



ISSN: 3049-2017

IJMH 2025; 2(3): 105-108

© 2025 IJMH

www.themultijournal.com

Received: 05-06-2025

Accepted: 27-06-2025

Publish : 28-06-2025

Kamalakanta Behera

Assistant Professor of History,
FM Autonomous College,
Blasore

Navigating the Eastern Seas: Kalinga's Maritime Relations with China

Kamalakanta Behera**Abstract**

This article examines the maritime contact between Kalinga and China from the early centuries of the Common Era to the thirteenth-century Song trade notices, drawing on Chinese pilgrim travelogues, dynastic and commercial compendia, Indian epigraphic scholarship, and the excavated ceramic and numismatic record of the Kalingan coast. It traces the Chinese rendering of the name Kalinga as Ho-ling and Kia-ling, situates Tamralipti, Palur, and Manikapatna (Che-li-ta-lo) against Canton as the twin anchors of the exchange, and reconstructs the sea routes recorded in the Han Shu and travelled by Fa-Hien, Hiuen Tsang, and I-Tsing. Particular attention is given to the eighth-century Buddhist embassies of Subhakarasiṃha and Prajñā, to the Chu-fan-chi's account of self-governing Kia-ling shipping at Canton, and to the corroborating archaeological evidence from Khalkatapatna, Manikapatna, and Lalitgiri. Building on this evidence, the article argues against the Indianisation or colonisation model of Kalinga's overseas contacts and advances instead a theory of reciprocity, in which Kalinga and China figure as two independent civilisational centres engaged in a sustained, mutually initiated, and mutually beneficial maritime relationship.

Keywords: *Kalinga; China; maritime trade; Tamralipti; Ho-ling; Kia-ling; Bay of Bengal; Buddhist embassies; Chu-fan-chi; theory of reciprocity*

Introduction: Kalinga in the Chinese Record

The maritime relationship between Kalinga and China ranks among the longest continuously attested of all Kalinga's overseas contacts, sustained across nearly a millennium and a half from the earliest Chinese notices of Indian Buddhist missionaries in the last centuries before the Common Era to the detailed thirteenth-century trade notices of the Song dynasty. Unlike the more fragmentary and largely inferential case of Kalinga's contact with the Malay Peninsula, the Kalinga-China relationship is documented from both ends: by Chinese dynastic histories, pilgrim travelogues, and geographical compendia on the one side, and by the archaeological residue of Chinese wares and coinage recovered from the excavated ports of the Odishan coast on the other¹. Chinese sources of the medieval period render the name of Kalinga, or the successor territory of Odra/Odisha that inherited its maritime tradition, as Ho-ling or, in the trade compendia of the Song period, as Kia-ling, a transcription in which the historian K. S. Behera and others have recognised a direct phonetic descendant of the name Kalinga itself². The identification of the eighth-century Buddhist monk Subhakarasiṃha, discussed below, as the son of the king of Ho-ling, together with the Song-period references to Kia-ling ships trading at Canton, together indicate that Chinese observers understood "Kalinga" not merely as a distant place-name inherited from Indian textual tradition but as the name of a living maritime partner with which Chinese ports maintained regular commercial contact into the thirteenth century.

Ports of Contact: The Kalingan Seaboard and the Chinese Coast

The Kalingan side of this exchange was served by a chain of estuarine ports strung along the coast from the Bay of Bengal southward. Foremost among them, and the port most frequently named in the Chinese pilgrim accounts, was Tamralipti, situated at the mouth of the Rupnarayan-Ganga delta system, which Fa-Hien, Hiuen Tsang, and I-Tsing all

Correspondence:**Kamalakanta Behera**

Assistant Professor of History,
FM Autonomous College,
Blasore

identify as the principal point of embarkation and disembarkation for the sea route linking eastern India with Ceylon, Southeast Asia, and China.

Hiuen Tsang, who travelled through Odisha around 638 CE, describes a further port he calls Che-li-ta-lo, situated near the ocean shore in the south-east of the kingdom and serving, in his words, as a thoroughfare and resting place for sea-going traders and strangers from distant lands; this port has been identified by excavation with the site of Manikapatna on the Chilika lagoon³. Excavations at Manikapatna and at the neighbouring site of Khalkatapatna have themselves yielded the principal archaeological confirmation of the China trade, discussed in Section 5 below. Other ports of the Kalingan littoral named in the wider corpus of Indian and classical sources, including Palur, Kalingapatnam, and Pithunda, are similarly implicated in this trade, and it was from Palur specifically that the monk Subhakarasiṃha is recorded to have embarked for China in 715 CE.

On the Chinese side, the principal port of reception was Canton (Guangzhou), which the thirteenth-century trade compendium of Chau Ju-kua names explicitly as the destination of Kalingan shipping and which maintained, by that period, an established office of the superintendent of merchant shipping charged with regulating and certifying the headmen of foreign trading vessels, Kalingan vessels among them.

Sea Routes and the Southern Silk Road

Two distinct corridors linked Kalinga with China across the period covered by this study. The first was an overland extension of the Central Asian Silk Route, branching southward through Sichuan and Yunnan, crossing Burma and north-eastern India, and reaching Tamralipti by way of the Brahmaputra and Ganga river systems; this southern branch is attested in the Han Shu, the History of the Former Han Dynasty compiled by Pan-ku in the first century CE⁴. The second, and for the purposes of this study the more consequential, was the maritime route proper, which the same Han Shu associates with a passage through the Southeast Asian polities of Sumatra, Java, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam, linking the Kalingan coast to southern China by sea rather than by the long and difficult overland crossing.

This maritime corridor is precisely the route travelled, in one direction or the other, by every one of the major Chinese Buddhist pilgrims whose travelogues survive. Fa-Hien, returning to China in the early fifth century after his sojourn in India and Ceylon, took ship from an eastern Indian port and proceeded via Java before completing his voyage to China; I-Tsing arrived at Tamralipti in 673 CE by the sea route directly from China, having earlier travelled by sea to Sumatra; and the monk Vajrabodhi likewise returned to India from China through the port of Tamralipti. All three pilgrims, in the judgment of the scholarship on this route, preferred the maritime passage specifically because the alternative land route through Central Asia had by their time become unsafe.

The scale of the vessels engaged in this traffic is itself attested in Fa-Hien's own narrative, which describes a

merchant ship of some two hundred passengers on which he took passage; the Buddhist monks and scholars who later carried texts and doctrine between Kalinga and the Chinese court, including Subhakarasiṃha and Prajna discussed below, must in all likelihood have travelled as passengers on comparable merchant vessels, since it is inherently improbable that a ship would have been specially chartered for the exclusive use of a single religious traveller⁵.

Textual and Diplomatic Evidence

The most substantial body of evidence for direct Kalinga-China contact concerns the movement of Buddhist monks and manuscripts between the two courts during the seventh and eighth centuries. The scholar-monk Subhakarasiṃha, identified in Chinese sources as the son of the king of Holiṅ and generally equated by R. C. Majumdar and by the epigraphist Sylvain Lévi with a prince of the Bhaumakara line, embarked from the port of Palur around 715 CE carrying tantric texts, including the Maha-Vairocana-Sutra, and reached the Chinese capital the following year, where at the emperor's request he translated this text into Chinese⁶.

A second, closely parallel episode is recorded for the year 795 CE, when a monk named Prajna, resident in a monastery under the patronage of the king of Wu Cha (Odra, or Odisha), travelled to the Chinese court bearing a manuscript of the Gandavyuha autographed by that king for presentation to the Chinese emperor Te-tsung; Prajna remained at the Chinese court for some time and there translated the Shat-paramita Sutra. The Chinese sources describe the Odishan king responsible for this embassy in terms that Lévi and, following him, Majumdar identify with the Bhaumakara ruler Sivakara (Unmattasiṃha), and the monastery from which Prajna set out has been equated with the Ratnagiri Mahavihara⁷. These two episodes, separated by eighty years, establish a sustained pattern of royally sponsored religious embassy from the Kalingan-Odishan court to the Chinese court across the eighth century, a pattern for which the general maritime commerce discussed in this article supplied the necessary transport.

The most explicit and latest textual evidence, however, is commercial rather than religious in character. The Chufan-chi of Chau Ju-kua, a Chinese work on foreign trade compiled in 1225 to 1226 CE, refers directly to Kia-ling sea-going vessels and describes their internal system of trade organisation: on the larger of these ships, several hundred men would choose one of the more substantial merchants among them as headman, assisted by a deputy, and the superintendent of merchant shipping at Canton issued this headman a certificate empowering him to discipline his crew with the light bamboo, while on the death of any crew member the headmen were charged with drawing up an inventory of the deceased's property⁸. K. S. Behera, examining this passage, notes that the vessels so described were demonstrably not of Chinese construction, and the passage as a whole indicates that Kalingan traders constituted one of the principal foreign mercantile communities operating out of the Chinese port of Canton

in the early thirteenth century, fully eight centuries after the earliest pilgrim notices of the sea route between the two regions.

Archaeological Evidence

Excavation at the Kalingan port sites has produced a body of material evidence independent of, and corroborative of, the textual record. At Khalkatapatna, excavators have recovered Chinese celadon ware, blue-and-white porcelain of Chinese manufacture, and Chinese copper coins, including one complete specimen datable to approximately the fourteenth century, alongside a fragmentary example. At Manikapatna, identified as Hiuen Tsang's Che-li-ta-lo, comparable evidence has emerged: celadon ware occurs in some abundance, though a full typological study remains to be completed, and a fragmentary copper coin of Chinese type, bearing the characteristic square central perforation, has likewise been reported from the site.

A further, and in some respects more striking, category of archaeological evidence for Sino-Kalingan cultural exchange comes not from a port but from the Buddhist monastic complex at Lalitgiri in the Jajpur district of Odisha, where excavators recovered a stupa relic deposit consisting of four caskets nested systematically one within another. This practice of nested, multiple-casket relic deposition, while foreign to the general run of Odishan stupa architecture, corresponds to a well-established and continuing Chinese Buddhist reliquary practice, and its presence at Lalitgiri has been read as evidence of a specifically Chinese-influenced ritual practice transmitted to Odisha along the same routes of Buddhist exchange documented in the pilgrim and embassy accounts discussed above⁹.

Commodities and the Structure of Exchange

The commodity flow between Kalinga and China, so far as it can be reconstructed from the surviving literary notices, ran substantially in both directions rather than favouring either partner. From Kalinga, China received precious stones, ivory, pepper, betel nuts, medicinal drugs, and the fine cotton textiles for which the Odishan coast was noted; from China, Kalinga received porcelain and other Chinese wares, gold, silver, and silk, the last of these commodities entering the Odishan vocabulary itself in the term *Chinamsuka*, or Chinese silk cloth, attesting to the popularity and familiarity of the imported fabric among the Kalingan elite.

The fourteenth-century Chinese writer Wang Ta-yuan, describing conditions in Wu-tieh (Odisha), records that the region's natural products included rice, kingfishers' feathers, beeswax, and fine cotton stuffs, and remarks on the low cost of living there, noting that traders who travelled to the region were often reluctant to return home; he further provides a specific exchange rate between Odishan silver currency and Chinese paper money, indicating a level of mercantile familiarity and routine transaction between the two economies that goes considerably beyond occasional or ceremonial contact¹⁰. This detailed currency notice, appearing as late as the fourteenth century, demonstrates that the commercial relationship documented for the Tang and Song periods by

the pilgrim accounts and the *Chu-fan-chi* persisted, in recognisably the same form, into the last century before the effective political eclipse of the Eastern Ganga maritime state.

Refuting the Colonisation Paradigm: A Theory of Reciprocity

The Kalinga-China relationship offers, if anything, a still clearer illustration of the reciprocity that governed Kalinga's overseas contacts than does the relationship with the Indianised states of Southeast Asia, precisely because China was never, at any point in the period under review, a passive recipient of Indian civilisational influence in the manner that the older Indianisation paradigm supposes for the Southeast Asian mainland and archipelago. China possessed its own ancient and continuous civilisational tradition, its own imperial court and bureaucracy, and its own well-developed maritime and commercial institutions, including, by the Song period, a formal office regulating foreign shipping at Canton. The relationship between Kalinga and China cannot, therefore, be characterised even by the loosest analogy as one of colonisation.

What the evidence shows instead is a genuinely bilateral exchange conducted on terms of mutual respect and mutual benefit. Buddhist doctrine and texts moved from Kalinga to China, as the embassies of Subhakarasiṃha and Prajñā attest, but the initiative for these embassies came in each case from the Kalingan or Odishan side, carried by named individuals travelling under royal sponsorship to a Chinese court that received, honoured, and in Subhakarasiṃha's case commissioned translation work from them, rather than one that summoned or compelled their presence¹¹. Conversely, Chinese material culture, technology, and currency moved into Kalinga on Kalinga's own terms, adopted selectively into indigenous funerary and monastic practice, as the Lalitgiri relic caskets demonstrate, and absorbed into the local economy through mechanisms, such as the *Chinamsuka* textile trade and the silver-to-paper-money exchange rate recorded by Wang Ta-yuan, that presuppose ordinary, sustained commercial partnership rather than dependency in either direction.

The *Chu-fan-chi*'s description of *Kia-ling* shipping is, in this respect, the single most decisive piece of evidence available to this chapter's argument. A trading community substantial enough to be named, in the thirteenth-century Chinese record, by a term derived from Kalinga itself, operating vessels of distinctly non-Chinese construction, self-organised under headmen certified by the Chinese port authority yet answerable to their own internal customs of governance and inheritance, is by definition neither a colonised population nor a colonising one. It is a merchant diaspora functioning within, and contributing to, a shared and reciprocal maritime economy, exactly the model this dissertation advances against the older Indianisation framework for Kalinga's relations with Southeast Asia, and exactly the model the Chinese evidence, examined on its own terms, independently confirms.

Conclusion

The maritime contact between Kalinga and China, traceable in continuous outline from the pilgrim voyages

of the fifth century to the commercial notices of the fourteenth, rested on a stable infrastructure of ports, sea routes, and merchant institutions on both sides of the Bay of Bengal and the South China Sea. Tamralipti, Palur, and Manikapatna on the Kalingan coast, and Canton on the Chinese coast, anchored a route that carried not only textiles, precious stones, and spices in one direction and silk, porcelain, and specie in the other, but also, and perhaps most significantly, the Buddhist doctrine, texts, and monastic personnel whose movement is the best documented strand of the entire relationship.

This chapter's evidence, drawn from Chinese dynastic and geographical sources, from the surviving pilgrim travelogues, from Indian epigraphic scholarship on the Bhaumakara embassies, and from the excavated ceramic and numismatic material of the Kalingan ports, converges on a single conclusion consistent with the reciprocity framework argued throughout this dissertation: Kalinga's relationship with China was one of sustained, mutually initiated, and mutually beneficial exchange between two independent civilisational centres, neither of which stood in any relation of subordination to the other, and both of which were materially and culturally enriched by thirteen centuries of continuous maritime contact.

Endnotes

1. On the general chronology and character of Sino-Indian contact from the second century BCE onward, including the embassy of Chang-k'ien and the earliest notices of Buddhist missionary contact, see S. Beal, *Buddhism in China*, and P. C. Bagchi, *India and China (A Thousand Years of Cultural Relations)*.
2. On the Chinese rendering of Kalinga as Ho-ling and Kia-ling and its recognition as a phonetic derivative of the Indian name, see K. S. Behera, "Maritime Contacts of Orissa: Literary and Archaeological Evidence," *Utkal Historical Research Journal*, vol. 5, 1994, and K. S. Behera, "Glimpses of the Maritime Activities of Kalinga," *Orissa Review*, vol. 49, no. 4, November 1992.
3. On Hiuen Tsang's description of Che-li-ta-lo and its identification with Manikapatna, see On Yuan Chwang's *Travels in India* (A.D. 629–645), translated by T. Watters, vol. 2, pp. 193–194.
4. On the Han Shu's notice of the maritime route linking India and China through Sumatra, Java, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam, see the discussion of Pan-ku's first-century compilation in Haraprasad Ray, *Trade and Trade Routes between India and China*, c. 140 B.C.–A.D. 1500.
5. On Fa-Hien's return voyage and the two-hundred-passenger merchant vessel, see *Travels of Fa-Hien (Fa-Hien's Record of Buddhist Kingdoms)*, translated by James Legge; on I-Tsing's arrival at Tamralipti in 673 CE, see *A Record of the Buddhist Religion as Practised in India and the Malay Archipelago* (A.D. 671–695), by I-Tsing, translated by J. Takakusu.
6. On Subhakarasiṃha's embassy from Palur in 715 CE and his identification as the son of the king of Ho-ling, see Sylvain Lévi, "King Subhakarā of Orissa," *Epigraphia Indica*, vol. 15, 1919–20, pp. 363–364, and R. C. Majumdar, ed., *The History and Culture of the Indian People*, vol. 4, *The Age of Imperial Kanauj*, 2nd ed., pp. 63–65.
7. On Prajñā's embassy of 795 CE, the Gandavyuha manuscript, and the identification of the Odishan king with the Bhaumakara ruler Sivakara Unmattasiṃha, see Lévi, *Epigraphia Indica*, vol. 15, p. 364, and U. K. Subudhi, *The Bhaumakaras of Orissa*, pp. 119–120.
8. On the Chu-fan-chi's account of Kia-ling shipping and trade organisation, see Chau Ju-kua, *Chu-fan-chi* (1225–26 CE), as discussed and quoted in K. S. Behera, "Trade and Patterns of Commerce in Orissa (c. A.D. 700–1200)," *Utkal Historical Research Journal*, vol. 2, 1991.
9. On the nested relic caskets excavated at Lalitgiri and their affinity with Chinese Buddhist reliquary practice, see the archaeological reports on the Lalitgiri stupa excavation summarised in K. S. Behera, "Maritime Contacts of Orissa," op. cit.
10. On Wang Ta-yuan's fourteenth-century notice of Wu-tieh (Odisha), its products, and the Odishan-Chinese currency exchange rate, see R. C. Majumdar, ed., *The History and Culture of the Indian People*, vol. 6, *The Delhi Sultanate*, p. 658.
11. On the royal sponsorship and reception of the Subhakarasiṃha and Prajñā embassies as evidence of bilateral rather than unilateral cultural transmission, see the discussion in Majumdar, *The Age of Imperial Kanauj*, pp. 63–65, read alongside Subudhi, *The Bhaumakaras of Orissa*.

Works Cited

- Bagchi, P. C. *India and China: A Thousand Years of Cultural Relations*. Rev. ed., New Age Publishers, 2008.
- Beal, Samuel, translator. *Travels of Fah-Hien and Sung-Yun, Buddhist Pilgrims, from China to India (400 A.D. to 518 A.D.)*. Reprint ed., Munshiram Manoharlal, 2005.
- Beal, Samuel. *Buddhism in China*. Reprint ed., Asian Educational Services, 1996.
- Behera, K. S. "Glimpses of the Maritime Activities of Kalinga." *Orissa Review*, vol. 49, no. 4, Nov. 1992, p. 8.
- Behera, K. S. "Maritime Contacts of Orissa: Literary and Archaeological Evidence." *Utkal Historical Research Journal*, vol. 5, 1994, p. 57.
- Behera, K. S. "Maritime Trade in Ancient Orissa." *Sidelights on the History and Culture of Orissa*, edited by M. N. Das, Vidyapuri, 1977, pp. 119–120.
- Behera, K. S. "Trade and Patterns of Commerce in Orissa (c. A.D. 700–1200)." *Utkal Historical Research Journal*, vol. 2, 1991, p. 7.
- Legge, James, translator. *A Record of Buddhist Kingdoms: Being an Account by the Chinese Monk Fa-Hien of His Travels in India and Ceylon (A.D. 399–414)*. Reprint ed., Dover Publications, 1965.
- Lévi, Sylvain. "King Subhakarā of Orissa." *Epigraphia Indica*, vol. 15, 1919–20, *Archaeological Survey of India*, 1982, pp. 363–364.
- Majumdar, R. C., editor. *The History and Culture of the Indian People*. Vol. 4, *The Age of Imperial Kanauj*, 2nd ed., Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1964.
- Majumdar, R. C., editor. *The History and Culture of the Indian People*. Vol. 6, *The Delhi Sultanate*, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1967.
- Ray, Haraprasad. *Trade and Trade Routes between India and China*, c. 140 B.C.–A.D. 1500. Progressive Publishers, 2003.
- Subudhi, U. K. *The Bhaumakaras of Orissa*. Punthi Pustak, 1978.
- Takakusu, J., translator. *A Record of the Buddhist Religion as Practised in India and the Malay Archipelago (A.D. 671–695)*, by I-Tsing. Munshiram Manoharlal, 1966.
- Watters, T., translator. *On Yuan Chwang's Travels in India (A.D. 629–645)*. Vol. 2, Munshiram Manoharlal, 1961.