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A Seventh-Century Visit to Sumatra

An admirer of Fa-hsien, I-tsing (635–713), like his predecessor, was admitted to a Buddhist order at an early age, devoting the first thirty-seven years of his life to scholarly and monastic pursuits. In 671, I-tsing left for India, and in the course of his twenty-five year journey stopped at several points in Southeast Asia on the return voyage to China. The following travel account is one of the major reports of Indianized Southeast Asia during the period of the Tang Dynasty in China (618–907).

... This [East India] is the place where we embark when returning to China. Sailing from here two months in the south-east direction we come to Ka-cha [Acheh]. By this time a ship from Bhoga [Palembang] will have arrived there. This is generally in the first or second month of the year. But those who go to the Sinhala Island (Ceylon) must sail in the south-west direction. They say that that island is 700 yoganas off. We stay in Ka-cha till winter, then start on board ship for the south, and we come after a month to the country of Malayu, which has now become Bhoga; there are many states (under it). The time of arrival is generally in the first or second month. We stay there till the middle of summer and we sail to the north; in about a month we reach Kwang-fu (Kwang-tung). The first half of the year will be passed by this time.

When we are helped by the power of our (former) good actions, the journey everywhere is as easy and enjoyable as if we went through a market, but, on the other hand, when we have not much influence of Karma, we are often exposed to danger as if (a young one) in a reclining nest. I have thus shortly described the route and the way home, hoping that the wise may still expand their knowledge by hearing more.

Many kings and chieftains in the islands of the Southern Ocean admire and believe (Buddhism), and their hearts are set on accumulating good actions. In the fortified city of Bhoga Buddhist priests number more than 1,000, whose minds are bent on learning and good practices. They investigate and study all the subjects that exist just as in the Middle Kingdom (Madhya-desa, India); the rules and ceremonies are not at all different. If a Chinese priest wishes to go to the West in order to hear (lectures) and read (the original), he had better stay here one or two years and practice the proper rules and then proceed to Central India.

At the mouth of the river Bhoga I went on board the ship to send a letter (through the merchant) as a credential to Kwang-chou (Kwang-tung), in order to meet (my friends) and ask for paper and cakes of ink, which are to be used in copying the Sūtras in the Brahma-language, and also for the means (cost) of hiring scribes. Just at that time the merchant found the wind favourable, and raised the sails to their utmost height. I was in this way conveyed back (although not myself intending to go home). Even if I asked to stop, there would have been no means of doing so. By this I see it is the influence of Karma that can fashion (our course), and it is not for us, men, to plan it. It was on the twentieth day of the seventh month in the first year of the Yung-ch’ang period (689) that we reached Kwang-fu...