The GOLDEN KHERSONESE

STUDIES IN THE
HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY OF THE
MALAY PENINSULA BEFORE A.D. 1500

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CHAPTER I

THE PORTAGE OF THE SOUTH SEAS

Not only was the intrinsic wealth of Malaya small but such products as it did possess could for long be obtained in adequate quantities from countries farther north. It is not surprising therefore that this long green peninsula featured first in Chinese history as a stage on the sea-route to India rather than as a terminus of trade activity. A notice in the Ch'ien Han Shu\(^1\) reads as follows:

自日南障塞徐闻合浦船行可五月有都元国又船行可四月有邑奴没国又船行可二十日有湛離國步行可十餘日有夫甘都盧國自夫甘都盧國船行可二月餘有黃支國民俗習與珠涯相類其州廣大戶口多多異物自武帝以来皆獻見有譯長屬黃門與應募者俱入海市明珠壁流離奇石異物黃金銅銆而往所至國皆饑食為猾蠻夷賈船轉送致之亦利交易剽殺人又苦逢風波溺死不者數年來遂大球至圓二寸以下

From the barriers of Jih-nan, Hsiu-wen and Ho-p'u it is about five months' voyage to the country of Tu-yüan. It is about a further four months' voyage to the country of I-lu-mo, and yet another twenty odd days' voyage to the country of Shen-li. It is rather more than ten days' journey on foot to the country of Fu-kan-tu-lu,\(^2\) whence it is something over two months' voyage to the country of Huang-chih. The customs of the people are rather similar to those of Chu-yai (Hai-nan). These countries are extensive, their populations numerous and their many products unfamiliar. Ever since the time of the Emperor Wu (141-87 B.C.) they have all offered tribute. There are chief-interpreters attached to the Yellow Gate\(^3\) who, together with volunteers, put out to sea to buy lustrous pearls, glass, rare stones and strange products in exchange for gold and various silks. All the countries they visit provide them with food and companionship. The trading ships of the barbarians transfer [the Chinese] to their destination. It is a profitable business [for the barbarians], who also loot and kill. Moreover, there are the hazards of wind and wave to be encountered and [the possibility of] death by

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\(^1\) Chap. 28, pt. 2, f. 32 recto et verso.

\(^2\) Of this name the seventh-century commentator Yen Shih-ku 風師古 remarked

... 都盧國人勤務善緣高...

... the inhabitants of the kingdom of Tu-lu are strong and active and adept at climbing heights...

This might be held to imply that 夫甘都盧國 should be read as 'the kingdoms of Fu-kan and Tu-lu', but modern commentators have invariably interpreted the characters as a single place-name. The point has no importance for what follows.

\(^3\) The Department of Eunuchs.
drowning. If these are avoided the outward and return voyages take several
years. The large pearls are at the most two Chinese inches in circumference. 1

Fig. 8. Possible voyages of the interpreters of the Yellow Gate. Based on the Ch'ien
Han Shu, chap. 28. Two unidentified ports of call in Indo-China are necessarily
omitted, as is P'i-tsung, situated somewhere on or near the Malay Peninsula.

Despite the attentions of a succession of eminent scholars, 2
most of the place-names enumerated in this passage have stubbornly
resisted identification, and such interpretations as have been offered
have depended too largely on tenuous philological speculations

1 For the interpretation of this last sentence I am indebted to Professor
Duyvendak's translation. See note 1 on p. 10 of China's discovery of Africa.

2 This passage was first noticed by Paul Pelliot, TP, vol. xiii (1912), pp.
457-61 and subsequently studied by A. Herrmann, ZGBB (1913), pp. 553-61;
B. Laufer, Chinese clay figures, p. 86, note 2; G. Ferrand, JA (1919), pp. 451-5;
G. H. Luce, JBRs, vol. xiv, pt. 2 (1925), pp. 92-9; Fujita Toyohachi, 中国南海
and J. J. L. Duyvendak, China's discovery of Africa, pp. 9-12. In addition the
present author has recently re-examined the geographical implications of this
to the neglect of geographical probability. Of the position of one terminus of the itinerary, however, there can be no doubt: Jih-nan was Upper Annam, while Hsiu-wen and Ho-p'u were sub-prefectures on the southern coast of Kuang-tung. There is less certainty about the location of Huang-chih, the other terminus, but in view of the time taken on the voyage, it may well have been, as Ferrand suggested, somewhere on the shores of the Indian Ocean. That being so, it is difficult to suggest an overland portage more apposite than that at the neck of the Malay Peninsula. In other words, Shen-li may have been on the east, and Fu-kan-tu-lu on the west, coast of the Peninsula (Fig. 8).

Even if this be true, we are not told by which of the routes described on page xxvii above the Chinese envoys crossed from the China Sea to the Indian Ocean. The distance covered in ten days would vary with the type of country encountered, but a reasonable march might well have been about 120 or 150 miles, which implies that the trans-peninsular route was some considerable distance either north or south of the Kra Isthmus. Of the several possible routes two suggest themselves as conforming with the implications of the Chinese text. The first is that connecting the present Rajburi either with Tavoy by way of the Three Čedis Pass or—an easier journey but somewhat overlong for a ten-day march—with Moulmein by way of the Three Pagodas Pass; the other leads from Patani westwards to Kēdah. The intervening routes utilizing the Tenasserim, Pakchan, Takuapa and Trang Rivers are all too short. Neither the northern nor the southern possible route has yielded archaeological evidence confirming its use as early as the first century B.C. but at P'ong-Tük, where the Meklong River enters the composite delta of Lower Siam, Professor Coedès excavated a settlement yielding Buddhist remains of the second to sixth century A.D., while from P'ra Pathom further down the valley have come finds attributable to the fifth or sixth centuries A.D. The earliest remains associated with the route from Patani to Kēdah are those at its western terminus in the vicinity of the Mērbok and Muda Rivers, which Dr. Wales has claimed show

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1 Proposed locations for Huang-chih have ranged from Africa through India to the Malay Peninsula. For a conspectus of the views of various scholars see Wheatley, op. cit., pp. 80-1.
3 p. 195 below.
evidence of Indian settlement as early as the fourth and fifth centuries A.D. This evidence is too meagre to enable us to draw any valid conclusions as to the precise route which the Chinese ambassadors may have followed, but that they crossed the Malay Peninsula at one point or another is extremely probable. Here then in the reign of Wu-tí we encounter what may have been the first recorded contacts between China and the Peninsula, arising through the exploration of the sea-route to India, itself the logical extension of Han southward expansion which culminated in the incorporation of Nan-yüeh in the Chinese Empire in 114 B.C.² The passage also focusses attention on the role the Peninsula was destined to play in the epic of Chinese westward penetration during the next fifteen hundred years, namely that of a barrier to be crossed or circumnavigated.

After these preliminaries, relating presumably to the time of Wu-tí, the Ch'ien Han Shu continues as follows:

平帝元始中王莽欲欲耀威德厚遊黃支王令遣使獻生犀牛自黃支船行可八月到皮宗船行可二月到日南象林界云

During the Yuan-shih period of Emperor P'ing (A.D. 1-5), Wang Mang, [in his capacity] as counsellor, and desirous of manifesting the brilliance of his majestic virtue, sent rich gifts to the King of Huang-chih, at the same time commanding him to dispatch an embassy to present a live rhinoceros [as tribute]. From Huang-chih it is about eight months' voyage to P‘i-tsong. It is about a further eight months' voyage to the borders of Hsiang-in in Jih-nan. . . .

Once again we have an itinerary from Huang-chih to Jih-nan, but this time it is wholly a sea journey. Ferrand, assuming that Huang-chih was an Indian place-name, identified the intermediate station of P‘i-tsong with the [station] described in the Hsi-yang Ch’ao-kung Tien-lu 西洋朝貢典錄 as lying between Palembang and Malacca,⁴ while Duyvendak identified it with the P‘i-sung Island 昆宗嶼 which the Wu-pei-chih charts locate off the south-west coast of Johore.⁵ These equations across a period of some fifteen hundred years may well be treated with reserve, but it is not

¹ p. 274 below.
² Han Shu, chap. 95, ff. 10 verso—13 recto and Shih-chi, chap. 113, ff. 4 recto—6 verso.
³ This is the reading of the Chin-ling and Wang Hsien-ch‘ien editions. The Southern Academy, Min, Wang and official editions have 二月, which Professor Duyvendak considers a better reading (The Chinese Discovery of Africa, p. 10).
⁵ The Chinese Discovery of Africa, p. 11. The Wu-pei-chih charts are described on pp. 91-103 below. See also Fig. 21.