CHAPTER-III

MARITIME TRADE RELATIONS OF KOLLAM WITH CHINA

China had been a major country in sustaining the transmarine trading activities with Kollam during the medieval period. The flourishing of Indo-Chinese merchants played a major role in ancient Sino-Indian relations. They not only paved the way for the very first diplomatic and religious contacts, but also played an important role in the exchange of ideas and information. While the Silk Road through the perilous deserts of Central Asia formed the main overland route from China to northern India, the coasts of two countries were linked by the maritime route through South East Asia.

The contemporaneous sources give very little information about the sea-borne trade carried out from the Indian subcontinent at the time when Muslim expansion began in the Indian Ocean. It may well be the case that the range of Chinese and Indonesian goods sold in Daybul, Quilon, and Calicut, even in these early years were greater than it was thought necessary to record.¹ It is very probable that the large settlement of Muslims in Canton and their navigational techniques in sailing ships out of sight of land enabled them to operate as universal carrier of cargo and passengers in all the major sea-port towns of the Indian Ocean.

In the Chinese annals of the fifth, sixth and seventh centuries, all the products of Ceylon and India are classed, with those of Arabia and Africa, as products of Persia. The direct sea route between India and China, however, is known to have come into common use by the fifth century.

The trade with China, which had very much decreased in the previous centuries, revived with great vigour in the eighth century. By the ninth century the countries of southern Asia had developed an extensive maritime commerce which brought great prosperity. The T’ang empire in China, Sri-Vijaya (Sumatra) under the powerful line of the Sailendras, and the Abbasid Caliphate at Baghdad (see p.224, map.2) were the chief states outside India that flourished on this trade. According to the records of the T’ang dynasty (618-913), Kollam was their chief settlement. Ma Huan refers to the products and coinage of Kollam. He records that Kollam was very familiar to the navigators of T’ang dynasty.

Chinese ships regularly called at the ports of the Malay Peninsula and Sumatra to buy foreign goods. From the twelfth to fifteenth century, Chinese sea-going junks were frequent visitors to the west coast of India. Siraf on the eastern coast of the Persian Gulf was the chief emporium in the west and the rich merchants of that city feasted the numerous merchants from China, Java, Malaya and India who visited their city. The chief imports of Siraf were aloes, amber, camphor, precious stones, bamboo, ivory, ebony, paper, sandal-wood, Indian perfumes, drugs and condiments.

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The evidences of Arab geographers’ accounts, travelogues and indigenous literature are corroborated by archeological remains in the form of different types of Chinese ceramics obtained from several sites in the Malabar coast such as Baliapatam, Cannanore, Dharmadam, Pantalayini Kollam (see p.247, F.18), Ponnani, Kodungallur and Kollam.\(^5\) Earlier, Chinese sherds mixed with local pottery were reported from Kodungallur.

The maritime contact of China with Kollam is attested to by the Arab travellers like Sulayman and Ibn Khurdadbeh. The early Chinese rendering of Kollam was corrupted into Gulin. With the Mangol period (Yuan dynasty) the name is transcribed as Julan whereas Daoyi Zhilue renders the name as Xiao Gelan.\(^6\)

By Zhou Qufei’s (Chinese ruler-1178) time, Quilon had become a very busy and well known entrepot deserving a separate notice on it. He states “The ships took forty days from Gung – Zhou to Lambri (Lan-li) where the Chinese spent the winter and resumed journey next sailing season to reach Kollam in about a month. From here, those Chinese traders who wished to go to the Arab countries embarked on small boats”.\(^7\) Ibn Khurdadhbeh records the Jewish traders on their return from China used


\(^7\) Ibid.
to carry back musk, aloes, camphor, cinnamon, and other products of the eastern
countries.  

The Chinese had comparatively advanced knowledge of ship building and
navigation. The Chinese vessels are of three kinds; large ships called *chunks*, and
middle ones called *zaws* (dhows), and small ones called *kakams*. The indigenous
Malayalam literature of the 13th to the 16th century refers to the Chinese contacts with
the Malabar Coast. A mid fourteenth century poem called *Unnunili Sandesam*
mentions the Chinese *junks* (chunks) which came to the shore of Kollam.  

The Chinese traders and many unscrupulous officials invested their capital
in overseas commercial ventures and built large ships for foreign trade. The men of
the coastal districts, who had a long maritime tradition, sailed these vessels as sailors
with the introduction of new techniques of cotton processing, and paper and textile
manufacture, the rich region of the lower Yangtze had grown richer and hence,
needed foreign markets.

Even before Marco polo, the Chinese must have had a settlement at Kollam.
Marco Polo himself was employed by the Kublai Khan in a diplomatic capacity, and

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9 Ibn Battuta, *Travels in Asia and Africa-1325-1354*, Translated and Selected by H.A.R.Gibb, Reprint,
New Delhi, 2001, p.235.
11 Haraprasad Ray,“An Enquiry into the Presence of the Chinese in South and South-East Asia after
the Voyages of Zheng He” in K..S. Mathew (ed.), *Mariners, Merchants and Oceans – Studies in
Maritime History*, New Delhi, 1995, p.103.
visited Kollam while he was a Chinese Mandarin in the service of the Kublai Khan. According to Yule, “Kublai had a good deal of diplomatic intercourse of his usual kind with Kaulam (Quilon).” Consequently the king of Kollam had benefited largely from the Chinese trade.

Marco Polo remembers that the Great Khan derives very large revenue from the duties paid in the city of Zaiton and Haven. He levies a duty of ten per cent. Then again the ship’s charge for freight on small wares is 30 per cent., on pepper 44 per cent., and on lignaloes, sandalwood, and other bulky goods 40 per cent., so that between freight and the Khan’s duties the merchant has to pay a good half the value of his investment. Though on the other half he makes such a profit that he is always glad to come back with a new supply of merchandise.

Marco Polo on his return voyage from China (C.1293 CE.) touched the Kerala ports in the kingdoms of ‘Comari’ (Cape Comrin), ‘Coilum’ (Quilon) and ‘Eli’ (Elimala) and ‘Melibar; (Possibly Kozhikode, the kingdom of Zamorin). The products of Kerala mentioned are pepper, cinnamon, ginger and indigo. Foreign merchants brought here copper, gold, silver, silk, cloves and spikenard, which they exchanged for the products of the country. Regarding the trade of Kollam, Marco Polo says: “The merchants from Manzi (South China) and their ships and their merchandise make great profits both by what they import and what they export”

As observed by Marco Polo, one strand of its commerce ran to Manzi (China) however, the strongest strand of Kollam’s trade was the one with Arabia and the Levant from where commodities were further taken to Venice for distribution in Europe. The administrative unification and economic achievements of T’ang China, while they were responsible for the creation of new consumer demands and social tastes for luxuries within the limits of the empire, also led in the Far East to the emergence of a larger zone of Chinese cultural influence.  

The testimony of the Jewish traveller Benjamin of Tudela (1170) on conditions of trade in Kollam under Cola rule is worth citing. Ma Huan tells us that Kollam was known to the Chinese navigator of the T’ang dynasty (618-913 A.D). He records that one can reach from Cochi to Kollam with a journey of one night and one day.  

It is certainly true that the Arab conquests and rapid demographic diffusion and the political integration of Egypt, Syria, Iran and North Africa created an enormously powerful zone of economic consumption. Arab economic success in the early caliphate period was achieved with the aid of the skills possessed by the people of the ancient Near East. But the growth of great urban centres, a universal feature of Islam, and the new capital cities gave rise to an expanding demand for commodities of all kinds and for precious objects. This in turn quickened the pace of long-

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distance trade. The unity and homogeneity of the Arab world under the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates lasted for a long time.

About the middle of the eleventh century the empire of the Khalifs began to decline, and its decline paved the way for the interruptions of the Turks. The political collapse of Abbasid Caliphate caused a temporary commercial decline in West Asia, the area of Arabian Sea. The greatest loser was Kollam, whose importance depended on its commercial ties with the ports of Persian Gulf. Though Kollam maintained a good relationship with China, its trade with the Persian Gulf declined rapidly.

Kollam is the nearest of the Mulaybar towns to China and it is to it that most of the merchants (from China) came. The imports into China were of two distinct categories of goods, manufactured textile fabrics mostly of cotton, spices and drugs, and by far the more valuable intrinsically, jewels and semi-precious substances like ivory rhinoceros horn, ebony, amber, coral, various aromatic products and perfumes.

The chief articles of export from Kollam were brazil-wood or sapang, indigo, ginger and pepper, in which last was in great demand in China. Marco Polo estimates that Kuisay, the largest city in China at the time, alone consumed daily 43 loads of pepper, each load weighing about 200 lbs. They are said to have realized the large profits from the pepper trade. Kollam was the first port at which the Chinese ships

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touched while reaching India, and most of the Chinese ships touched it on reaching India, and most of the Chinese merchants frequented it; but the Mohamedans had already succeeded in wresting a considerable portion of the trade form their hands. Ma Huan refers to the Muslims as a major trading community of medieval period.  

At the end of the tenth century, the Sung government of the day showed great interest in foreign trade. It became a government monopoly and strenuous efforts were made to increase it. The Colas sent ‘embassies’ to China. Chinese sources record four separate Cola missions to China. The first mission was sent by Rajaraja I on 16 October 1015. The envoy of the mission presented the Emperor with 800 kgs. of pearls, sixty pieces of ivory, sixty pounds of incense and 3,300 pounds of perfumes. The chief articles of merchandise in this long distance trade were necessarily goods that carried great value for small bulk.

Spices, coconut and areca nut of Kerala had great demand in China and the Chinese brought to Kerala coast goods like silk, porcelain, copper, quick silver, tin, lead etc. Chinese net and ceramics of China had great demand in Kerala coasts and Kollam was an important centre of Chinese trade.

This trade was at first welcomed in China, but in the twelfth century, the drain of currency and precious metals resulting from this expansion of the trade in luxuries caused serious concern to the Chinese government. They, therefore, prohibited the

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export of precious metals and coined money, and put restrictions on the trade with ‘Ma’bar’ and ‘Kulam’ that is the Coromandel coast and Kollam.

Drainage of China’s metallic currency, compelled China to take measures from time to time to preserve the metals from flowing out. For example, as early as 1282 and 1283 use of cash was restricted and iron was strictly prohibited.26 Silver also flowed out of the Chinese economy.27 In 1296 the exportation of gold and silver was again prohibited and the government tried to limit the trade with Malabar, Kollam and Fandaraina.28 The restriction indicates very clearly the fact that the ports on the Malabar Coast had very active trade relations with China in the thirteenth century.29 Hundreds of Chinese coins were discovered by the team of Dr.P. Rajendran, archaeologist and U.G.C.scientist, Kerala University, recently from Sasthamkotta lake. Bronze and copper coins have been discovered from this region. These coins belonged to 10th century A. D. and have a square hole in the middle and script on the one side of the coin.30

Chau-Ju-kua speaks of the goods transacted by the Chinese at Kollam. They included ho-chi silks, porcelain ware, camphor, cloves, sandal wood, cardamom and

30 Personal communication with Dr. P. Rajendran, Archaeologist, Kerala University, Karyavattom Campus, December8, 2013.
gharu wood. He also testifies to the use of coins at the markets of Kollam. According to him twelve silver coins were worth a gold coin. Every year ships from Sumatra called at Kollam.

Chao-Ju-Kua (13th century) held the post of superintendent of the Bureau of maritime trade. His duties levying taxes from seafaring merchants, inspection of incoming and outgoing ships, taking care of tributary envoys, etc. He was in charge of receiving the foreign envoys; inspecting their official documents; inquiring about the size, strength and the distance of the envoy’s country from China; and making a list of all the tribute to be presented to the court. Chau-Ju-Kua, therefore, could have got his information on the Cola kingdom from the traders and envoys coming from South Asia. Port officials in charge of collecting customs revenue were certainly engaged in buying up the high-valued imports and reselling them at an inflated price in the open market.

The expansion and the new activities which became faintly evident in the rhythm of both caravan and trans-oceanic trade from the seventh century onwards in the northern and southern China received a great deal of their impetus from the domestic aspirations and developments of the T’ang and Sung empires. However, in the west it was joined by the powerful of the historical forces of time, the rise of Islam and its expansion across the fertile lands of the near East and South Asia. This in turn


ushered in a process of movement of people, which by definition involved the exchange of ideas, economic systems, social usage, political institutions, and artistic traditions.

The heavily planked, multi-decked Chinese ships known as junks began to sail towards South East Asia only from the later T’ang period and could not reach the commercial emporia of the Malabar coast before the accession of the Sung dynasty. Meanwhile Muslim traders were well received at the port of Canton and they were allowed to conduct their commercial and communal affairs through the traditional Islamic institutions.

The expansion in China’s seaborne trade during the centuries under the Sung dynasty was part of the development that took place in the whole of the coastal provinces south of the river Yangtze. The demand for goods increased and urban classes also began to develop. The increasing prosperity and urbanization under the Sung dynasty necessitated the import of bulk commodities like cloth, pepper, sugar, etc. apart from items of luxury.

The Sung government encouraged mass production ceramic.34 The last Sung emperor has been reported having said “profits from maritime commerce are very great. If properly managed, they can amount to millions”. A permanent navy was established for the protection of the new maritime trade and financial support was offered for innovation in ship design and naval gun powder weapons. Increased use of foreign imported products and greater knowledge of non-Chinese people and

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Kingdoms are reflected in Chu-fan-chi written by Chau Ju-kua in 1225. Zaiton was a centre of fine quality porcelain and silk manufacture. When Ibn Battuta visited the city, it seemed to him to be the greatest, port in the world, its commercial traffic exceeding that of Alexandria, Kollam and Kozhikode.

The Sung rulers had derived a large income from sea customs and taxes paid by merchants and hence had a direct incentive to encourage overseas economic relations. In addition, the government raised impressive revenue from the sale of tribute goods sent by foreign princes. Quantities of drugs and aromatics which entered China as tribute from dependent kingdoms in South East Asia were probably as great as those imported by private merchants, although the profits of the tribute trade must be measured against the valuable presents which the imperial court returned to those rulers who had sent their envoys to China in the first place.

To co-ordinate the overseas trade and its taxation, the Sung government established maritime trade supervisorate at various ports. These maritime trade supervisorate had the duties like inspection of incoming ships and their cargoes and charging duty, assessing cargoes and charging duty, purchasing government monopoly products, registering Chinese ships going abroad, issuing certificates for merchants, enforcing prohibitions against export of controlled commodities and providing accommodation for maritime merchants.

Ibn Battuta was so impressed with Chinese ships during his visit in India. The dhows of the Western sea were only partially decked or not decked at all, and if some

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vessels had a rudimentary cabin or two, most of the passengers were expected to brave the elements the whole time they were at sea. Owing to bulkhead construction, which distributed weight evenly on the hull, ocean-going junks could support as many as five decks, as well as numerous enclosed cabins for the convenience of the more affluent passengers. Some of the rooms even had private lavatories, a convenience far superior to the little seat hooked over the side of a dhow. Firefighting equipment, steward service, lifeboats, and common rooms for the passengers added to the comfort and safety of a voyage across the eastern sea. He also claims that the crew of a sizable junk might number 1000 men, counting both sailors and fighting mariners.\textsuperscript{37} He says that in his time Junks were built exclusively in the southern Chinese ports of Canton or Zaitun.

While referring the city of Zaitun, Marco Polo says that the quantity of pepper imported there was so considerable that was carried to Alexandria to meet the demands of the western parts of the world was not more than even a hundredth part.\textsuperscript{38}

During the era of the two Sung dynasties (960-1279), China experienced spectacular economic growth. Agricultural and industrial output shot up, population soared, cities multiplied, and the internal network of roads and canals was vastly improved. A remarkable expansion of overseas trade accompanied these trends. Chinese nautical and naval technology was well in advance of the Arabian Sea tradition and could conceivably have been wielded to enforce a monopoly over the

\textsuperscript{37} Ross E, Dunn, \textit{The Adventures of Ibn Battuta (A Muslim Traveller of the 14\textsuperscript{th} Century)}, California, 2005, p.223.

\textsuperscript{38} A. Sreedhara Menon, \textit{A Survey of Kerala History}, Madras, 1996, p.70.
eastern sea routes. In fact, the Sung emperors embraced a dual policy. They encouraged Chinese merchants to trade directly to India. But at the same time they invited foreign traders, notably Muslims, to establish, settlements in the cities of South China.\(^{39}\)

Moreover, Chinese mercantile operations tended to be hampered by the Sung government’s insistence on close regulation and control. By contrast, the alien Muslim trading groups were fluid, versatile, and unimpeded by any central bureaucratic authority. They could therefore move goods across the Bay of Bengal and the South China more speedily, more efficiently, and probably at lower cost than could the Chinese \textit{junk} masters. Thus the “commercial revolution” of Sung China stimulated the expansion of Muslim shipping east of Malabar and the growth of busy, multinational settlements in Zaitun, Canton and other such coast ports.\(^{40}\)

The payments for international exchanges were in kind, or in gold, silver or copper and occasionally iron. The payment in kind was advocated in Sung China in 1219 when it was suggested that silks, porcelain, and brocades be offered in exchange for aromatics in order to reduce the outflow of precious metals.\(^{41}\) One of the causes of significant metal outflows could be an unfavourable balance of trade. Chinese imports included pearls, dyes, pepper, aromatics and some drugs which may have come from South Asia and these may well have necessitated considerable cash outflows.

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\(^{40}\) Ibid.

In Sung times ivory and spices were already in use as currency.\(^{42}\) Foreign trade in key commodities which also served as substitutes for money surely was of importance to medieval states. According to T’ien Ju Kang after the voyages of Cheng Ho “silver, paper money, cloth, sapanwood and pepper were interchangeable as currency.”\(^{43}\) The mission from the Colas in A.D. 1015 is extensively described in the *History of Song Dynasty*. Led by the Cola Samanta, Soli Sanwen, the mission comprised fifty-two members and carried a great quantity of pearls, precious stones, resinous substances, spices and medicinal herbs.\(^{44}\)

Malabar imported ‘Ho-chih silk’ in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Chinese silk fabric was imported into Cola and Pandya country in Sung times.\(^{45}\) Chau Ju-kua refers to “cotton stuffs with coloured silk threads” as part of the produce of the Cola country.\(^{46}\)

Twelve variations of silks have appeared in the Geniza papers.\(^{47}\) Very good silk is produced in China from which they make great store of damask cloths in colours,


\(^{43}\) *Ibid*.


\(^{45}\) Meera Abraham, p.177.

\(^{46}\) Chau-Ju-Kua, *Chu-fan-chi*, p.100.

\(^{47}\) Xinru Liu, *Silk and Religion (An Exploration of Material Life and the Thought of People, A.D. 600-1200)*, New Delhi, 1996, p.129.
satins and other cloths and brocades. Silk was used as capital investment, rather than a commodity, it is continued to be a stable factor in international trade. Here silk was not necessarily considered a commodity transported from its place of production to the place where there was a market demand for it, but in fact was regarded as a good to be traded for other commodities that would fetch a profit. In this sense, silk took a form of currency.

In Sung period strenuous efforts were made to increase the volume of maritime trade. A mission was sent abroad by the emperor with credentials under the imperial seal and provisions of gold and piece-goods to induce “the foreign traders of the South Sea and those who went to foreign lands beyond the sea to trade” to come to China. Special license to import goods were promised them. Trade in the articles like jewels and semi-precious substances, such as ivory, rhinoceros horn, amber and various aromatic products and perfumes, was open only to licensed vendors who bought their supplies at government warehouses in quantities and at prices fixed by government. Trade in cotton fabrics, spices and drugs, was under no restrictions, and subject only to an import duty payable in kind and varying from one-tenth to two-tenths of the goods imported. Besides the import duty collected at the time of their entering the port, these goods had also to bear a fixed tonnage tax on the ship.

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Export of cotton fabrics, spices and drugs to China had already reached high watermark during the Sung dynasty towards the end of the twelfth century. Even when the southeastern and southern provinces of China passed into the sway of Mongols since 1227, external trade went on unaltered and perhaps with more vigour. A few more ports such as Kingyuan (Ning-po), Shang-hai, and Kan ju were also opened to foreign trade.

By the late thirteenth century several political changes had taken place on the international scene. The Yuan dynasty had replaced the Sung in China and with the establishment of the Mongols the tempo of trade quickened along the east-west land routes linking China proper with Central Asia and the West. Both land and sea trading activities were encouraged by the Yuan dynasty. During the period of the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368), the Chinese traveller, Wang Dayuan, sailed twice to India and other countries and returned with pepper.

The Chinese *junks* which were visiting Kollam increasingly from the period of T’ang rule began to prefer this Malabar port as their favorite centre of trade after the establishment of Mongol (Yuan dynasty) rule in China.\(^\text{52}\) In 1277-78, “the first maritime trade bureau of the Yuan dynasty was established at Ch’uan-chou”.\(^\text{53}\) This was followed by the establishment of bureaus at Shanghai, Chi’ng-Yuan (Ning-po or Ming-chou), and Kan-fu (on Che-chiang coast). By the year 1293-94, there were in all seven maritime trade bureaus.

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When Kublai Khan had gained control over China, the Yuan Empire made efforts to establish official relations with various countries along the coasts of Asia. Embassies were dispatched and it was expected that foreign countries would submit tribute to the new power holders in China and subordinate themselves as vassals. The Yuan were particularly interested in Malabar and Kollam.

When Malabar had already accepted the status of a nominal Yuan vassal, Kollam and some other ports were still outside of Kublai’s reach. Hence, in early 1280, Yang Tingbi, one of the more frequently referred to Yuan diplomats travelling to maritime Asian countries, was sent to Kollam to induce its lord to follow the example to Malabar and submit tribute as well. The embassy reached Kollam in the spring of 1280 and was told that Kollam would indeed send tribute in the following year.

The various trading communities of Kollam including the Thomas Christians and the Muslims sent messengers and gifts to the great Khan (Kublai Khan) of China. In 1282, a messenger was sent with gifts to the Great Khan, “a gorget set with different kinds of jewels and also flacons of drugs which was reciprocated by an official mission despatched by the Chinese ruler in 1283 carrying with it a golden badge for the king of Kollam.”

48 Roderich Ptak, *China’s Seaborne Trade with South and Southeast Asia, 1200-1750*, Britain, 1999, p.139.
The last mission from Kollam during Yuan dynasty is dated around September 1296. The natural consequence of all these developments was the concentration of the spice trade of Malabar in Kollam and its emergence as the principal port in the western littoral of India. Merchants came to this kingdom with their ships from Manzi, Arabia, and the Levant, and carried out a great trade, for they brought goods from their own countries, and went back with their ships laden with merchandise from this kingdom. According to William Logan, the 18th century British collector of Malabar, there was a large Chinese colony in Kollam.

The Yuan missions to Kollam reveal that a change in commodity demand had taken place and that new trade realities had emerged which made the west coast of South India, as also of Sri Lanka increasingly important commercially from the thirteenth century onwards. In Yuan times the Chinese were well aware of Malabar as a source of pepper.

At Canton the trade was carefully organized by officers of Kublai Khan. Ibn Battuta emphasized the strict control of foreign trade by Chinese officials, and the excellence of the junks built at Canton, thirteen of which he saw lying off Kollam, awaiting the summer monsoon to return to China. He estimated four thousand

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Muslim merchants on the Malabar coast, one of whom, Mithqual was reputedly of vast wealth, with ships sailing to Yemen and to China. Though the junks were Chinese, he specifically states that the crews were Muslims. The Hindu princes and their subjects were dependent to a high degree on the prosperity of the foreign trade, they were careful to encourage foreign merchants, to treat their clients impartially, to keep the peace among men of many nations, and not to exact too heavy tolls.\(^6^0\)

The fourteenth century Chinese reports mention Kollam on the Western coast of India having very flourishing trade. This was considered a principal port of all the lands of the western ocean by them. Pepper, dry betel-nuts, jackfruit and coloured cotton stuffs were purchased by the Chinese from this port. Sapan-wood, frankincense, pearls, corals, butter and jasmine flowers were brought to Kollam. Till the rise of Calicut as an important port of Malabar coast, the main port visited by the Chinese junks was Kollam and frequent missions were exchanged between the king of Kollam and the emperor of China.

The works of Wang Ta-yuan (Tao I chih lio dated 1349), Ma Huan (Ying Yai shang lan dated 1425-1432), Fei Hein (Hsing ca’s shong lan dated 1436) and Huang Shan-ts’eng (Hsi yang chao kung tien lu dated 1520) make mention of the Chinese trade conducted on the Malabar coast.\(^6^1\) It was reported that a gold coin, tangka by name, was used in trade.\(^6^2\) The Chinese names of several items used in Malabar such

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\(^{60}\) Ibid.


\(^{62}\) Ibid.
as cinacatti, cinavala and cinavedi speak for the long Chinese contacts with the Malabar Coast.

Explorations have proved the presence of sixteenth and seventeenth century Chinese porcelain (white and blue and celedon) wares spread over a large coastal area of Kerala. Similar, Chinese cultural materials found on the coastal regions of Kollam. The finds include a large number of Chinese porcelain potsherds and other ceramics from various sections on the sea-shore as well as from the trenches at Tangasseri. They were found between 0.5 and 2 meter depth from the surface. Recently, the remains of celedon wares have been discovered from Thankassery. It is very interesting to note that these celedon wares (see p.246, F.15) are belong to 8th to 14th century A.D. These fine quality celedon wares include ash coloured jars and plates.63

Certain sections on the coast have yielded more blue painted white celedon ware while a few other sections have dominance of red, and grey-ware potteries which have incised decorations. High quality celadon-wares were seen only near the coast while the red and grey wares were even found five km. inland at Cinnakada in 2 meter depth.64 The occurrence of high quality celedon types and the red and grey ordinary wares in Tangassery perhaps indicates one of the evidences for social stratification among the traders settlement in the area. The celedon wares might have

63 Personal communication with Dr. P. Rajendran, Archaeologist, Kerala University, Karyavattom Campus, December 8, 2013.
been used by the high class people while the red and grey wares which had wide
distribution were intended for the common people.65

Some of the place names, fishing practices, and certain articles’ names still
prevalent in Kollam are some of the examples of Chinese cultural diffusion with the
local culture.66 Such an imprint could last only through the long settlements of
Chinese in this region for several centuries. Besides the material and cultural
evidences the Chinese chronicles as well as travel accounts indicate that Tangasseri in
Kollam was one of the important trading centre.

Prof. Karashima67 (see p.247, F.16) discovered many fine pieces of 14th
century celedon68 of the Longquan kiln at Tangasseri. These were found at a section
of the sea shore which exposed by sea erosion southwest of the light house. Judging
from the remains of some old brick structure and also from a map of the 17th century,
there appears to have been an old fort in the area. The porcelain pieces are of high
quality. The specimens belonging to the Yuan dynasty are of export quality.69

Karashima says that the potsherds found on the surface at other places of the
coast belonged mostly to the later Ming and Quin periods of the 17th and 18th

65 Ibid., pp.72-73.
66 Ibid., p.73.
67 Noboru Karashima, renowned Japanese scholar discovered valuable archaeological remains like the
pieces of Chinese celedon from the coastal regions of Kerala.
68 Hermann Kulke, et.al, (eds.), Nagapattinam to Suvarnadwipa, Singapore: Institute of South Asian
centuries. The places from which the team picked up those pieces were the old habitation sites of foreign nationals and merchants—judging from place names such as Cinacceri, Tangacheri and Silk Street. Therefore, it can be said that during the 17th and 18th centuries, many pieces were brought from China and used by the people living in those places or stored for re-export. The ceramics discovered here are mostly of ordinary quality and meant for daily use in households.

The most eloquent testimony to the Chinese trade at Kollam is the pottery and potsherds obtained from the coastal areas of the town. The team of explorers obtained different types of Chinese porcelain like celadon, blue, white, brown glazed ware, dehua, and quasi dehua and white Yuan pottery. Islamic imitations of the same also have been found out.

### Mission from China to Kollam

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1280 CE (January, 16th year of Kublai Khan rule)</th>
<th>Yang Tingbi, the Daroga of Pacification office (commander-in-chief), ordered to proceed to Kollam.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1280 CE (3rd month) (10th month)</td>
<td>Yang reaches Kollam. Ha-sa-er-hai, elevated to ambassador’s rank to accompany Yang (but the mission strayed to the Mabar coasts.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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70 Ibid.
71 Ibid.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1282 CE (1\textsuperscript{st} month)</td>
<td>The mission reached Kollam during the 2\textsuperscript{nd} month of 1282. They came from Mabar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1283 CE (1\textsuperscript{st} month)</td>
<td>Sent Yang Tingbi with presents of bows, arrows, (horse) saddles and straps.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1283 CE (2\textsuperscript{nd} month)</td>
<td>The Chinese emperor presented Wa-ni, the king of Kollam, gold seal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1291 (9\textsuperscript{th} month)</td>
<td>Tie li, Minister of Rites and A-lao-wa-ding (Alauddin) and Bu-la-bing as attending officers carried matching tiger-seats to Kollam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1294 CE (9\textsuperscript{th} month)</td>
<td>Tu-gu-tie-mer (Temur) and others dispatched as envoys.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Kollam Mission to China\textsuperscript{73}**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1280 CE (11\textsuperscript{th} month)</td>
<td>Hanlin Accademy Chancellor reports about the arrival of embassies from Kollam (Julan), Maba (er), Java (shi-bo).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1282 CE (9\textsuperscript{th} month)</td>
<td>The envoy memorialised and presented costly merchandise and one black ape.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1287 CE (1\textsuperscript{st} month)</td>
<td>Bui-liu-wen-nai and others came as envoys.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid.
From quite early times Chinese junks had appeared in the Indian ports. But systematic Chinese maritime expansion to the south began only in the Ming period. Ming naval voyages were sponsored by the State. The size of vessels is larger than the earlier junks.  

Heavy commitment of the court in the revenue coming from maritime trade and tremendous expansion in shipping and nautical science encouraged both the Yuan and Ming emperors to take keen interest in trade. At the beginning of Ming rule, maritime trade authorities were established in three coastal provinces of South-east China to supervise the trade missions. The Fujian supervisorate was established at Quanzhou because, since the Sung dynasty, it had been China’s major port for foreign trade.

In the time Ming Emperor Yung Lo successive naval expeditions had been fitted out under the great captain, Cheng Ho. A full description of his voyages in the southern seas has been left by Ma Huan who accompanied the party as an interpreter. Being a Muslim was an advantage to Admiral Cheng Ho in his dealings with the Islamic rulers of the Indian Ocean region. Early in the fifteenth century Zheng He conducted as many as seven expeditions to the West (1405-1431/3) touching on Borneo, Malacca, Java, Sumatara, Sri Lanka, Aden, Ormuz, Yemen, and Zanzibar, among the ports and visited Quilon, Cochin and Calicut several times. The first of


Zheng He’s naval voyages had paved the way for a wave of Chinese migration to South-East Asia and increase in commercial intercourse with this region. The Arab and Persian traders had suffered a setback due to aggressive Chinese naval voyages to the far end of the Indian Ocean, verging on armed trade during this period. The foreigners were no longer required to come to the Chinese ports to obtain Chinese products; instead, the junk fleets of China now carried Chinese produce into all parts of the continent to contend for commerce in the East.

As a result of strict enforcement to trade regulations and encouragement by Kublai Khan and later by the Mings, China had profitable trade with Kollam, and pepper was the only substantial item which the Chinese cared for and which was available as easily at Cochin and Calicut.

In Ming times, enormous quantities of pepper were imported after Cheng Ho’s voyages. Apart from its use for culinary purposes it was also valued as a medicine. So widespread was its use and importance that in 1403 emperor Yongle allowed traders from South India to sell pepper in the Chinese market without paying tax, refusing to oblige his ministers who were insisting on the imposition of tax on


79 Ibid.
this lucrative trade. During the reign of the first Ming Emperor Hung Wu, pepper and sapanwood were frequently given to subjects as a reward for services rendered—a practice first recorded in 1379. Che’ng Tsu of the Ming dynasty (1402-24) despatched vessels to the islands and countries of India, Ceylon, Aden, the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea.

During the Sung and Yuan dynasties there was not much cotton in China but its production grew fast during the Ming period. Frequent contacts with South-East Asia and India may have improved the quality of the production already in the days of Cheng Ho. By the mid-Ming period, China’s cotton output and the technological level of textile industry had increased to such an extent that a high percentage of the Chinese population took to cotton cloth, and at the end of the sixteenth century, Matteo Ricci remarked that enough cotton could be grown in the Middle kingdom to supply the whole world.

During the Ming dynasty, demand from the armies stationed in the northern regions who wanted uniforms made of some kind of warm, light but durable material, caused an increase in the procurement of cotton from the cotton producing provinces of the east and south. There is ample archaeological evidence from Sinkiang and other

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areas which prove that there was indeed large scale consumption of cotton cloth in the army. In some cases cotton and cotton cloths were therefore paid as taxes by the people. The Ming government also used cotton for payment as part of the salaries of the military personnel and their families, other livestock along the northern borders.  

The Ming potteries, like celadon and blue and white porcelain became highly popular throughout the Middle East, and in East African architecture there was a fashion for decorating the interiors of vaulted buildings and domes with inset porcelain bowls.

During the time of Ming dynasty a number of seaborne expeditions are conducted. The expeditions were finally abandoned in 1433, this happened against a background of dissident criticism from senior Mandarins that the financial gains to the treasury were meager. After Cheng Ho’s voyages future Ming emperors were determined to close China’s sea-coasts to foreign visitors and placed an embargo on the trade of Chinese merchants to overseas destinations.

During the 1530s an imperial ban was imposed on all sea voyages by Chinese, but influential members of the Chinese aristocracy, the local magnates and rich merchants accumulated vast amounts of wealth. They defied the law by smuggling and trafficking with foreign adventures. As maritime prohibitions were increasingly enforced, the illegal private trade operators joined with pirate ships. From the middle

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84 Ibid., p.91.

of the fifteenth century onwards there had been a great spurt in the building of private ships and in non-official interactions with foreign countries.\textsuperscript{86}

Zhan Xie, an official and author of Dongxi Yang Kao reports that even as early as 1465 to 1505, the rich and major families of China ‘travelled in large ships to trade abroad’. \textsuperscript{87} Foreigners continued to come to China for trade while Chinese trades, especially those belonging to the coastal regions, began to trading with the foreign countries in private ships.

Observing that maritime trade was a necessity, as time passed Chinese officials started petitioning the emperor to remove the ban on maritime trade. In 1589, forty-four ships were permitted to trade annually with the eastern and western regions involving in the grant of 88 licenses. In 1597, the number was increased to a total of 137.\textsuperscript{88}

From the middle period of the Ming dynasty, great advances were made in domestic commerce and manufactures, and this was accompanied by an increase in commerce with South East Asia. As a result, contraband trade flourished between China and South East Asia. Actually private trade has its own limitations, the cost, the dangers from sea pirates, infrastructural expenses, the complexity of high sea voyages, especially for long distance trade, required huge investments not possible for private traders.


\textsuperscript{87} \textit{Ibid.}, pp.40-41.

\textsuperscript{88} \textit{Ibid.}, p.41.
Chinese Missions to Kollam\textsuperscript{89}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Mission</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1407 CE</td>
<td>Xiao Gelan</td>
<td>Visit by a branch fleet attached to Zheng He’s first voyage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1409 CE</td>
<td>Xiao Junan</td>
<td>During the third voyage, Fei Xin accompanied Zheng He.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1431-33 CE</td>
<td>Xiao Gelan</td>
<td>During the seventh voyage Gong Zhen was a member of the entourage</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Kollam Missions to China

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Mission</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1368-78 CE</td>
<td>Da Junan</td>
<td>Under the name Da Junan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1407 CE</td>
<td>Xiao Gelan</td>
<td>Came with Samudra and Calicut mission, may be in their boat.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Inventory of Chinese Imports and Exports- 14\textsuperscript{th} Century\textsuperscript{90}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Import into China</th>
<th>Export to Kollam</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pepper, coconut, betel-nut, Li-fish (dried)</td>
<td>Gold, iron, blue and white porcelain-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{89} \textit{Ibid.}, p.399.

\textsuperscript{90} \textit{Ibid.}
The Chinese influence had been very strong in Kollam, and that could be seen from the design of its wooden palaces, resembling their sampan shaped boats, to the method of fishing with counter-weighted dip nets, operated from the shore, which are still called Chinese nets (see p.248, F.19) Even to this day large olive green Chinese water pots are in use in several old houses in Kollam, and pieces of blue and white porcelain can still be picked up on the beaches.  

Kollam maintained a multi-layered network for the movement of commodities-- on the one hand it stretched to West Asia encompassing the exchange centres of Abbassid Persia, while on the other hand it extended to China, feeding the consumption classes of T’ang, Sung, Yuan and Ming periods.

However, a very substantial share of Kollam’s transmarine trade was through the channels of Jewish diaspora that spread all over Fatimid Egypt and the Mediterranean. By locating itself at the central position of the multiple mercantile networks, Kollam emerged as a leading trading centre of the Indian Ocean supporting and empowering the local rulers in its political needs.

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But at the end of the fifteenth century the Portuguese came into Kerala with the policy of ‘pepper and Christian’. The political atmosphere of Kollam was highly favourable for the establishment of the Portuguese. It brought about tremendous changes in the socio-political and economic realm of not only Kollam, but Kerala as a whole. The social and political structure of Kollam was re-shaped.