

## Pearls and Power: Chōla’s Tribute Mission to the Northern Song Court within the Maritime Silk Road Trade Network

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### Abstract:

This paper begins with a close reading of an anecdote written in the 1070s by the Chinese scholar, Peng Cheng, a minor official of the Northern Song dynasty (960-1126). Peng’s account describes the arrival of a tribute mission from the distant South Indian kingdom of Chōla (*zhunianguo* 注輦國), which flourished from ca. 850-1279, at the Chinese court. According to Peng, an emissary from this foreign mission requested that the Chinese court allow him to perform a native custom, ‘casting into the court (*sadian*)’. Following this Chōla practice, the emissary knelt before the chamber in which the emperor was seated. Using a golden plate and a lotus-shaped ladle, he cast several tens of *liang* of pearls across the court’s floor toward the emperor’s throne. Reflecting in private on this event, Peng Cheng found the initial request, and the fact that the Chinese court permitted a foreign custom to be included in Song court ceremony, curious enough to recount. Peng’s tale is a chapter in his one known work, *Scattered Illuminations from the Literatus* (*Moke huixi* 墨客揮犀), along with other anecdotes the Chinese scholar likely circulated among his friends.

**Keywords:** Peng Cheng | Chōla | Song Dynasty | China

### Book chapter:

*In the Xining reign period (1068–1078) of the Song emperor Shenzong, the kingdom of Chōla (zhunian 注輦)<sup>1</sup> sent an emissary to China bearing tribute. The emissary requested that, in accordance with his own custom (bensu 本俗), he might perform ‘the casting (of pearls) into the court (sadian 撒殿)’. A Chinese court official announced that this custom could be performed.*

*The emissary carried a golden plate filled with pearls, and he knelt before the doorway’s front step (kan), raising the plate over his head. Using a golden lotus, he scooped up the pearls and spread them across the court in the direction of the throne. This custom ‘sadian’ is the country of Chōla’s most venerable ritual (li 禮).*

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<sup>1</sup> *Zhunian* was the Chinese name for the Chōla kingdom, located on the Coromandel Coast of East India.

*After the court session had ended, those officials in charge of cleaning up the court gathered more than ten liang of pearls. They distributed these pearls as gifts (fenci 分賜) to the Audience and Palace Attendants<sup>2</sup> who had served that day in court.*

Peng Cheng, 'The Casting of Pearls into the Court'<sup>3</sup>

This paper begins with a close reading of an anecdote written in the 1070s by the Chinese scholar, Peng Cheng, a minor official of the Northern Song dynasty (960-1126).<sup>4</sup> Peng's account describes the arrival of a tribute mission from the distant South Indian kingdom of Chōla (*zhunianguo* 注輦國), which flourished from ca. 850-1279, at the Chinese court.<sup>5</sup> According to Peng, an emissary from this foreign mission requested that the Chinese court allow him to perform a native custom, 'casting into the court (*sadian*)'. Following this Chōla practice, the emissary knelt before the chamber in which the emperor was seated. Using a golden plate and a lotus-shaped ladle, he cast several tens of *liang*<sup>6</sup> of pearls across the court's floor toward the emperor's throne. Reflecting in private on this event, Peng Cheng found the initial request, and the fact that the Chinese court permitted a foreign custom to be included in Song court ceremony, curious enough to recount. Peng's tale is a chapter in his one known work, *Scattered Illuminations from the Literatus* (*Moke huixi* 墨客揮犀),<sup>7</sup> along with other anecdotes the Chinese scholar likely circulated among his friends.

At first glance, one sees reflected in this 11th-century anecdote the nature of Song China's relations with the kingdoms beyond its borders. Descriptions of foreign cultures and their interaction with the imperial court often appeared in detail in the *History of the Song Dynasty* (*Songshi* 宋史) historical record. From these records came an official understanding of 'barbarian decorum', against which the Song state continued to measure its own cultural norms. This approach to the study of Song foreign relations follows the conventional assumption that the Confucian ideals behind the Song state's worldview can be applied unaltered to both public and private realms of discourse. Does the official account of a foreign mission necessarily tell the same tale as does an account recorded privately by a Song official, even if both accounts are decidedly Confucian? If the terms are the same, is the meaning necessarily so? A study of Chinese tributary relations with its neighbor from across the Indian Ocean network reveals the

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<sup>2</sup> During the Song Dynasty, the Palace Attendants were often eunuchs.

<sup>3</sup> Peng Cheng, 'The Casting Pearls into the Court (*sadian*)' in *Continuation of Scattered Illuminations from the Literatus* (Xu Moke huixi 續墨客揮犀), j. 8, p. 16.

<sup>4</sup> Peng Cheng 彭乘 (fl. 1050-1080) should not be confused with Peng Cheng 彭乘 (985-1049) about whom much more has been recorded (see biography in *Songshi* 宋史, j. 298). This Peng Cheng was a native of Gao'an 高安 in Yunzhou 筠州 prefecture (a part of modern-day Jiangxi province). His official posts included *zhongshu jianzheng* 中書檢正 (Official charged with investigation and notification in the Great Imperial Secretariat [the emperor's chancellors]). Peng had a high regard for the Song literary figures, Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037-1101) and Huang Tingjian 黃庭堅 (1045-1105), both of whom were considered to be political conservatives. In his own work, many of Peng's observations were of events that took place in the Jiangxi and Guangdong region of South China. (This information was taken from Balazs and Hervouet 1978, 330.)

<sup>5</sup> The Chōla kingdom was located in Southeastern India in modern-day Tamil Nadu. This maritime empire particularly flourished during the 11th century. The Chōla leadership established their capital at Tanjore.

<sup>6</sup> A traditional Chinese unit of weight; approximately two ounces.

<sup>7</sup> Balazs and Hervouet 1978, 330.

many levels of images employed by the Song state as expressions of the power and prestige in a Chinese cultural empire.

Regarding the protocol of tributary relationships, the Song court's reception of foreign visitors was clearly limited by imperial ritual, particularly the tenets of Guest Ritual (*binli* 賓禮). The *Songshi* gives the following description of *binli*:

In early times the kingdom of Zhou defeated and eliminated the kingdom of Yin.<sup>8</sup> The Zhou rulers honored Wei Zi 微子 as a descendant of the Yin rulers. Reforming the practice of their *li*, the Zhou rulers made room for Wei Zi as a guest in the king's home, and thereby ensured peace for the kingdom. The Song rulers, desiring to employ the ceremonies of Zhou and to include themselves as descendants of Confucius, took as their guiding principle the practices and spirit of these former kings and worthies. These practices came to be known as *binli*. These practices included arranging feasts for emissaries to the court, as well as providing seasons during which to provide gifts and goods to foreign embassies and to receive tribute from faraway regions. As for the proper method of caring for and banqueting (guests) and (for the guests themselves) the propriety of ascending and descending from the throne, bowing in appearance at and withdrawing from court, *binli* orders these practices.<sup>9</sup>

In the Song government, the ministries of War, Household (finance), and Rites all handled tribute missions to the Chinese court. However, while the first two ministries resembled modern-day institutions of diplomacy, the Ministry of Rites also served a worldly role by arranging and regulating the cosmic and moral orders in which all kingdoms functioned. Diplomatic protocol was intended to reflect these orders, and cosmological changes could require diplomatic responses. The example of the Zhenzong 真宗 Emperor's (r. 997-1022) insistence, with the controversial 1008 appearance of Taoist text titled the 'heavenly book' (*tianshu* 天書) on visits from a large contingent of vassal states, is a clear example of a diplomatic response to a shifting cosmic order.<sup>10</sup>

Although many aspects of Imperial China's foreign relations, including the existence of an unchanging 'tribute system', have been debated vigorously by scholars in recent years, James Hevia's discussion of *binli* in his study of the Qing court's reception of the MacCartney Embassy brings us greater understanding of this ritual's use in earlier periods.<sup>11</sup> Hevia contends that relations between China and its neighbors were a flexible matter. As he writes, 'rather than reflecting or representing an unchanging tradition of foreign relations replicated through a succession of Chinese dynasties, supreme lord/lesser lord relationships were unique achievements produced and reproduced, made and altered, in response to changing circumstances.'<sup>12</sup> Peter van der Veer describes Hevia's understanding of *binli* with Clifford Geertz's observation that '(pomp) serves power, not power pomp'.<sup>13</sup> Although such flexibility

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<sup>8</sup> *Yin* is an alternate title for the latter half of the ancient Chinese Shang dynasty (ca. 1401-1154 BC).

<sup>9</sup> Toghito *et al.* 1983, j. 119, 2795.

<sup>10</sup> For a description of these events, see Davis 2001, 67-68.

<sup>11</sup> Hevia 1995.

<sup>12</sup> Hevia 1989, 77.

<sup>13</sup> Veer and Gibson 2016, 18. Geertz's quote is found in Geertz 1980, 13.

also applied to the spirit in which Song policy was formulated, the notions of historical precedent and the relative positions of ‘lord and vassal’ tempered specific shifts in the court’s external policy. Moreover, individual officials who themselves identified with ideal Confucian morality would likely see the faithful observance of *binli* as the only trusted path toward universal harmony.

Perhaps Peng Cheng sensed that the Song court had faltered in its efforts to uphold the Confucian values to which Peng himself was dedicated. Peng as an historical figure is a mystery; little is known about his personal biography. However, the period of Chinese history during which he wrote is well known as a time of radical political experimentation at court, led by the reformer official Wang Anshi 王安石 (1021-1086) with the support of the Shenzong 神宗 Emperor (r. 1067-1085). Open opposition to Wang’s reform policies could be costly politically, and many officials were sent into exile for expressing their views. There is no record of Peng Cheng being censored for his politics. However, he professes in his writing a great admiration for the leading official and literary critic Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037-1101), and Su stood squarely in the anti-reformers’ camp. There are indirect suggestions in Peng’s work that he may have held similar political convictions.

The reader will note in examining the terms Peng chose to describe the events of *sadian* and the context in which he placed the story in the *Moke Huixi* collection, that the author imparts a morally charged message on his audience. As Michael Freeman describes the anti-reformist writings of the 1068-1086 reform period, ‘temporal events, the manifestations of the workings of basic principles, were both held together by a basic order and charged with moral import. Moral meaning was not imposed by the historian; it inhered in events themselves and would stand revealed when the true story was recounted.’<sup>14</sup> Peng’s own protest was lodged in just such a manner.

There are many questions to ask of this anecdote, *sadian*. First, what did Peng mean by concluding that the ‘casting of pearls into the court (*sadian*)’ constituted ‘their own custom (*bensu* 本俗)’? Here, there are interesting issues of translation and untranslatability, for which we can refer to an early work of Vincente Rafael. Regarding the Philippine nationalist hero Jose Rizal’s fictional account of ‘Father Damaso’s sermon’, Rafael describes the conditions under which a Tagalog-speaking audience is drawn to unrecognized fragments of the sermon ‘that slide away from their context and so are susceptible to recontextualization’.<sup>15</sup> Translation here involved the transmission of the ‘untranslatable’ from one cultural or political context to another. The ‘pearl-casting’ of Peng Cheng’s tale appears as just such a fragment, taken from its East Indian context by a Chinese scholar, categorized as ‘their own’/non-Chinese, and then incorporated as part of Chinese tributary protocol. However, one might ask whether this act is a re-affirmation of a trans-cultural link between the ruler and the ruled, or if something else is happening here. Does Peng notice here that ‘pearl-casting’, as was the case for Father Damaso’s Catholic Christian imagery in Rizal, has found meaning for the Chinese court that may be quite different from the meaning intended by its East Indian performers?

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<sup>14</sup> Freeman 1973, 158.

<sup>15</sup> Rafael 1993, 214.

Multiple readings of the Chinese characters in Peng's account result in a variety of interpretations that depend on the reader's approach to the text. *Su* 俗 is a slippery term to translate from Classical Chinese. Defined primarily as 'custom', this character carries with it a secondary meaning of 'vulgar' or 'worldly'. Such a translation might betray Peng Cheng's chauvinistic disdain for pearl casting as a foreign practice. The poet and statesman much admired by Peng, Su Shi, once commented that, 'a man who is thin may gain weight, while an official who is unrefined (*su*) can never be cured.'<sup>16</sup> This characterization of barbarian practices would not be uncommon among early Song officials who saw themselves as the vanguard of a renewed Confucian idealism.

However, Peng later refers to *sadian* as 'ritual (*li* 禮)'. *Li* suggests a quality of universal order and structures and may be translated as 'the exemplification of eternal principles'.<sup>17</sup> Does Peng's understanding this foreign practice as *li* allow him to suppose that this East Indian kingdom has practices equal to the *li* of China? Is there an accepted universal category in Song China's political vocabulary that suggests a cross-cultural equality beyond the subjugating norm of the Chinese tribute system? Such an assertion would challenge the Sino-centric world order that places utmost importance on the performance of tributary practices that accord with Confucian beliefs.

The tribute mission Peng described also appeared in the *Songshi*. Peng does not indicate in which year the tribute mission arrived at the Song court, specifying only that the event occurred during the Shenzong Emperor's reign. The *Songshi* and *Statutes of the Song Dynasty* (*Song Hui Yao* 宋會要) both noted that a mission from Chōla arrived in Kaifeng on 27 June 1077.<sup>18</sup> The envoys included 'chief envoy' Qilolo, 'vice envoy' Nanbeipada, and 'staff official' Matuhualuo.<sup>19</sup> Three days after arriving at court, the envoys received an audience with the emperor, at which time they spread pearls before the throne. The *Songshi* account notes that the Song emperor gave 800 strings of copper cash and 52,000 *liang* of silver as gifts to the Chōla ruler in return.<sup>20</sup>

However, Peng Cheng was not the only Song period scholar to make note of this event. Among Peng's like-minded contemporaries were Pang Yuanying 龐元英 (fl. 1078-1082) and the well-known scholar Shen Gua 沈括 (1031-1095). Pang wrote in his account that envoys from Chōla and Sri Vijaya (Sanfoqi 三佛齊) both approached the Song court, at which time the *sadian* ritual was performed. Pang's account of the diplomatic exchange was written during his tenure as the director of the Wenchang 文昌 Ministry, the Department Head of the Reception of Foreign Guests, from 1082 to 1085.<sup>21</sup> Pang makes no reference to the embassy's description of *sadian* as

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<sup>16</sup> The original line is 人瘦尚可肥，俗士不可醫， found in the poem Yu Qian Seng Lu Yunxuan 於潛僧綠筠軒 (For the Hermit Monk Lu Yunxuan) from Su Shi, *Jizhu fenlei Dongpo shi* 集注分類東坡詩 (Variorum Classified Edition of Poems of Su Dongpo).

<sup>17</sup> Mathews 1931, 566.

<sup>18</sup> One distinct problem with the description of the 1077 tribute mission is that this mission occurs at the same time that a mission reportedly arrived from Sri Vijaya, the kingdom then at war with Chōla. The Chinese transliteration of the name of the ruler who supposedly ordered the Chōla mission to China better fits the Sri Vijayan ruler of that time. Although Robert Hartwell concludes that the Sri Vijayan mission never existed, the question still persists.

<sup>19</sup> Hartwell 1980, 189.

<sup>20</sup> This detail is also noted by Karashima and Sen 2009.

<sup>21</sup> Note by V. Velgus in Balazs and Hervouet 1978, 191-192.

the Chōla kingdom's 'most respectful ritual (*zhi jing zhi li* 至敬之禮)', but he specifically notes that the request to perform *sadian* had been presented in a formal memorial in advance of the audience.<sup>22</sup> Shen Gua's account may be found in his well-known treatise of Northern Song history and scientific achievement *Dream Pool Essays* (*Mengxi Bitan* 夢溪筆談), completed around 1088.<sup>23</sup> Shen Gua included all the details mentioned in Peng's account, and appended a geographical note with reference to the Chōla kingdom being located about 4,000 *li* by sea from Guangzhou and the ethnographic note that the people of Sri Vijaya were another type of 'Southern Barbarian' and neighbors of the Cham.<sup>24</sup>

A later generation of Song scholars, such as the prolific Ye Mengde 葉夢得 (1077-1148), the Neo-Confucian scholar Xue Jixuan 薛季宣 (1134-1173), the occasional envoy to the Jin court Lou Yue 樓鑰 (1137-1213) and the local official Jiang Shaoyu 江少虞 (*jinshi* after 1115, d. after 1145), also took a great interest in this anecdote. Ye's wide-ranging history *Dinnertime Discussions of the Stone Forest* (*Shilin Yanyu* 石林燕語), contains an account that closely follows Shen Gua's version.<sup>25</sup> Ye was also a young contemporary and admirer of Su Shi, a relationship he likely shared with the lesser-known Peng Cheng. However, the Chinese scholar with the account that most closely resembles Peng Cheng's version is Jiang Shaoyu, the lowly prefect whose one known literary work *Categorized Garden of Facts* (*Shishi Leiyuyuan* 事實類苑) has been described as a selection of passages chosen to illustrate aspects of 'social morality'.<sup>26</sup> In his account Jiang includes all of the details mentioned by Peng, elaborating only in his description of the vessel used to perform the *sadian* ritual.<sup>27</sup>

Certain details, included only in Peng Cheng's account, lead to multiple interpretations of the event itself. The other accounts, with the exception of Jiang's work, did not mention that the pearls were later gathered up and distributed to the Audience Attendants and minor officials at court. The Song government had put restrictions on the number of tribute missions the court would receive from certain kingdoms, and the Chinese had set duties for certain 'non-tribute' items. In 1061, there was an official proclamation that all surplus tribute must be presented first to the emperor, while goods deemed 'non-tribute' would be taxed. The notion that a valuable tribute item such as pearls was being parceled out to court officials may have suggested a minor scandal.

Moreover, pearls and a golden lotus-shaped ladle, have links to the Chinese Buddhist tradition. In North China, for example, pearls were suggestive of Buddhist remains.<sup>28</sup> Although Indian rulers were no longer strong patrons of Buddhism, the early Song emperors were. Whether the performance of *sadian* before the Shenzong Emperor was a conscious act of Buddhist piety is difficult to determine from official records. However, such an accusation would not be unfounded. A similar mission from the Chōla kingdom had come to China 44 years earlier,

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<sup>22</sup> Pang Yuanying 2006, 120.

<sup>23</sup> Balazs and Hervouet 1978, 226-227.

<sup>24</sup> Shen Gua 1961, 767.

<sup>25</sup> Ye Mengde 2006, 10: 33.

<sup>26</sup> Yoshida Tora note in Balazs and Hervouet 1978, 323.

<sup>27</sup> Jiang Shaoyu 1993, 874: 509.

<sup>28</sup> Liu 1988, 56.

arriving in Kaifeng on 15 November 1033 and staying at court until 22 March 1034. ‘Barbarian etiquette (*yili* 夷禮)’ was observed when the envoys scattered pearls from a silver container before the throne.<sup>29</sup> Noting that the Chinese emperor of that time, Zhenzong, was a supporter of Taoism at court, the Chōla emissary *salisanwen* 娑里三文 (Soli Samudra) worded many of his comments to the throne in Taoist references.<sup>30</sup>

In the *Songshi* account, the practice of *sadian* by the Chōla mission is described as *yili*. Such a description distinguishes *sadian* as a form of *li*/ritual from the practices of *li* initiated by the Chinese court. A reason for making this distinction is because ‘barbarian’ *li* ordered the courts of particular kingdoms while Chinese *li* was seen as ordering a universal system of relations.

However, Peng clearly labeled *sadian* as the Chōla kingdom’s most venerated *li*, without any ‘barbarian’ qualification. In this case, the practice of *sadian* at the Song court was an acknowledgment that universal moral order, which was the Chinese emperor’s domain, could be expressed through a non-Confucian practice. Peng’s note that the emissaries described *sadian* as their own traditional custom (*su*) complicates the picture, because such base behavior was, in Chinese terms, detrimental to the natural moral order.

Medieval Indian historical sources show that subordinate rulers at birth festivities for the Chōla ruling house performed a court ceremony similar to the one described by Peng.<sup>31</sup> As for the Chōla emissaries in China, performing this *li*/ritual before the Chinese throne, and labeling it as their ‘most highly venerated *li*’, was a gesture of diplomatic good will and an acknowledgment of the Song empire’s regional importance. However, the fact that, as Peng describes it, the Song emperor would allow a barbarian vulgar custom to be performed as *li* suggests that Confucian principles were not always needed to reinforce world order.

This Chōla tribute mission and audience with the Song emperor was not an isolated incident. Beginning in summer 1015 the Chōla kingdom under Rajendra I (1014-1044) sent envoys to Kaifeng (Fig. 1). In his list of tribute missions to the Song, Robert Hartwell noted the *Songshi* account, where the emperor Song Zhenzong 宋真宗 (r. 997-1022) ordered the Imperial Aide (*gongfeng guan* 供奉官) and Usher at Imperial Audiences (*gemen zhihou* 閣門祇候) Shi Youzhi 史祐之 to serve as the Lesser Lord of Diplomatic Receptions (*Honglou shao qing* 鴻樓少卿) and escort the Chōla emissaries to the Song court. This first Chōla mission remained in Kaifeng, according to Hartwell, for nearly a year from 15 May 1015 to 10 May 1016, with the actual audience with the emperor dated October 16 to November 5, 1015.<sup>32</sup> The envoy reportedly claimed that the Chōla kingdom had received word from a visiting merchant that the Song emperors were performing the Taishan 泰山 and Fenyin 汾陰 ritual sacrifices to Heaven and Earth, and that this conduct had calmed the seas (there had been no storms) for 10 years, which prompted the Chōla ruler to send his tribute mission.<sup>33</sup> In the spring the Song emperor had ordered the Bureau of Protocol (*liyi yuan* 禮儀院) to compile a list of tribute missions from

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<sup>29</sup> Hartwell 1983, 189.

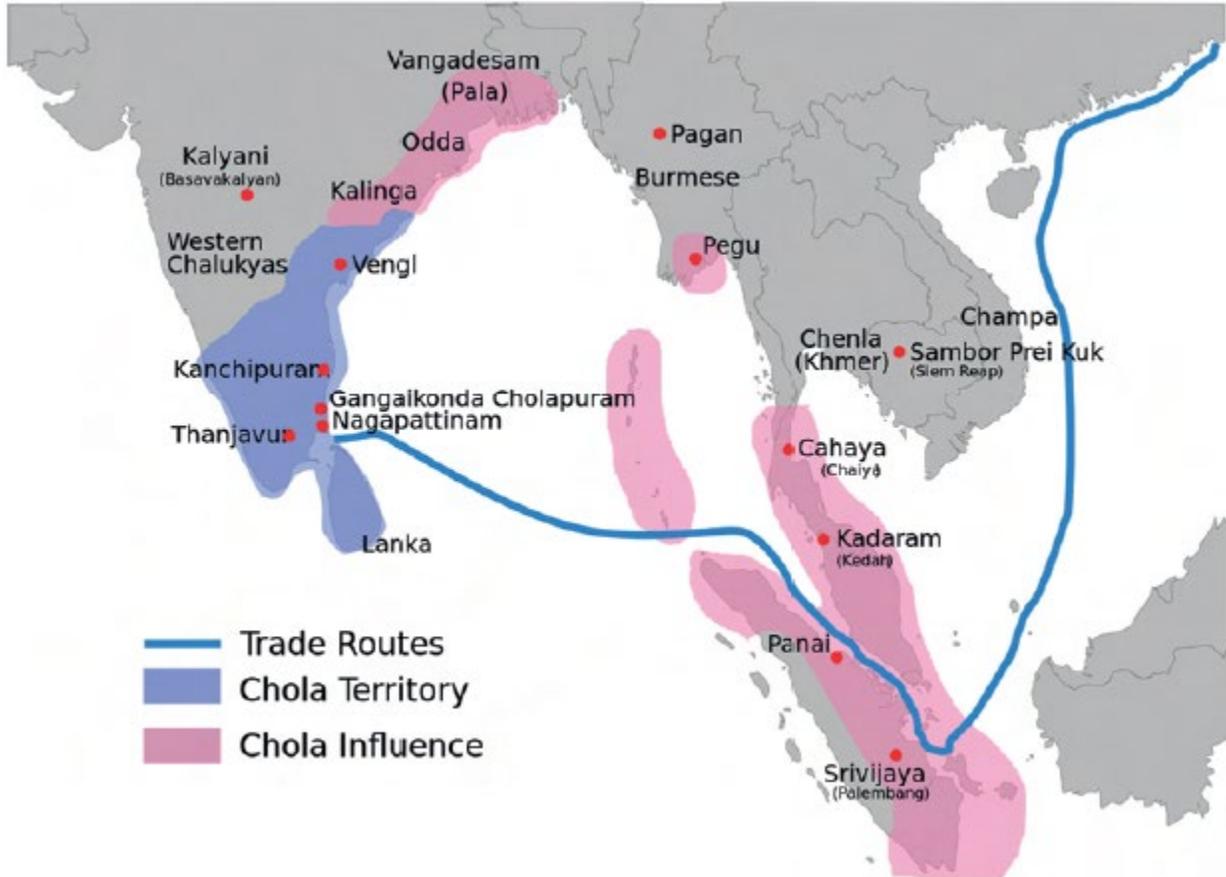
<sup>30</sup> Luo Xianglin 1986, 382.

<sup>31</sup> Dhar 1991, 113.

<sup>32</sup> Hartwell 1983, 188.

<sup>33</sup> Hartwell 1983, 188.

various kingdoms, which the bureau titled ‘Chart of the Tribute Missions of the Four Barbarians’ (*siyi shuzhi tu* 四夷述職圖). The Supervisor for the Court of Diplomatic Protocol Zhang Fu 張復 then compiled a description of the Chōla kingdom’s dress and customs to present to the emperor.<sup>34</sup> Here, we may have the source of knowledge at the Song court of Chōla practices, from which the emperor drew notes when remarking on the practice of *sadian*.



**Fig. 1.** The Chōla empire during Rajendra Chola I (ca. 1030 CE) (WikiCommons, Gregors 2011).

The list of subsequent tribute missions to the Song court was not extensive.

Hartwell recorded the next mission arriving in Kaifeng on 29 February 1020, although the head of Chōla mission had become sick and died upon arriving in Guangzhou, the first port of call for southern maritime kingdoms, so the emperor ordered that a banquet be given for the remaining members of the tribute mission and that lavish gifts be sent back to the Chōla ruler. During an audience with the Song Emperor on 15 November 1033 the Chōla envoy Abu Adil (Puya Tuoli 葡押陀離) requested that barbarian etiquette be observed, and pearls were scattered from a silver container. On 26 June 1077, as described above, pearls, and in Hartwell’s account ripe camphor, were scattered from a golden lotus bowl. Following these descriptions, there are no more official

<sup>34</sup> Hartwell 1983, 188.

accounts of Chōla missions, which align with the rise and fall of the maritime empire's influence in the western reaches of the Indian Ocean trade network.

In terms of economic benefits, the Chōla kingdom and China likely did not share similar assumptions when they entered into tributary relations. While the Song empire was a larger power at the time of their encounter, the strength and regional influence of the Chōla Kingdom had been steadily increasing from the late 10th century. The Chōla kingdom under Rajendra I had led numerous successful military campaigns against its South Indian neighbors, stripping conquered states, such as Sri Lanka and Bengalese Pala kingdom, of their treasures as war booty.<sup>35</sup> At the height of Rajendra I's power his navies had advanced on and captured parts of modern-day Myanmar and the Malay Peninsula, including Sumatra. By the time that their 72-man mission approached the Song for the first time in 1077, the Chōla kingdom had lost control of Sri Lanka and their regional influence had waned. However, Chōla continued to remain influential in the Tamil region of southernmost India until the 1250s when the neighboring Pandyas under Sundara Pandya deposed the last Chōla ruler.

Scholars of medieval India also contend that the Chōla rulers pursued a form of 'commercial diplomacy' during this period. This term suggests flexible diplomatic relations, aimed at fostering ties of trade and economic activity. Moreover, Chōla's confrontation and eventual military defeat of the leading contemporary Southeast Asian maritime power (and Chinese tributary vassal) Sri Vijaya could have been a bid by Chōla to wrestle away from Sri Vijaya control of the commercially strategic Malacca Straits and to replace that Southeast Asian kingdom in the higher order of states that maintained close relations with the Song court. From 971 a steady stream of tribute had flowed from Sri Vijaya to the Song, and next to the Vietnamese and Champa (*zhancheng* 占城) Sri Vijaya would be the most active Southeast Asian participant in China's tribute system throughout the early Song empire. Tansen Sen contends that the Sri Vijayan leadership actively attempted to prevent contact between the Chōla kingdom and the Song court.<sup>36</sup> This diplomatic rivalry may not have been well understood from Kaifeng, but it would explain the reason why the Chōla envoys wished to describe their interactions with the Song court with the greatest display of veneration and through their highest order of ritual interaction.

The participants from Chōla may have seen themselves as ambitious traders wishing to establish closer relations with a regional economic power. Therefore, the Chōla delegation entered the process without the same power of *li* in their possession. What they represented in their actions could never equal what the Chinese court officials represented in theirs. Moreover, China regarded Chōla as a 'first class' trade partner, grouping it with kingdoms in the Middle East, Sri Vijaya and Java.<sup>37</sup> The establishment of an official system of levies in China suggests that channels of international trade, including relations with Chōla, were quite active during the early Song. However, whether or not the Song court showed deference to the 'native customs' of its visitor on purely economic grounds is difficult to determine, and likely not the case. Tansen Sen makes the point that the Song court had revamped the tribute system when it came to interaction with maritime kingdoms, given the lucrative trade that had been flowing through southern ports

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<sup>35</sup> Keay 2000, 220.

<sup>36</sup> Sen 2009, 63.

<sup>37</sup> Hall 1980, 176.

since the founding of the dynasty.<sup>38</sup> This could well be a strong reason for the Song emperor's acceptance of 'native custom' in place of established court-based protocol when interacting with Chōla envoys. It could also be the reason why Peng Cheng, as a conservative member of the court, would have found reason to lodge his protest.

Peng himself has a possible role to play in the creation of this account. In many ways he looks like a figure resembling Stephen Greenblatt's subversive Thomas Harriot in his *Brief and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia*, or Shakespeare, as viewed through his history plays.<sup>39</sup> Peng Cheng wrote nothing overtly describing an authority undermining itself, but there is a warning against moral imbalance implicit in the terms he chose to use and those he chose to omit.

This warning carries over to Peng Cheng's choice of the 'miscellaneous notes' (*biji* 筆記) literary form to describe this event. This literary form suggests that the scholar intended a certain tone of informality and intimacy in his account. The *biji* is a free and unstructured style of Chinese literature, the subjects of which ranged from short fictional narratives to brief expositions of history or philosophy. The reader audience of *biji* accounts did not extend beyond the author's immediate circle of friends, and its contents exposed more personal convictions than did a writer's official commentaries and memorials.

Regarding the anecdote *sadian*, it may be that Peng Cheng was not particularly interested in the actual ritual, its importance to the visiting delegation, and the import of its performance before the Song emperor. Most likely, it was the strangeness and non-Confucian nature of this foreign practice that attracted his attention. Moreover, the collection from which this anecdote is taken enhances the context in which one may view this tale. Peng Cheng's work is filled with descriptions of the strange and the 'unnatural', including an account of an earthen Buddha that moved, monkeys that kidnapped small children and harassed Buddhist monks, and a woman whose bloated stomach could sound like a drum. These events represented disturbances in the natural and human orders, and were themselves indicative of larger disturbances. Solutions generally came in the guise of a Confucian official or his words of counsel. Once the proper way was reestablished, the disturbance vanished.

Such a literary collection finds representational parallels with the wonder-cabinets (*wunderkammern*) of early modern Europe, in which curios were kept to mark the outer boundaries of accepted culture. As Steven Mullaney notes of these European displays, 'no system determines the organization of the objects on display or separates one variety of the marvelous from another. We are surprised upon entering the room, but our surprise is occasioned not so much by the individual items we encounter, impressive though they are, as by the immediate familiarity they show for whatever joins them.'<sup>40</sup> Each item shares with the others its aspects of 'strangeness'; the collection becomes a representational whole with each part sharing this overall significance. The Chōla emissary's 'casting of pearls' then fits into this scheme of strange occurrences, an event worth noting because of the disturbance it causes to the natural Confucian order.

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<sup>38</sup> Sen 2009, 63.

<sup>39</sup> Greenblatt 1988, 21-65.

<sup>40</sup> Mullaney 1983, 42.

The strength of the Chinese official Peng Cheng’s protest depends on the context in which he included his anecdote. Alone, the story retold does not stray far from the official account of a vassal kingdom paying tribute to its Confucian lord. However, the strangeness of the *su*/custom performed as a supplement to the Song court’s ‘guest ritual’ becomes more striking when the other subjects of Peng’s notes are included. Nature is out of order in many of these tales, and Confucian morality is required to set things straight. The Song court under the Shenzong Emperor, and dominated by the reformist faction of Wang Anshi, suffered its share of upheaval. The incident described in *sadian*, with all its unorthodox behavior (at least according to a strict Confucian moralist) in ceremonial proceedings and its official profiteering, exemplified this upheaval. The collection of strange tales in *Moke huixi* was a mirror held up against a distorted Chinese empire. Peng Cheng, as did Harriot, lodged his protest in his handling of this mirror.

A reference to *sadian* in late Song literature provides an interesting coda to contemporary attitudes toward this ritual practice. In a short poem with a long title, ‘In a 40-Character Poem Composed When Evening Rain led to Morning Clear, and the Forest Looked Glorious, and Everywhere Sparkled like Pearls (*Wan yu chao ji, lin duan yu ran, wang zhi jie bao zhu ye, xi zuo si shizi* 晚雨朝霽，林端煜然，望之皆寶珠也，戲作四十字)’<sup>41</sup> the aforementioned Northern Song scholar Xue Jixuan wrote (*my translation*, see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Translation of Xue Jixuan.

晚雨在林麓，	Wǎn yǔ zài lín lù,	Evening rain on the forest hill,
朝來弄晴曦。	Zhāo lái nòng qíng xī.	The morning was clear and bright.
瀾翻漾明月，	Lán fān yàng míng yuè,	The swelling waters reflect the bright moon.
粲爛生摩尼。	Càn làn shēng mó ní.	Its brilliance brings forth the mani jewel.
撒殿固無事，	Sā diàn gù wú shì,	Perform the ‘pearl-casting’ ritual but without incident.
雨天亦何爲。	Yǔ tiān yì hé wéi.	Why conduct the ritual on a rainy day?
少須風景麗，	Shào xū fēng jǐng lì,	The young yearn for beautiful scenery,
去去將安之。	Qù qù jiāng ān zhī.	While the old desire peace.

A prominent thinker and critic of the Neo-Confucian Daoxue 道學 School<sup>42</sup> Xue Jixuan draws on the image of ‘pearl-casting’ that has circulated in the private writings of Song scholars since the first accounts of Chōla tributary missions. The image has been placed in a Buddhist context, and it retains its fantastic and marvelous qualities. Long after Chōla emissaries performed what they termed their most reverential ritual, and Confucian scholars have noted the practice in a variety of contexts, *sadian* remains a trope for an unorthodox act with the highest intention.

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<sup>41</sup> Xue Jixuan 2003, 113.

<sup>42</sup> Goossaert *et al.* 2015, 1363.43

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