth to the twelfth century. These objects prove that trade between Bengal and China existed and Bengal was an important trade centre of the Indian sub-continent in the Maurya, Sunga, and Kusana periods. Apart from these, during the Yuan period, Wang Dayuan's account of his 1330s travels with Chinese sailors in the Straits of Malacca and the Bay of Bengal regions, *Daoyi Zhilue* (Brief Records of the Island Barbarians), published in 1349, shows that Bengal (*Pengjiala*) was, by the early fourteenth century, a destination of note for Chinese traders.⁴⁶ Then, Bengal was called *Pengjiala* in Chinese, which at present has been changed to the word *Mengjiala*. However, the record in the *Yingzong Shilu* (Veritable Records of Emperor Yingzong) provides that Song Yun, a Chinese trader, first visited the Ming court as the deputy envoy of a tributary mission from Bengal in mid-1439 and asked for and received funding to repair his damaged ship as well as a guarantee of protection for its return voyage from China to Bengal.⁴⁷ A subsequent record in the *Yingzong Shilu* in 1446 reveals that he was not only actively trading in Bengal but was networked with Samudra in northern Sumatra of Indonesia. The upper Bay of Bengal region, Bengal, was one of the Chinese marketplaces with goods of note.

All accounts of Chinese sources state that the soil of Bengal was fertile and there were produced crops in abundance. Among the agricultural products of Bengal, the Chinese especially mentioned twice-a-year cultivation of rice, two kinds of millet, sesame, beans, ginger, mustard, onions, garlic, cucumber, melons, and eggplant.⁴⁸ Among other native products, the Chinese have mentioned corals, pearls, crystals, cornelians, and peacock feathers. The common fruits were banana, jackfruit, sour pomegranate, and coconut. Sugarcane, sugar, honey, butter, and ghee were also much in use. The Chinese speak of the various industries of Bengal, such as paper, lacquer, sugar, cotton, and silk. In particular, the paper used to be made from the mulberry tree. One Chinese account said that the Bengal paper was white and that it used to be made from the bark of a tree. The most important industry was, however, the cotton industry and the Chinese accounts mentioned a number of cotton fabrics of Bengal.⁴⁹ During the Muslim rule in Bengal and Ming dynasty in China, trade relation between the two countries reached beyond of the previous eras. Particularly Ma Huan (1380-1460), to most accounts, paid his first visit to Bengal with Cheng Ho, the

ambassador of Ming Emperor Youngle as an interpreter in 1411-12 in order to conduct tributary trade. As seen in Ma Huan's travelogue, the Chinese mission reached Chittagong from Sumatra and there they changed over to small boats. Then they sailed towards Sonargaon, a distance of 500 *Li* or more (One *Li* is equal to one-third of a mile).⁵⁰ Travelling from this place in a south-western direction for thirty-five stages, they reached Gaur, the capital of Bengal and called on King Ghiyasuddin Azam Shah.⁵¹ The cotton textile, particularly, the pi-cloth was an attractive product of their trading from Bengal. Ma Huan remarked about Bengal fabrics that the land of Bengal produced five or six kinds of fine cloth. One of these cotton fabrics, a 'cloth as fine as starched paper', known as the pi-cloth, perhaps, the fine Muslin cloth for which Bengal was famous, is a type often mentioned in Chinese sources.⁵² The Muslin of Bengal was then superior to all others and received the name of Gangatiki from the Greeks indicating that it was on the bank of the Ganges.⁵³ However, the production of Muslin cloth became extinct during the colonial period. Furthermore, Fei Shin, another traveller like Ma Huan, came to Bengal with a mission led by Hou-Hien in 1415. According to his travelogue, Bengal had a seaport called Chittagong on the Bay of Bengal. Here certain duties were collected but King of Bengal received Chinese ships warmly. When the king heard that Chinese ships had arrived there, he sent high officers to offer robes and other presents, and over a thousand men and horses would also come to receive them to the port. By travelling 16 stages, they reached Sonargaon that was a walled city with tanks, streets, and bazaars wherein trade of all kinds of goods was carried on.⁵⁴ Here servants of the king met Chinese merchants with elephants and horses. Again by travelling twenty stages, they came to Pandua wherein the palace of King Jalaluddin Muhammad Shah was.⁵⁵

Chinese Admiral Zheng He also visited the port of Chittagong. He conducted tributary trade between Bengal and China and established warm diplomatic relations between Bengal Sultanate and the Ming dynasty of China.⁵⁶ Most of the 'tributary goods' were perfumes, spices, jewels, rare birds and animals, Chinese silk, and other special local products. Goods were exchanged between Chinese ship commanders and Bengali and other Indian merchants. On the arrival of the Chinese ship, local merchants came on board and fixed the date of transaction

with the ship commanders.⁵⁷ On the appointed day, the Chinese displayed their goods, negotiated the prices with local merchants and signed an agreement in duplicate.⁵⁸ Both sides obtained a copy of the agreement. Then, the local merchants and the merchants of the ship clapped each other's hands signifying finalisation of the deal. Negotiation over prices could consume from one to three months. Chinese silk was, for instance, exchanged for pearls. According to the description of Ibn Battuta, in Chinese vessels, there were three classes: the biggest called *Junk*, the middle sized called *Zao*, and the small size called *Kakam*.⁵⁹ The greater ships had from three to twelve sails, made of strips of bamboo woven like mats. Each of them had a crew of 1,000 men, viz., 600 sailors and 400 soldiers, and had three tenders attached, which were called, respectively, the Half, the Third, and the Quarter, names apparently indicating their proportionate sizes.⁶⁰ Every ship had four decks and numerous private and public cabins for the merchant passengers, with closets and all sorts of conveniences. The commander of the ship was an important personage and, when he landed, the soldiers belonging to big ship marched before him with swords, spears, and martial music.⁶¹ Therefore, there were conducted two kinds of trade between China and Bengal—tributary trade and private trade with local merchants. Trade relations between them were friendly and the process of trading was disciplined.

Political and diplomatic relations

China and Bengal have been conducting political and diplomatic relations since the period of the Tang dynasty. In the mid-seventh century, diplomatic missions were exchanged between the Tang court and the kingdoms of northern India and Bengal that often included Buddhist monks along with diplomatic envoys.⁶² In particular, cordiality between the two countries developed during the reigns of the Indian (including Bengal) King Harshavardhana and the Tang Emperor Tai Zong (627-649). King Harshavardhana sent his first mission to China in 641 and, in response, the Chinese Emperor reciprocated a mission headed by a military man General Liang Huaijing in 643. The second Chinese mission was sent in 645 or 646 under the leadership of Li Yibiao. Again, without waiting for the return mission from King Harshavardhana, the Chinese emperor sent the third embassy led by Wang Xuanze in 648.⁶³ Likewise, during the Yuan dynasty, emissaries

including Buddhist monks, were exchanged with each other. It is evident from the visit of Chinese traveller Wang Dayuan to Bengal, even though there are different views about exact dates of his visit. As *Visva-Bharati Annal 1* (1945) describes that Wang Dayuan visited Bengal in the winter of 1349-50 AD,⁶⁴ while Sen states two occasions of his visit, first from 1330 to 1334 and then between 1337 and 1339.⁶⁵ Whatever the dates, he visited Bengal during Yuan period in order to establish diplomatic relations and to conduct trade. Apart from these, during the Pala dynasty in India, the Kambojas of Chinese origin played an important role in the political history of ancient Bengal. They made a matrimonial relationship with the Pala kings and the kinship was so deep that even the last king of Pala dynasty was of Kamboja origin. In this context, a reference may be made to the Irda copper plate which records Kamvo Javamsatilaka Rajyapala. The name of the Kamboja king was suffixed with Pala. From the statement of the Arthasastra, it is known that the Kambojas were the best warriors.⁶⁶ The Sabhaparva of the Mahabharata also recorded that the king of Kamboja presented to Yudhishtira three hundred horses of various colours.⁶⁷ In the battle of Kurukshetra, the fast and powerful horses of Kambojas provided a great service to the Kauravas.

Significantly, there are a number of records on political and diplomatic relations between China and Bengal during the Ming dynasty in the first half of the fifteenth century. During the period, Jaunpur (West Bengal and Bihar) and Bengal was ruled by Pathan kings independent from Delhi Sultanate. Padua in the district of Maldah was then the capital of Bengal. A full account of political and diplomatic missions was found in the *Siyang Chao Kung Tien Lu* compiled in 1520, the *Shu Yu Chou Tseu Lu* compiled in 1574, and the *Ming-She*. According to the *Siyang Chao Kung Tien Lu* (a contemporary Chinese book), the first diplomatic mission was sent from Bengal by King Ghiyasuddin Azam Shah in 1408 AD during the reign of Hung Wu, the founder of the Ming dynasty.⁶⁸ It reached Tai-Tsang in Kiang-su with presents for the Emperor in the next year (1409). In this context, the Bengal King Ghiyashuddin Azam Shah was regarded as a farsighted statesman, since he adopted the policy to open up Bengal to China and other countries for trade relations. However, after that, in the earlier fifteenth century, Ming emperor, Yongle sent Chang Hu, a Chinese Muslim, as an envoy to Bengal.⁶⁹ According to the description of *Ming-She* (Annals of the Ming Dynasty), the Chinese

Ming emperor had also initiated a policy of opening up and communicating with foreign countries. Since then, ambassadors were sent from Bengal in almost every year. In particular, ambassadors were sent from Bengal in 1408, 1409, 1411, 1412, 1414, 1418, 1420, 1421, 1423, 1438–39 and from China in 1411-12, 1415, 1420, and 1422-23.⁷⁰ It was distinguishable that in 1412, the Chinese emperor sent a minister named Chenkiang for reception of ambassadors from Bengal before their arrival to the palace. The ambassadors reached the palace with news of the death of their king, Ghiyasuddin Azam Shah. The officials of the Chinese Emperor were, then, sent to attend the mourning ceremony of the dead king and the coronation ceremony of Prince Saifuddin Hamza Shah.⁷¹ In 1414, the new King of Bengal sent an ambassador with a mandate of expressing gratitude and presenting famous horses and other luxurious products of Bengal as gifts. Moreover, there is a kingdom called Jaunpur, the country of the Diamond Seat (Vajrāsana), in western Bengal; where Buddha attained spiritual enlightenment. The kingdom of Jaunpur, which had come to be founded in 1393 included Gayā, the place of Buddha's enlightenment.⁷² In 1412, the Chinese ambassador was sent to the kingdom of Jaunpur with the imperial mandate and presents of gold embroidered silk and decorated clothes for King Ibrahim Sharqi for opening up diplomatic and commercial relations with him.⁷³ Likewise, in 1415, the Chinese emperor sent Hou Hien with a naval force to communicate with Bengal and other countries. In 1420, the ambassador of King Jalaluddin Muhammad Shah of Bengal complained to the Chinese emperor's court that their country had been invaded by Jaunpur's King Ibrahim Sharqi, several times.⁷⁴ In October 1420, the Chinese emperor ordered Hou-Hien to go again for pacifying them. The mission was headed by a senior eunuch diplomat Hou Xian who delivered to the Jaunpur king the imperial edict that "Only through good neighbourliness can you protect your own territory."⁷⁵ Gold and money were, then, presented to the king of Jaunpur Ibrahim Sharqi and then the war stopped. It was said that Jalaluddin Muhammad Shah, the son of Raja Ganesh who had embraced in Islam, occupied the power of the Bengal Kingdom as a *de facto* king, making King Saifuddin Hamza Shah a puppet king. Raja Ganesh believed in Hindu religion and was a minister of King Ghiyasuddin Azam Shah. The Muslim king of Jaunpur, thus, attacked the *de facto* king Jalaluddin in order to recover the power of

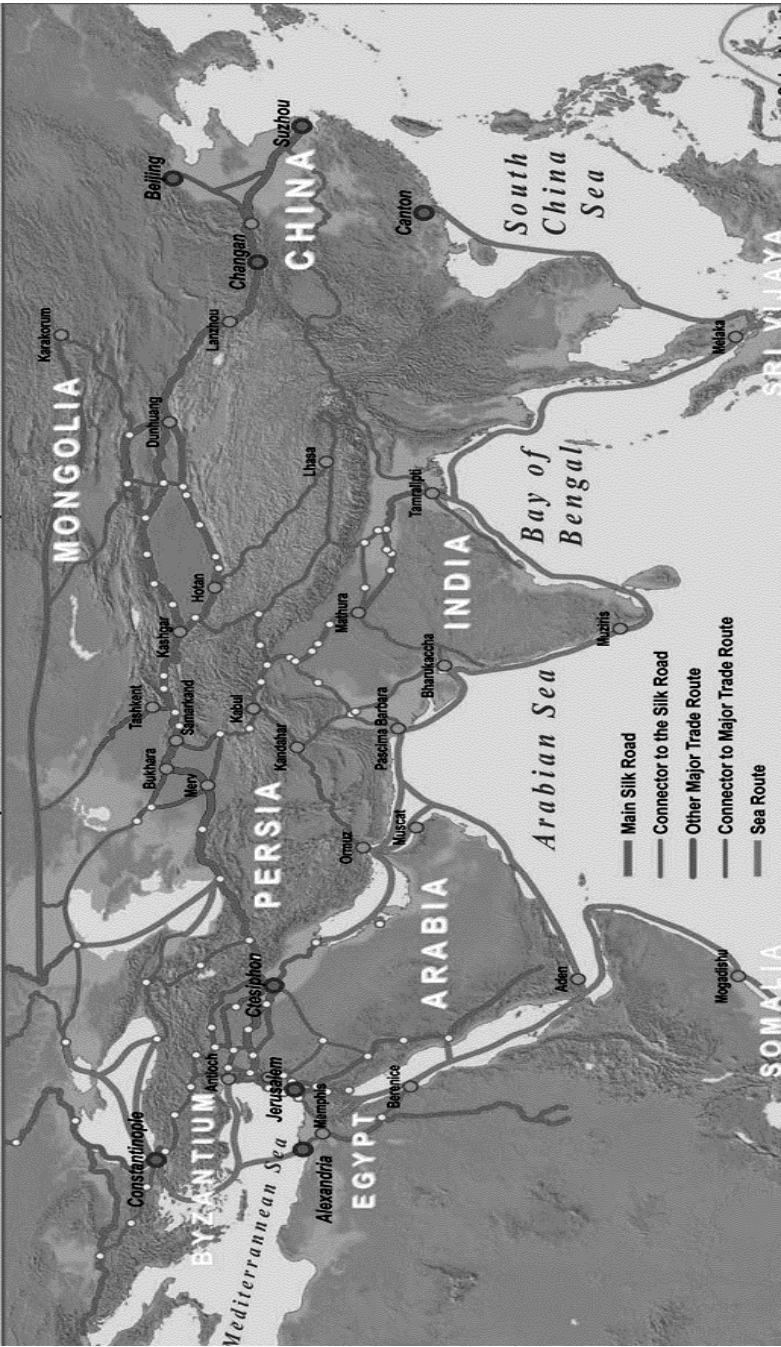
King Saifuddin Hamza Shah. Ibrahim Sharqi was specially requested by Qutb-ul-Alam, a Muslim saint of Bengal, to intervene in favour of the Muslims in Bengal.⁷⁶ Since warm diplomatic relations existed between the Ming emperor and the Muslim rulers in Bengal, the diplomacy of the Ming emperor was quite successful in solving the conflict between Bengal and Jaunpur kings.

Connectivity between China and Bengal

It is generally accepted that there were two main routes of the 'Silk Road', i.e., the northern route and the southern route, supplemented by the middle route, the sea routes, and by combined part-land and part-sea routes.⁷⁷ According to Herodotus's description of 430 BC, the northern route started at the mouth of the River Don, a region belonging to the Sarmatians (today's Uzbekistan). It then crossed the Volga (Oarus) and continued to the Ural River and finally reached Gansu.⁷⁸ The southern Silk Road from China to South Asia and Southeast Asia existed even before the Central Asian Silk Road became popular and the introduction of Buddhism to China. Moreover, evidence from ancient Indian classics, historical writings, and archaeological and anthropological observations has proved that there was a historical trade link between Bengal and Yunnan province of China via Assam and Manipur provinces of India and Myanmar. All trade links with northwest India were carried through the Qin territory of China. The state of Qin was a member of the Chinese feudal system during the Chun Qiu period (770-476 BCE) and became powerful following a policy of economic advancement.⁷⁹ Significantly, it was also found out that the road from Yongchang (Baoshan) of Ailao kingdom in Yunnan was historically a gateway to the outside world, where merchants from home and abroad would come for the purpose of trade.⁸⁰ In Myanmar, Bhamo and Myitkina were equally important centres of trade links between Bengal in the west and China in the east. During the period of the Qin and the Han dynasties, merchants from Sichuan travelled to Changan in the north and Nanyue (present-day Guangxi) in the south and travelled to Burma and Bengal via Dianzhu.⁸¹ Additionally, travel in the Brahmaputra Valley of Bengal and India was possible both by land and water routes passing through Sadiya, Kapili (within the boundaries of present Nowgong), Pragjyotishpura (Guwahati), Hadapeswara (Tezpur), and Davaka.

Guwahati in the middle of the Brahmaputra Valley was the capital of the ancient powerful kingdom of Kamarupa. It enjoyed a strategic geographic position, linked to the Burmese trade route in the east and feeding northern India in the west. It had flourishing commerce, being the major trans-shipment centre of goods by land and water. It has already been established by the evidence from the *Arthashastra*, the Indian epics, and the *Puranas* that around the fourth century, China had very close trade relations with India and Bengal. Furthermore, Singhal (1969) and Frank (1998) have alluded to trade over two overland routes through Nepal and Tibet to China.⁸² The southern Silk Road was, therefore, a circular road connecting South Asia and Central Asia with southern China and present-day Southeast Asia.⁸³ It began from Yunnan, passed through Myanmar, India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Tibet, and looped back to Yunnan.

The Silk Road and Arab Sea Routes (8th – 14th Centuries)



Source: <https://www.chinadiscovery.com/assets/images/silk-road/maps/Silk-Road-arabsea-route-Map-full.jpg>

In the fourth century BC, the Uttarapatha land route entered into central India on the one hand and the land routes from Bengal to China via Nepal and Myanmar on the other. The area was rich in resources, notably of cotton, iron, copper, and gold. The entire Gangetic area (the area of the Ganges River) as an international and domestic trading centre is well documented in various literary sources, dating from before the fourth century BC to the first five centuries.⁸⁴ Besides, the road linking south-western China (Yunnan and Sichuan) with India was recorded by Xuanzang (mid-seventh century) and Yijing (late-seventh century), as both authors described the route between Bengal and Sichuan. Fan Chuo, a military official who served in Tang China's Annan Protectorate also recorded these roads in his *Man Shu* (Records of the Barbarians). Although his books are currently missing, *Xin Tang Shu* (New History of the Tang Dynasty), edited in the tenth century, fortunately, kept a record of the seven routes that he had discerned, linking China with the 'barbarians of four directions'.⁸⁵ The sixth route linked Annan with India starting from Tonkin via Yunnan province through Prome to Maghada. Besides, the *Xin Tang Shu* (The New History of the Tang Dynasty) gives the distance from present-day Dali to the ancient city of Tagaung in Burma as 700 km from where the city of Pyus (Pugan, ancient Burmese kingdom) was 500 km.⁸⁶ The Kamarupa at the lower and middle course of the Brahmaputra River was 800 km to the west from where Pundravardhana (in north Bengal) was 200 km and Magadha on the south bank of the Ganges 300 km. Another route from Zhuge Liang passed through Myitkyina and Mogaung to Manipur (called Daqin Bolomen, Dakshin [South] Brahmadesa) covering a distance of about 850 km and finally south-westward to Pundravardhana, a distance of 750 km. Xuanzang describes the route from Magadha to Kamarupa, which covers a distance of 1,200 km.⁸⁷ Similarly, according to Jia Dan's record, there were two ways from Tonkin to Dai, one by the river and the other over land.⁸⁸ After arriving at Dali, the routes joined together and extended to Myanmar and Bengal. From Yunnan to India, there were again two routes; the southern one from Dali to Yongchang through the Pyu kingdom, Prome, the Arakan Range, Kamarupa and Bengal and the western one crossing the Irrawaddy, the Mogaung, and the Chindwin Rivers reached India beyond.⁸⁹ The southern route seemed very roundabout but it was important, not only because it linked Yunnan and

Myanmar but also because it connected the maritime Silk Road in the Bay of Bengal. From there eastward, people could reach Rongzhou in Sichuan, westward to India (Yandu) via Bengal, southeastward to Vietnam (Jiaozhi), north-eastward to Chengdu (capital of Sichuan), northward to the Big Snow Mountain (Daxueshan), and southward via Myanmar and Bengal to the sea. Moreover, Yang Bin has found out a vivid trade network that, as Tome Pires described, encompassed Bengal, Arakan, Pegu, Siam, Burma, and China.⁹⁰ The merchants from different regions including Chinese, Arabs, Gujaratis, Persians, Bengalis, Kling, Siamese, and other Southeast Asian from Ava, Burma, and Cambodia used the trade network. The centre of this trade network was most certainly Bengal as all of these countries were located along the Bay of Bengal. Although Yunnan was a land-locked area, it had built a historical relationship with the peoples of the Bay of Bengal through the land route. All scholars agree that China, Sri Lanka, and Bengal were all the sources of the origin of Buddhism in Yunnan. They argue that the introduction of Tantric Buddhism to Nanzhao was part of the Indianisation trend and vividly reveals the Bengali connections in Yunnan, just as the cowrie monetary system has done. In ancient period, Bengal, Northeast India, Myanmar, and south-western China were therefore, connected by the ancient Silk Road. The people of these countries visited and conducted trade with each other and exchanged religion, knowledge, arts, and literature. But, indeed there is, at present, no major transport route connecting this sub-region. An overland route linking the sub-region would facilitate the transnational flow of people, knowledge, and culture, minimising cross-border trade barriers, ensuring greater market access, and enhancing trade, tourism, investment, and economic growth. The connectivity initiative of the BCIM forum and China's BCIM Economic Corridor can revive the ancient Silk Road, which connected the sub-region.

Renowned navigator, Admiral Zheng He of the Ming dynasty, led seven maritime expeditions to the Indian Ocean during the period from 1405 to 1433, visiting 30 or more countries and places and expanded the Chinese maritime sphere of influence in the Indian Ocean region, in particular, the Bay of Bengal.⁹¹ The voyages of Vasco da Gama were successful in reaching the region a century after these expeditions. However, the maritime Silk Road followed by Admiral Zheng He went

through the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean to the shores of Arabia and Africa and would touch the seaports of Canton, Bangkok, Chittagong, Calcutta, Madras, Goa, Karachi, Muscat, and Alexandria on the Indian and African peninsula.⁹² The first expedition from 1405 to 1407 had its end destination in Guli (present-day Calicut in Kerala state) and the second expedition from 1407 to 1409 called at Jiayile (present Cail on the eastern coast of India), Xiao Gelan (Quilon of Kerala), Kezhi (Cochin of Kerala), Guli, and Ganbali (Coimbatore of Tamil Nadu).⁹³ The third expedition from 1409 to 1411 and fourth from 1413 to 1415 visited Jiayile, Kezhi, Xiao Gelan, and Guli. The fifth expedition travelled from 1417 to 1419 to Cochin, Coimbatore, and Shaliwanni (present-day Nagapatam of Tamil Nadu). The sixth expedition of Zheng He visited Chittagong and Calcutta ports in present-day Bangladesh and West Bengal, respectively, in 1421. The seventh expedition from 1432 to 1433 called at Cail, Cochin, Calicut, and Coimbatore.⁹⁴ These expeditions conducted tributary trade and diplomatic duties between China and Indian southern coast and Bengal. Therefore, it may be noted that by the maritime expedition of Admiral Zheng He China conducted trade and diplomatic relations with Bengal and other places of the Indian Ocean region. China's twenty-first century maritime Silk Road is the updated version of the maritime route followed by Admiral Zheng He.

Conclusion

The overall traditional relations of Bengal and China can be regarded as friendly in the pre-European times of Bengal. Their relations included exchange of culture and knowledge, trade, as well as political and diplomatic relations. Particularly, during China's Han, Tang, and Yuan Dynasties, religious (Buddhism) and trade relations between the two countries were a dominant feature. However, during the Ming dynasty in China and Muslim rule in Bengal, political, diplomatic, and trade relations were prominent. Scholars, travellers, and Buddhist monks visited China and Bengal for gathering knowledge, preaching Buddhism, and for the purpose of trade. Significantly, the Kambojas of Chinese origin settled in and mixed with the people of Bengal and contributed to the religion and politics of Bengal. Besides, the cowries originating in the Maldives were shipped to South Asia and Bengal, where they began functioning as the monetary system. The source of cowries in Yunnan

was Bengal that worked as the monetary system there from the ninth to the seventeenth centuries. During the Ming dynasty, the giraffe presented by the king of Bengal to the Chinese emperor was one of the rare cultural proofs of the cordial historical relationship between China and Bengal.

Trade Relations between China and Bengal existed in all of the dynasties of China. In particular, Chinese sold silk textiles to India/Bengal for nearly two millennia from the early years of the Han dynasty to the period of the Ming dynasty. Similarly, certain kinds of Bengal cotton textile were sold in China even well after the Chinese cultivation of cotton in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. The silk cloth production originated in China, while cotton textile was first manufactured in South Asia, particularly, in Bengal. The knowledge of silk and cotton production from China and Bengal, respectively, transferred to each other through the Silk Road. *Gossypium Arboretum*, one of the varieties of cotton cloth, which originated in East Bengal (Bangladesh) transferred to China and became the basis for the Chinese cotton industry. Moreover, other goods used by the Chinese in trading with Bengal were gold, silver, satins, blue and white porcelain, copper, iron, musk, Vermillion, quick-silver and grass mats. On the other hand, products of Bengal traded with China were corals, pearls, crystals, cornelians and peacock feathers. During Ming dynasty in China and Muslim rule in Bengal, the expeditions of Admiral Zheng He of the Ming emperor conducted tributary trade between Bengal and conducted warm diplomatic relations with the king of Bengal. Most of the goods of this trade were perfumes, spices, jewels, rare birds and animals, Chinese silk, and other special local products. Furthermore, political and diplomatic relations between China and Bengal have been evidenced in the Tang dynasty. Diplomatic relations between the Tang court and the kingdom of north-western Bengal often included Buddhist monks along with diplomatic envoys, who performed religious activities. In particular, cordiality between the two countries developed first between the Indian/Bengal King Harshavardhana and the Tang Emperor Tai Zong (627-649). Significantly, diplomatic relations between two countries reached the highest level beyond all other previous relations during the Ming dynasty and Muslim rule in Bengal. The Ming emperor solved the conflict between the kings of Bengal and Jaunpur.

China's southern land-based and maritime Silk Road was connected to Bengal and the Bay of Bengal. In particular, China's southern Silk Road linked Bengal via Myanmar on the one hand and via northeast India on the other, from Yunnan and Tibet. The southern route seemed very roundabout as people could reach Rongzhou in Sichuan eastward, westward to India/Bengal (Yandu), southeastward to Vietnam (Jiaozhi), north-eastward to Chengdu (capital of Sichuan), northward to the Big Snow Mountain (Daxueshan), and southward to the Bay of Bengal via Bengal and Burma. The route was strategically significant because it linked Yunnan and Bengal via Burma, and also connected the maritime Silk Road in the Bay of Bengal. Additionally, the sixth maritime expedition of Zheng He visited Chittagong and Calcutta ports in Bangladesh and West Bengal, respectively. The expedition made trade relations with local merchants and conducted diplomatic relations with the king of Bengal, and fought against piracy in the Indian Ocean. Therefore, a vivid trade network encompassed Bengal, Arakan, Pegu, Siam, Burma and China. The merchants from different regions, including Chinese, Arabs, Gujaratis, Persians, Bengalis, Kling, Siamese, and other Southeast Asian used the trade network. The centre of this trade network was certainly Bengal along the Bay of Bengal. Although the ancient Silk Road has linked Bengal and Yunnan, there is, at present, no over-land road between them. A road link between Bangladesh and Yunnan Province via northeast India and Myanmar can foster economic development, increase people-to-people contact, and return the heritage of ancient period, which prevailed between them in the ancient period.

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