

# ON A TENTATIVE LOCATION OF "FO-SHIH COUNTRY" IN THE T'ANG PERIOD

by Shōji ITŌ

This article will attempt to set forth a tentative view concerning the location of "Fo-shih Country" in the T'ang period. Since this is only tentative, I would therefore welcome suggestions and corrections on my theory.

In a previous SPAFA's Workshop on Srivijaya, Mr. Khemchat Thepchai<sup>1</sup> of Thailand reported that he found Chinese glazed stoneware sherds of the T'ang period during his excavation at Laem Pho in Chaiya, Surat Thani Province in southern Thailand. He proposed that Laem Pho might have been an important Srivijaya entrepot at that time.

I-Tsing (637-712 A.D.), a great Buddhist monk and sutra's translator, recorded his travels between 671 and 695 A.D. to "Fo-shih Country". Through ancient Chinese records like the writings of I-Tsing, we can obtain more information about the location of Fo-shih.

Another useful record which can help locate Fo-shih is an old Chinese record called the *Hsin T'ang Shu* ("Dili-zhi 33") that gives us some information about the location in Fo-shih country. This book gives an account of a maritime route, from Canton in China

to the Indian Ocean. It was actually a record written by a Chinese "Chia Tan" in about 800 A.D. of the T'ang period.

There are several interpretations of the voyage made by Chia Tan. With all due respect to the earlier scholars, my reading of those records based on comparisons with current geographical sources yields the following:

*"If one goes to the Southeast from Canchou for 200 li, one reaches Tunmen-shan. After that, in full sail, if one goes to the West (from Tūnmén-shān) for two days, one reaches Jīuchōushih for two days, one reaches Xiangshih. Also if one goes to the Southwest (from Xiangshih) for three days, one reaches Chānbulao-shān. This Chānbulao-shān is in Húanwang country. This country is situated in the sea East about 200 li.*

*Again if one goes to the South (from Chānbulao-shān) for two days, one reaches Ling-shan. Also if one goes (from Ling-shan) for one day, one reaches Mendu country. Again if one goes (from Mendu country) for one day, one reaches Gūdá country. Also proceeding (from Gūdá country) for half a day, one reaches Bēntuóláng-chōu. Again if one goes (from Bēntuóláng-chōu) for two days, one reaches Jūntulūng-shān. Again if one goes (from Jūntulūng-shān) for five days, one reaches a strait, which is called "Chih" by the native people. This strait runs from the North to the South with a length of 100 li. On its northern shore is Lō-Yueh*

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country. On its southern shore is Fo-shih country (In Fo-shih country, I heard the following:) If one goes by ship to the East (from Fo-shih country) for four or five days, one reaches Ho-ling country, which is the largest one in the southern countries. (Now put back in Fo-shih country), again if one goes out into the West through the strait, one takes three days to reach Kokosengchih country”.

From this record of “Hsin T’ang Shu”, several place names or countries and the time required to sail to these places are as follows:

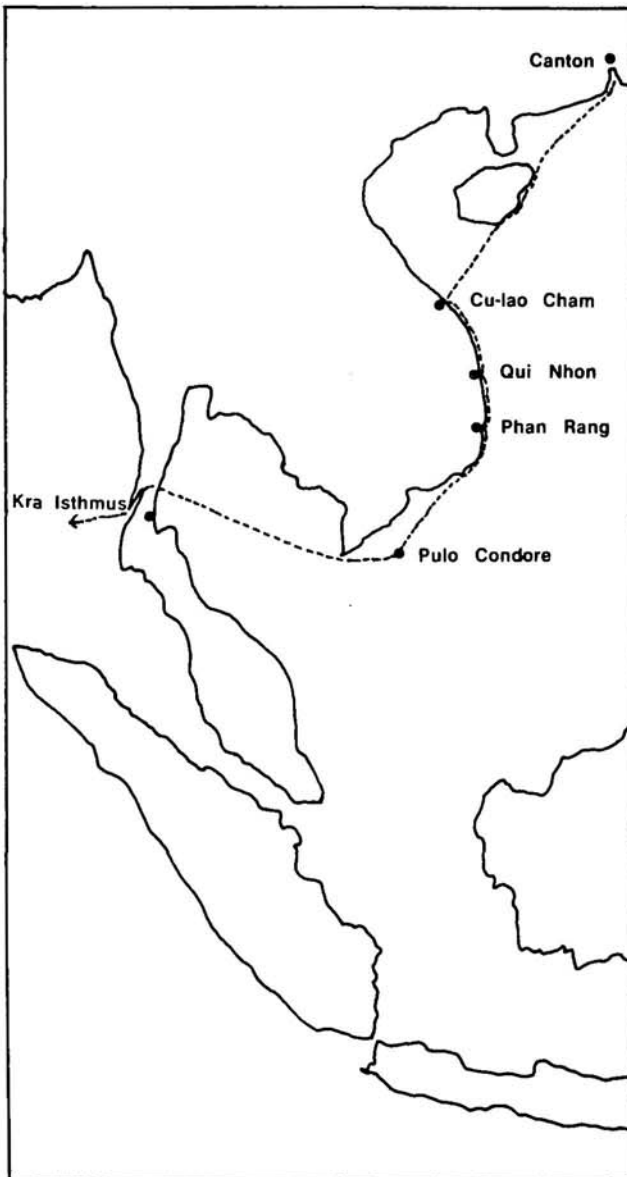


Fig. 1 A maritime route from Canton to the Indian Ocean via “strait” about 800 A.D.

Canchou (Canton)  
 ↓ to the Southeast, 200 li  
 Tūnmen-shān (near Hong Kong)  
 ↓ to the West, for two days  
 Jiūchōushih (unknown)  
 ↓ to the South, for two days  
 Xiangshih (around eastern shore of Hainan island)  
 ↓ to the Southwest, for three days  
 Chānbulao-shān (Cu-lao Cham)  
 ↓ to the South, for two days  
 Ling-shān (Qui Nhon)  
 ↓ for two days and a half  
 Bēntuoláng-chōu (Phan Rang)  
 ↓ for two days  
 Jūntulùng-shān (Pulo Condore)  
 ↓ for five days  
 Strait (Kra Isthmus)

Firstly, according to this record, it takes the sailboat 18 days and a half from Tunmen-shan to the Strait. Beyond the strait, it takes the sailboat 19 days and a half from the strait to far off Sri Lanka. So based on the sailing direction the strait mentioned in the text is situated almost in the middle between Tūnmén-shān (near Hong Kong) and Sri Lanka.

Secondly, one can estimate the distance a sailboat can cover an average of 156 kms. in a day. So between Cu-lao Cham and Qui Nhon, the sailboat advanced 132 kms. in a day. Next, between Qui Nhon and Phan Rang, it ran 136 kms. in a day. And from Phan Rang to Pulo Condore, it advanced 200 kms. in a day.

Since it takes 5 days for the sailboat to traverse the distance between Pulo Condore and the strait, we can calculate the distance between the two places, average distance the boat travels a day 156 kms. times 5 days making a total of 780 kms. So it can be proposed that the location of the strait might be a place 780 kms. distance from Pulo Condore. As I have shown in Fig. 1, if one searches for the location of the strait 780 kms. from Pulo Condore on a map, one can see that it will be located approximately in the Malay Peninsula.

Thirdly, it was quite regrettable that in this voyage, no mention was made about the direction of the sailboat from Pulo Condore. It is unknown which way the sailboat headed. But it seems likely that the direction of the sailboat should naturally follow the directions of the tide and wind. As for the wind direction, Prof. M.C. Chand Chirayu of Thailand explained in his article in the *Journal of the Siam Society* (1974) Vol. 62, part 1 that the wind direction could have brought the ship on which I-Tsing was travelling in December, to points Southwest and above the equator. The fact that I-Tsing took 20 days to reach landfall, could mean that the ship sailed with the Northwest monsoon which cut short the journey

by half<sup>2</sup>. As far as the tide direction is concerned, Fig. 2 shows that the direction of the tide first advanced to the Southwest from the southern shore of Formosa, then turned directions at Pulo Conaore or Cape Camau and advanced to the Siam Gulf. So following the directions of the wind and tide, we can estimate that the direction of the sailboat was westward up to the interior sea of the Siam Gulf. Then it might have reached the eastern shore of the northern part of the Malay Peninsula. I am inclined to think that the port of call might have been an entrance to the "Strait".

It seems to me that "Fo-shih country" should be located in the Malay Peninsula. According to Hsin T'ang Shu, Fo-shih country was situated on the southern shore of the strait. So if one could locate the strait, automatically it is possible to know the location of Fo-shih country. Fortunately, the record added some descriptions about the strait. They are as follows:

- (1) The Strait is called "Chih" by native people.
- (2) The Strait runs from the North to the South with a length of 100 li.
- (3) On the strait's southern shore is Fo-shih country.
- (4) It takes 3 days to traverse (the area) to the West through strait.

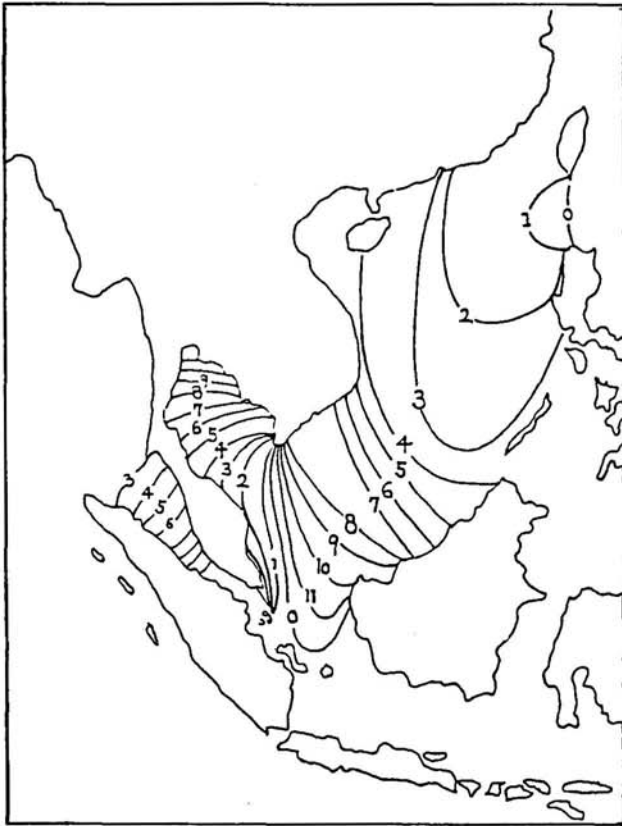


Fig. 2 The lines of tide shown at intervals of one hour based on Dobby, 1956

Among the four points of the description, (2) is the most important one. But in the present days, there is no strait or channel to traverse from the eastern to the western shore of the Malay Peninsula. But I imagine the existence of such a channel as a tentative possibility. The "Strait" referred to in the text might be the Kra Isthmus in the northern part of the Malay Peninsula. My hypothesis is supported by the fact that today, the Kra Isthmus acts as a channel and runs from an interior area of the Malay Peninsula to the western shore.

At first, it seems to me that the description in record, "from north to south," might fit the flowing direction of Kra Isthmus. In the next place, a remarkable point in record, is that it was recorded that the length of this strait, was "100 li". This term called "li" is a unit of distance used during the T'ang period. "100 li" is equal to 55.98 kms. in length at that time. However the actual length of the Kra Isthmus from Ban Pack Cham, in the northern edge to Victoria Point is 67 kms., which forms the mouth of the Isthmus, the 100 li (55.98 kms.) is shorter. But it seems that it is

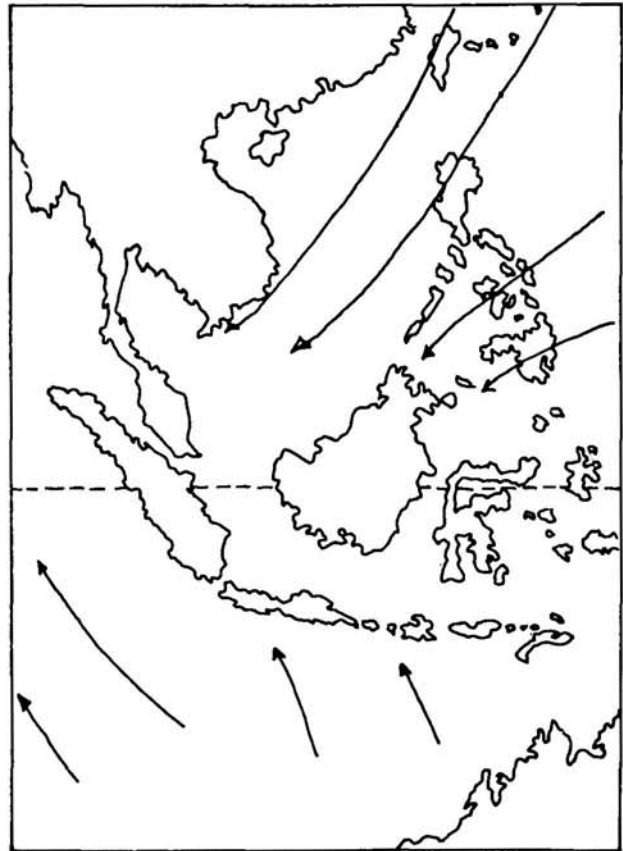


Fig. 3 Windchart for November when It-Ching set sail from Canton for Chele-foche in 671 A.D. according to Prof. M.C. Chan Chirayu Rajani.

reasonable to assume that "100 li" might only be an estimate of the distance between the end points of the Isthmus of Kra.

In other words, distances used in *Hsin T'ang Shu* were represented only in multiples of 100 li. Thus the East-West distance of the Kra Isthmus in the T'ang period text was reckoned simply as "100 li". Therefore, I am inclined to think that the description of "the strait as having 100 li in length which runs from north to south" might refer to length and directional flow of the Kra Isthmus as it is in the present days.

Another question still remains to be answered, and this is the location of the entrance of the "Strait". I suggest that the entrance might be in the area of Chumphon. But in this record, there is no description about the land on the eastern shore of the Malay Peninsula to the eastern entrance of the Kra Isthmus. Perhaps the writer omitted describing the eastern side of the Isthmus due to the short distance involved. The writer was probably more concerned showing other travellers how to get across the Kra Isthmus.

As a conclusion, since the text described "on this strait's southern shore is Fo-shih country", I am inclined to think that Fo-shih country might be the area around Chaiya. As I have mentioned at the beginning of this paper, Chinese T'ang ceramics were found in Chaiya, and several Buddhist ruins and images were also discovered in this area.

In a previous SPAFA's Workshop, Mr. Preecha Noonsuk<sup>3</sup> of Thailand presented a paper about the meaning of the term "Chaiya". He said that Chaiya originally meant "Banyan tree-Medicine". Since the Bayan tree is the sacred Bodhi tree for Buddhists, thus Chaiya is closely associated with Buddhism. Likewise the meaning of "Fo-shih" also has Buddhist connotation "Fo" means Buddha and "Shih" means death.

Finally, to show the Buddhist character of Fo-shih country, we refer again to the Chinese pilgrim, I-Tsing, who stayed in Fo-shih country during the T'ang period. I-Tsing described this country in his book, called "*Ken-pen-shuo-i-chieh-yu-pu-po-i-chieh-mo*" (Buddhist sutra) 5 as follows:

*"In Fo-shih, there are over one thousand Buddhist monks living. They strive to learn and practice Buddhism. Its method, rites, etc., are the same as in China. Therefore if Buddhist monks of the T'ang period wish to go to India and learn Buddhism, they should stay at Fo-shih for one or two years, then they had better head for Central India".*

The remarkable point in this record is the relationship between Fo-shih country and Central India. From this description, it seems to me that the location of Fo-shih country was a place from where a traveller could easily reach Central India, and where Indian Buddhist influences could spread easily. In paper

presented at previous SPAFA Workshop on Srivijaya, I discussed a peculiar iconographic image of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva<sup>4</sup> found in Chaiya that is closely associated with images of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva found in Central India. I believe that the iconographic similarities between the Chaiya Avalokitesvara and those found in Central India further supports my hypothesis that Fo-shih was located in the area in and around the Isthmus of Kra, possibly at Chaiya.

## NOTES

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## GLOSSARY OF CHINESE CHARACTERS

Fo-shih 佛逝	Ling-shān 陵山
I-Tsing 義淨	Mendu 門毒
Hsin T'ang Shu 新唐書	Guada 古達
Dili-zhi 地理志	Bēntuóláng-shōu 奔陀浪州
Chia Tan 賈耽	Jūntulung-shān 軍突弄山
Canchōu 廣州	Chih 質
Tunmen-shān 屯門山	Lo-yueh 羅越
Jiūchōushih 九州石	Kokosengchih 葛菴僧祇
Xiangshih 象石	Chànbulāo-shān 占不勞山
Chànbulāo-shān 占不勞山	HuánWàng 環王
HuánWàng 環王	Ken-pen-shuo-i-chieh-yu-pu-po-i-chieh-mo
Ken-pen-shuo-i-chieh-yu-pu-po-i-chieh-mo	根本說一切有部百一羯磨

Taishō Tripitaka, vol. 24, no. 1453,  
(Mūlasarvāstivādaikaśatakarman)