

# **I-Tsing's Legacy at the South Sea - A Combined Narrative and Humanistic Geography – Phenomenological Analysis<sup>1</sup>**

Ven. Dr. Zhen Chan & Ooi Han Chun

Lecturer and Director of Students Affairs International Buddhist College Songkhla, Thailand

## **Abstract**

This paper takes a more informed look into narrative analysis's personal life learning experience. The research method of narrative analysis was analyzed along with a narrative from the original literacy text written by I-tsing himself, the Chinese historical record of the T'ang Dynasty, and other commentaries ascribed by scholars in various periods to demonstrate its validity better. The humanistic geography - phenomenological approach was employed to better understand the human world by studying people's relation with nature, their geographical behavior, and their feelings and ideas concerning space and place. The researcher has invented a combined data analysis framework of Polkinghorne's Narrative Analysis and

---

<sup>1</sup> The write-up is a revised and enhanced version from the article titled *I-tsing at the South Sea – The Buddhist Learning Journey*, which was published on HRD Journal, Volumn 11, Number 1, Burapha University, Thailand, 2020.

Humanistic Geography – Phenomenological Analysis to study the central reason I-tsing decided to set foot at the South Sea (Śrīvijaya) for such a long time carrying out his mission before returning to China. The researcher has articulated the analyzed outcomes into three insightful findings as a response to the research inquiry. The findings were explained in lengthy detail and supported with various valid and reliable references, documentary facts, and case studies of real-life stories.

### **Keywords**

I-tsing, legacy, South Sea, learning experience

## **Background of the study**

From its birth land of India, Buddhism spread into China and can be traced back to as early as the Han Dynasty (A.D. 25-200) — reaching its glorious peak during the T'ang Dynasty (A.D. 618-907). Numerous Chinese Buddhist pilgrims initiated their westbound journey to deepen their Buddhist knowledge and practice in the Buddha Land (天竺佛国 India). Among the most prominent and outstanding Chinese pilgrims to India were Fa Xian (A.D. 334-420), Xuan Zang (A.D. 602-664), and also, I-tsing (A.D. 635-713), the central character of this study. Nevertheless, not many research works had been done on I-tsing compared to the first two prominent characters, i.e., Fa Xian and Xuan Zang. The reason given by most of the scholars was there were not many reference materials collated with I-tsing. Under this circumstance, the researcher was inspired to do this research, knowing that something could be done to rectify the situation by excavating and unearthing all the possible reference materials from various sources, especially those concealed and hidden behind the vast Chinese historical literary texts.

Furthermore, among the present works done by the

scholars on I-tsing, the researcher found a notable missing puzzle considered an incomplete mission to describe the life-learning journey of I-tsing fully. The missing puzzle meant here is “the most reasons and factors prompting I-tsing to spend over a decade residing in the countries of the South Seas, mainly in the Śrīvijaya Kingdom.” Even though most scholars choose to pay less attention to it or ignore it, the researcher would prefer to highlight it and place it on the discussion table to revive its existence. The researcher would instead consider it a vital and significant mission to fill up this missing puzzle. This is the reason why this study was conducted.

Therefore, as a sincere Buddhist learner and practitioner, the researcher felt such pity and wrong for not knowing well this prominent ancient master. The latter had contributed his whole life to the Buddha-sasana, particularly in translating and interpreting Buddhist texts. Even today, his works still have such a significant influence and impact. They are beneficial reference material, especially when tracing back to the 7th century's transportation and cultural evolution in Central and Southeast Asia. I-tsing, throughout his life, had translated a total of 56 Buddhist Sanskrit Scriptures and more than

230 volumes of Buddhist texts into the Chinese Language, covering three major Buddhist Literature Texts (Tipitaka), i.e., Sutta (Discourse), Vinaya (Disciplinary Code) and Abhidhamma (Commentary). Hence, I-tsing, no matter in the history of Buddhism or the history of cultural exchanges, had made an extraordinary and significant contribution. Perhaps this was another reason for the researcher to conduct this study.

### **Statement of the problem**

I-tsing had stopped over and spent more than ten years traveling and carrying out his mission in various places in the South Sea, particularly in Śrīvijaya. He was, therefore, very familiar with the social situations in the South Sea countries. The reliability of the description in his writings regarding the social condition of the South Sea is relatively high. Notably, his two authentic self-writings, i.e., the “*A Record of the Inner Law Sent Home from the South Sea*” 《南海寄归内法传》, and the “*Biography of Eminent Monks Who Went to the West*

*Region in Search of the Dharma During the Great T'ang Dynasty*” 《大唐西域求法高僧传》, left us a very precious historical treasure. It has become the most authoritative historical source to date, which recorded the life situation, and the actual scene of the South Sea in general, and Śrīvijaya in particular, during the 7<sup>th</sup> century.

The achievements and contributions of I-tsing throughout his life, from his major work of Buddhist texts translations to his self-written works on the history of Transportation, Language and cultural exchange between China and the outside world, were outstanding and remarkable achievements. According to the book of *Kai-yuan Manual Buddhist Collections* 《开元释教录》, a total of 56 books and 230 volumes of Buddhist texts were translated throughout his life.

Nevertheless, while studying I-tsing and his entire life learning journey, the most curious question that always arises in mind is, “*why didn't I-tsing directly go back to his country of origin, China, to carry out his missionary works after the accomplishment of his learning in India?*” Instead, he set foot in Śrīvijaya, a nation that is totally different in every aspect of his life.

Such a significant problem needed an in-depth search to resolve the question of the reasons and factors that made I-tsing spend such a long time in the South Sea before and after his learning in India.

It is worth mentioning that even though scholars had done much research work in a different period regarding the life journey of I-tsing, rarely had they paid enough attention to this particular aspect, or they might likely have not been very interested in it. Moreover, this is the primary intention I am conducting this study.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The primary concern of this research is to explore the most urging factors and the strong motivation which brought I-tsing to spend over a decade in his life for carrying out his life mission in the South Sea (Śrīvijaya). Hence, specifically, this study is conducted for answering the following research questions:

## Research Question

What were the most urging factors and the strong motivation behind I-tsing's setting foot and spending over a decade in his life carrying out his life mission in the South Sea (Śrīvijaya)?

## Significance of the Study

This study is a significant endeavor for exploring and discussing in-depth the entire life learning journey of I-tsing. The outcome is precise and inclusive, especially the notable missing puzzle that none of the scholars, either in the past or in modern days, were interested in or paid much attention to.

Secondly, this research is also helping to fill up the incomplete part of the historical record of the ancient Malay Peninsula ("*Sejarah Kuno Nusantara*" in the Indonesian Language) in the 6<sup>th</sup> – 7<sup>th</sup> century. The two important literary works of I-tsing, which were accomplished during his 12 years stayed at Śrīvijaya, had handed down all the essential



records describing the real situations and the social conditions at that time. Unfortunately, we could not gather much further information from the local historical records. The local modern historians and scholars even opined that, if without the precise chronology of I-tsing through his two books, they could lose the entire piece of record for this particular period, even though the Śrīvijaya Kingdom was one of the brilliant and flourishing kingdoms in the history of Indonesia around the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore, the outcome of this study is also indirectly carrying out this incomplete mission.

Thirdly, this study is thoroughly conducted in English, so the result and outcomes are written and presented in English. We know that almost eighty to ninety percent of the reference sources that correlate to I-tsing were written in Chinese. There are only limited reference materials in languages other than Chinese, such as French, Japanese, English, and Indonesian. Therefore, this can be a helpful and valuable reference for those who can only understand English.

## Research Design

Qualitative research was employed for this study. It is based on a constructivist paradigm<sup>2</sup>, a narrative strategy, and a humanistic geography approach.

Narrative research has many forms, uses various analytic practices, and is rooted in different social and humanities disciplines. Chase described “narrative” might be the term assigned to any text or discourse, or it might be the text used within the context of a mode of inquiry in qualitative research, with a specific focus on the stories told by individuals<sup>3</sup>. As Pinnegar and Daynes suggest, narrative can be both a method and *a phenomenon* of study. As a method, it begins with the experiences as expressed in lived and told stories of individuals. Writers have provided ways for analyzing and understanding the stories lived and told. The researcher will define it here as a specific type of qualitative design in which "narrative is understood as a spoken or written text giving an account of a series of

---

<sup>2</sup> Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA, U.S.: Sage.

<sup>3</sup> Polkinghorne, D. E. (1995). Narrative configuration in qualitative analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 8(1), 5-23.

events/actions, chronologically connected"<sup>4</sup>. The procedures for implementing this research consist of focusing on studying the life of Master I-tsing, gathering data through the collection of his stories, reporting his experiences, and chronologically ordering (or using *life course stages*) the meaning of those experiences. Although narrative research originated from literature, history, anthropology, sociology, sociolinguistics, and education, different fields of study have adopted their own approaches. In this study, the *humanistic geography approach* will also be employed.

*Humanistic geography* achieves an understanding of the human world by studying people's relations with nature, their geographical behavior, and their feelings and ideas regarding space and place. Also, the study of people's spatial feelings and ideas in the stream of experience<sup>5</sup>. Doing humanistic research is largely a personal matter involving intuition and imaginative interpretation<sup>6</sup>. The primary objective of the *phenomenological geography approach* is the direct investigation and description of phenomena as

---

<sup>4</sup> Czarniawska-Joerges, B. (2004). *Narratives in social science research*. London; Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage, p.17.

<sup>5</sup> Tuan, Y. F. (1976). Humanistic Geography. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 66, p. 266-276.

<sup>6</sup> Johnston, R. J. (1983). *Philosophy and human geography: An introduction to contemporary approaches*. London: E. Arnold, p.75.

consciously experienced, without theories about their causal explanation and as free as possible from unexamined preconceptions and presuppositions<sup>7</sup>. Therefore, the focus of phenomenology is the understanding of human activity through the study of meanings allocated to the elements of the individual's life-world<sup>8</sup>.

## Data Collection

In this research, the document review is used as a method of data collection. For the purposes of the study, the researcher has collected and gathered numerous literacy documents from various sources, e.g., the official historical records of China, Indonesia, as well as other Southern Sea countries in the 6<sup>th</sup> – 7<sup>th</sup> century, the autobiographies and biographies, also academic journals and articles which directly or indirectly related to the study. The researcher has conducted the following activities in order to collect all the

---

<sup>7</sup> Spiegelberg, H. (1975). *Phenomenological Perspectives: Historical and systematic essays in honor of Herbert Spiegelberg*. The Hague: M. Nijhoff.

<sup>8</sup> Johnston, R. J. (1983). *Philosophy and human geography: An introduction to contemporary approaches*. London: E. Arnold, p.57-58.

relevant data:

1. Compiled any record directly related to the history of I-tsing in Chinese, Indonesian, or any other language, then summarized them into English.

2. Consulted two individual scholars who are authorities in I-tsing history for the complete information. The information from them has been transcribed into English.

3. Organized the information from those sources into an appropriate structure.

## **Data Analysis**

### **The Combined Data Analysis Framework of Polkinghorne's Narrative Analysis and Humanistic Geography – Phenomenological Analysis**

1. It is an immediate investigation and description of phenomena as consciously experienced, without theories about their causal explanation

and as accessible as possible from unexamined preconceptions and presuppositions. It focuses on the events, actions, happenings, and other data elements to put them together in a plot.

2. It uses to-and-fro, recursive movement from parts to whole or from whole to parts.
3. It fills in the gaps between events and actions using a narrative smoothing process.
4. It maintains that narrative analysis is not merely a transcription of the data but is a means of showing the significance of the lived experience in the final story. As to the phenomenological method, this is frequently summarized by a phrase ‘to the things’ – interpreted as implying that phenomena (i.e., the meanings are given to items in the individual’s life-world) must be transmitted to the phenomenologist without intermediaries.
5. Doing humanistic research is primarily a personal matter, therefore, involving intuition and imaginative interpretation. It makes the range of disconnected data elements coherent in

a way that appeals to the reader.

6. It makes the final story congruent with the data while bringing narrative meanings that are not explicit in the data themselves. Having identified the contents of the natural attitude, it then seeks to articulate the general essences that underlie it and, from those, the absolute knowledge that resides in consciousness.
7. It emphasizes connotation and sustains the metaphoric richness of a story. The goal of the phenomenological approach is to reconstruct the worlds of individuals, the phenomena in those worlds which are there as repositories of meaning.

## **Findings**

This study's primary aim and objective, i.e., why didn't I-tsing return to his home country right after his mission in India but stayed such a long time in the South Sea, particularly in Śrīvijaya. Two significant situations needed to be explored in order to unearth the primary causes of I-tsing

not returning home immediately after India's mission. Firstly, the domestic situation in China at that time was in line with the development of Buddhism. And secondly, the condition of the South Sea, particularly Śrīvijaya, during that period. What were those factors inducing I-tsing to stay back and spend such a long time carrying out his missionary work in the South Sea?

The researcher learned that one of the genuine and core intentions of I-tsing's westbound journey to the birthplace of Buddhism was to obtain the Dhamma, the authentic scriptures, in order to solve the problem of Buddhist monks' matter of practice. The "Buddhist monks' matter of practice" refers mainly to the Vinaya or the Disciplinary Rules, the principal guide for shaping a Buddhist monk's perfect conduct and behavior. Even though the disciplinary codes had already been translated, they did not play their role in constraining the wrongdoings. The study of the scriptures was very prosperous, but a lack of genuine understanding and the ambiguity was chaotic. This is partly due to the socio-political conditions and the belief system during the beginning of the T'ang Dynasty.

Buddhism has reached its peak period, especially amid the T'ang Dynasty or after I-tsing's time. I-tsing lived



in the early T'ang Dynasty. He was born in the year 635 and passed away in 713. Since it was introduced and spread into China during the Western Han Dynasty (A.D. 25-200), Buddhism had been disorderly, and the teachings were not given in proper order and manner. Although there were many discourses and scriptures translated into Chinese, the Buddhist followers were generally ignorant of the central idea of Buddhist teachings, which led to a low level of faith in Buddhism.

The eminent scholar and translator, Lahiri<sup>9</sup> has observed that the Chinese Buddhists were greatly confused by multifarious forms of Buddhism introduced in China from India and Central Asia by the importation of missionaries belonging to different schools and different countries, by translations of Mahāyāna sutras, like *Vimalakirtinirdeśa*, *Saddharmapuṣṭaka*, *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, and the *Buddha Avataṣṣakanāma Mahāvaiṣṭya Sūtra* of two prominent Indian schools of Nāgājūna and Asaṅga and by translation of some Hīnayāna texts. Amidst this ever-growing confusion and uncertainty, the Chinese thinkers were groping in the dark for centuries

---

<sup>9</sup> I-ching, & Lahiri, L. (1986). *Chinese monks in India: Biography of eminent monks who went to the Western World in search of the Law during the Great Tang dynasty*. Delhi.

and thus led to the departure of renowned pilgrims, like Faxian (AD 400), Xuan-zang (AD 629) and I-tsing (AD 671) and others for India in search of authentic texts and the true doctrines and to pay homage to the far-famed shrines of their religion. The confusion caused by erroneous translation of the Buddhist texts, the misunderstanding of subtle and mystic ideas of the Buddhist philosophy and the lack of disciplinary codes for monastic life prompted the earnest pilgrims to undertake perilous voyages across the breadth of Asia to procure complete and purer sources. The eternal religious fervor of the monks to make a pilgrimage to India, the holy land of the Buddhists, was nonetheless significant.

Notably, I-tsing was born in the period of immobilization and towards the formalization stage of Buddhism. I-tsing went westbound with the high motivation of seeking the “Dhamma”, the authentic scripture and teaching of the Buddha, as he was not satisfied with the so-called “reforming form of Chinese Buddhism”. I-tsing found there were still many unsolved and ambiguous interpretations, especially those related to the Vinaya or Disciplinary Rules. I-tsing solicitously wanted to go to India to learn and observe by himself the way of practice of the monks there. As a result of his learning experience in India,

he had authored two self-writings, namely (1) “*A Record of The Inner Law Sent Home From The South Seas*” 《南海内法寄归传》； and (2) “*Biography of Eminent Monks Who Went to the West Region in Search of the Dharma During the Great T'ang Dynasty*” 《大唐西域求法高僧传》.

The book “*A Record of The Inner Law Sent Home from The South Seas*” 《南海内法寄归传》 was written by I-tsing while he was sojourning in Śrīvijaya after he completed his study in India. His motive in writing the *Record* was to provide his fellow monks at home (China) with information about the monastic rules and manner of living of the monks in India and the islands of the South Sea. In his narration and by way of comparison, I-tsing did not forget to criticize those monks in China whose behaviors were not in agreement with the disciplinary rules, particularly the rules of the Sarvāstivāda School<sup>10</sup>.

While another book of I-tsing, the “*Biography of Eminent Monks Who Went to the West Region in Search of the Dharma During the Great T'ang Dynasty*” 《大唐西域

---

<sup>10</sup> Yijing, S., Li, R., & Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research (2000). *Buddhist monastic traditions of Southern Asia: A record of the inner law sent home from the southseas*. Berkeley, CA: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research.

求法高僧传》, had recorded the biographies of the fifty-six eminent monks who had been passing through the immense hardship and perils the pilgrims braved during their travel, their indomitable spirit and desire for learning Buddhism in India. I-tsing's main objective was to immortalize those self-sacrificing monks who made a remarkable contribution to the propagation and the prosperity of the Dhamma bequeathed by the Buddha<sup>11</sup>.

As articulated in the humanistic geography approach, the geographical activities and phenomena (e.g., social condition) reveal the quality of human awareness<sup>12</sup>. Hence, the researcher had observed duly the related archival reports, such as I-tsing's self-writing books and literary works, as well as the literary records and commentaries of China's T'ang Dynasty etc. to look into how geographical activities and phenomena influencing the decision making of I-tsing based on the current situation and the social conditions he was at that time. I-tsing had twenty-five years (671-695) experience of traveling and learning abroad. Thus, he had a

---

<sup>11</sup> I-ching, & Lahiri, L. (1986). *Chinese monks in India: Biography of eminent monks who went to the Western World in search of the Law during the Great T'ang dynasty*. Delhi.

<sup>12</sup> Tuan, Y. F. (1976). Humanistic Geography. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 66, 266-276.

keen and powerful insight into his personal situation and the development and the trends of Buddhism in China at that time.

**Finding (1): The unreadiness of conditions for allowing I-tsing to return home.**

I-tsing's sense of place was acute and robust. I-tsing was very aware and observant of what was happening in his homeland and the surrounding environment. His intention and indomitable motivation of west-bounding were to acquire authentic and pure Dhamma is to revise the defective Buddhist practice, particularly the practice of Vinaya or Disciplinary Rules of Buddhist monks in China. Nevertheless, I-tsing lived in the period of the immobilization of Buddhism, which means the Disciplinary Codes, which had been vigorously established in the early or even before T'ang (from the transition period of Sui Dynasty, entering the T'ang Dynasty) gradually developing toward institutionalization and immobilization. This had intensified the attempt of I-tsing to return home immediately for bringing China back to the most genuine and original

practice of Vinaya-rules as he has observed in India and the South Sea.

The Vinaya-Master Dao-xuan 道宣律师 (596-667), has been establishing the Vinaya-rules suiting the Chinese monasticism, by mainly referring and adopting the disciplinary codes established by the Buddha that has stated in the Vinaya-Pitaka, particularly the “*Four Parts of Vinaya*” 《四分律》 of Dharmagupta School 法藏部. However, whenever there is unclear or ambiguity, he will appropriately refer to the other Vinaya-rules from different sects or schools, as well as Pāli Canon and Chinese Agama, for removing the complexity and making suitable modifications. It is also an attempt to reflect the ultimate spirit of Mahayana, according to Dao-xuan<sup>13</sup>.

Unfortunately, I-tsing disagrees with this way of setting up the Vinaya rules. He opined:

“What is permitted by one school may be disallowed by another. The monks should observe the disciplinary rules of their respective schools and should not substitute the rules governing lights fault

---

<sup>13</sup> 佐藤达玄 (1997)。《戒律在中国佛教的发展》(上、下册)。嘉义, 香光书乡出版社。

of other schools for those dealing with grave offenses of their own school. They should also not detest the prohibition rules of other schools, thinking that such affairs are allowed by their own school. Otherwise, the distinctions between the schools will not be apparent, and the reasons for permission and prohibition will be unclear. How can one and the same person observe the disciplinary rules of all four schools?”. 【原文：“详观四部之差律仪殊异。重轻悬隔开制迢然。出家之侣各依部执。无宜取他轻事替己重条用。自开文见嫌餘制。若尔则部别之义不著。许遮之理莫分。岂得以其一身遍行於四。”】<sup>14</sup>

Such thought of I-tsing naturally formed a kind of confrontation and friction between him and the reality of the situation (social condition) in China. Moreover, I-tsing himself is a devoted practitioner of “Mūla-sarvāstivāda Vinaya” 《根本说一切有部律》, which he had learned and persisted its authenticity of the Vinaya practice in India, the birthplace of Buddhism. However, it was obviously not in

---

<sup>14</sup> 义净 (690), 《南海寄归内法传》 Retrieved from [http://tripitaka.cbeta.org/T54n2125\\_001](http://tripitaka.cbeta.org/T54n2125_001)

line with the mainstream of Vinaya practice, i.e., “*Four Parts of Vinaya*” 《四分律》 in China at that time, which was gradually becoming an institutionalized and immobilized monastic order in China. Thus, I-tsing’s personal thought and persistence had become the obstacle and containment for I-tsing to return instantly to his homeland after his mission in India. Since then, the South Sea, particularly Śrīvijaya, has been the ideal place for him to set foot and carry on with his mission of translating the scriptures and texts in the original Sanskrit language.

On the one hand, Śrīvijaya is a Buddhist kingdom during that period enjoying its glory with the Hīnayāna Buddhism, and with the majority of the followers practicing the *Mūla-sarvāstivāda Vinaya*. On the other hand, Sanskrit was the common practicing language in the kingdom. It seems the social conditions in Śrīvijaya are more conducive for I-tsing’s to continue his mission under his personal circumstances and the social conditions in China at that time.

The researcher is analyzing and looking into I-tsing’s failure to return home immediately after his learning in India by utilizing the humanistic geography approach, i.e., the understanding of the human world by studying people’s relation with nature, their geographical behavior, as well as



their feelings and ideas concerning their environment (socio-politics, economic, cultural conditions etc.). Through this observation, an assumption can be made to illustrate further the I- tsing's situation of setting his foot in the South Sea. Moreover, the hypothesis made can also be supported by the narrations of life experience stories of others that had faced the same situation as I-tsing.

The researcher assumed that if I-tsing insisted on returning home country right after his learning in India, he would face two possibilities or challenging situations under the current social conditions in China. They were either (1) I-tsing would be heavily criticized by the mainstream “localized-Vinaya” upholders and practitioners because of his obstinate characteristics for persisting on what he had learned and observed in India and South Sea; or (2) I-tsing would have to eventually give up his mission of advocating the authentic and purest Vinaya practice, which he had acquired from the birthplace of Buddhism. I-tsing had to accept the conventional reality of the majority, or the collective voices were always a better influence on society.

## **Finding (2): I-tsing needed a conducive platform for his return to China**

I-tsing, in his writing “*Record of The Return to the South Sea*” 《重归南海传》 (this is one of the chapters under his book of the “*Biography of Eminent Monks Who Went to the West Region in Search of the Dharma During the Great T’ang Dynasty*” 《大唐西域求法高僧传》 ), mentioned that, he went back to China (set foot at Guangzhou in year 689 永昌元年), but only for a short stay (about three months) to acquire paper and ink, and a few assistants to help him in the South Sea. Even though I-tsing’s words are seemingly a little too far-fetched, but there is something else behind it. He wrote:

“At the mouth of the river of Bhoga (Śrīvijaya) I went on board the ship to send letters as a credential to Guang-zhou, in order to meet my friends and ask for papers and ink cakes, which are to be used in copying Sanskrit Sūtras and at the same time to find some means to hire scribes. Just at that time, the merchants found the wind favorable and

raised the sails to their utmost height. I was in this way conveyed back (although not myself intending to go home). Even if he asked to stop, there would have been no means of doing so. By this, I see it is the influence of karma, which determines the fate is beyond human planning. It was on the twentieth day of the seventh month of the Yung-ch'ang period (A.D. 689) that we reached Guang-zhou. The monks and laity as well met and received him with respect.”

【原文：“净于佛逝江口升舶，附书凭信广州，见求墨纸，抄写梵经，并雇手直。于时商人风便，举帆高张。遂被载来，求住无路。是知业能装饰，非人所图。遂以永昌元年七月二十日达于广府，与诸法俗重得相见。”】<sup>15</sup>

Among the modern scholars, Professor Wang Bangwei has spotted this interesting scenario; he commented: “According to I-tsing himself, he seems to have been transported back home by chance. It would not be possible if I-tsing does not know when the monsoon is blowing and do not have enough time to get down from the ship. I-tsing’s

---

<sup>15</sup> Yijing, & Takakusu, J. (1966). *A record of the Buddhist religion as practised in India and the Malay Archipelago (A.D. 671-695) by I-tsing*. Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal.

word of his realization of “*the influence of karma, which determines the fate is beyond human planning*” is a bit overstated in this context. This is merely an excuse for I-tsing to go back home.” Moreover, if it is only to seek and acquire ink and paper and find someone to assist him, then it is sufficient to write a letter for doing so. It is unnecessary for I-tsing to risk himself again with the ups and downs on the sailing journey. I-tsing was aware of the difficulties and dangers of navigating the sea<sup>16</sup>.

Furthermore, if he needs to go to Guang-zhou, he can go freely without such a pretext. But why do I-tsing act so? An envisage can be made that I-tsing wished and intended to return home, but not immediately. He wanted a reason to go back to Guang-zhou, let people know that he wanted to return, with the intention to translate the Buddhist scriptures. On the other hand, he was unwilling to say the obvious<sup>17</sup>.

When he was in Guang-zhou, he sighed and said to the resident monks Zhi-zhi Monastery 制旨寺 that:

“I (I-tsing), went to the Western Country (西

---

<sup>16</sup> 义净原著、王邦维校注 (1988)。《大唐西域求法高僧传》。中外交通史籍丛刊，中华书局，北京。

<sup>17</sup> 义净原著、王邦维校注 (1988)。《大唐西域求法高僧传》。中外交通史籍丛刊，中华书局，北京。

国, India) with a primary hope of transmitting and spreading (the Law). I came back and stayed on the island of the South Sea. Some texts are still wanting, though what I brought (from India) and left at Śrīvijaya amount to 500,000 ślokas belonging to the Tripiṭaka. It is necessary under this circumstance that I must go there once again. But I am already more than fifty years of age; while crossing the running waves once more, the horses that pass-through cracks may not stay and protect the life would be difficult. If the time for the morning dew (for dying) comes suddenly, to whom should those books be entrusted? The sacred canon is indeed to be the important doctrine. Who is then able to come with me and take it over? The right type of person who could easily translate the Sūtras must be found out.” 【原文:

“本行西国，有望流通，迴住南海，经本尚阙。所将三藏五十余万颂，并在佛逝国，事须覆往。既而年余五十，重越流波，隙驹不留，身城难保，朝露溘至，何所嘱焉？经典既是要门，谁能共往

收取？随译随受，须得其人。”<sup>18</sup>】

Again, the above self-description of I-tsing showed his keen interest in returning home, but somehow the time seemed not ripe. This was solely the self-observation of I-tsing himself. Indeed, if he had wished to carry out the canons' translation work, it would be most appropriate to do it in China. Why bother searching for people from China to go far in the SouthSea for carrying out the mission?

Furthermore, in another self-narration of I-tsing depicted from his book of the “*Biography of Eminent Monks Who Went to the West Region in Search of the Dharma During the Great T'ang Dynasty*” 《大唐西域求法高僧传》卷下《大津传》：

“I, I-tsing, met Ta-ts'in in Śrīvijaya (where he came AD 683). I requested him to return home to ask imperial favor in building a temple in the West. When he saw that benefits would be great and large (had this petition been granted), Ta-ts'in disregarding his own life agreed to re-cross the vast ocean. On the fifteenth day of the fifth month in the third year of the Tien-

---

<sup>18</sup> Yijing, & Takakusu, J. (1966). *A record of the Buddhist religion as practised in India and the Malay Archipelago (A.D. 671-695) by I-tsing*. Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal.

shou period (692), he takes a merchant ship to return to Chang-an. Now I send with him a new translation of various Sūtras and Sāstras in ten volumes, the “A Record of The Inner Law Sent Home From The South Seas” 《南海內法寄歸傳》 in four volumes, and the “Biography of Eminent Monks Who Went to the West Region in Search of the Dharma During the Great T’ang Dynasty” 《大唐西域求法高僧傳》 in two volumes.” 【原文：“淨於此見。遂遣歸唐望請天恩。於西方造寺。既覩利益之弘廣。乃輕命而復滄溟。遂以天授二年五月十五日附舶而向長安矣。今附新譯雜經論十卷。南海寄歸內法傳四卷。西域求法高僧兩卷。”】<sup>19</sup>

However, after another six years in Śrīvijaya, I-tsing made a direct request to the T’ang Ruler at the time, Empress Wu Ze-tian, to build a Chinese temple in Śrīvijaya. I-tsing sent the monk Ta-ts’in 大津 back to China to convey his request, as well as presenting his translations and his two

---

<sup>19</sup> Yijing, & Takakusu, J. (1966). *A record of the Buddhist religion as practised in India and the Malay Archipelago (A.D. 671-695) by I-tsing*. Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal.

self-writings, which had been accomplished in Śrīvijaya to Empress Wu. This was perhaps the best opportunity for him to do so, as he knew that Empress Wu promoted Buddhism over Confucianism and Daoism as the favored state religion. At the time, it was the second year of Empress Wu's reign. Empress Wu was officially recognized as empress of China in more than two millennia.

I-tsing used various means to probe the response and acceptance of the Buddhist community in China on his return. He was trying to attract the attention and acknowledgment (on his existence) of the imperial, Empress Wu. As commented by Prof. Wang Bang-wei, “I-tsing must have heard about the favorable support of Empress Wu to Buddhism compared with the emperor(s) before her. Empress Wu made use of the name of Buddhism to claim that she was the reincarnation of Maitreya Buddha, and also used various legends with the name of Buddhism to deify herself. Hence, from these two intentional or unintentional actions of I-tsing, it can be seen that he did not have a strong wish for a long-term stay in Śrīvijaya. Perhaps this is the best chance for I-tsing to present himself and his



works.”<sup>20</sup>

I-tsing was very observant and sensitive to his surroundings. He was incisive and able to define his present situation well, and most importantly, he knew how to accommodate and act appropriately according to the situation. This is what the humanities aspect of the humanistic geography approach tries to explain, “Knowledge of the human world is acquired by examining social institutions. These institutions can be viewed both as an example of human inventiveness and as forces limiting the free activity of individuals.”<sup>21</sup>

I-tsing wished and wanted to be welcomed home by the imperial and the public. In this way, he could stabilize and consolidate his position, and would not be easily shaken and disturbed by the mainstream (those following the practice of “*Four-part of Vinaya*” 《四分律》) at the time. Moreover, I-tsing wished the condition in China could still allow him to continue to uphold and promote the *Mūla-sarvāstivāda Vinaya*.

---

<sup>20</sup> 义净原著、王邦维校注 (1995)。《南海寄归内法传》，中华书局，北京。

<sup>21</sup> Tuan, Y. F. (1976). Humanistic Geography. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 66, 266-276.

Finally, I-tsing as his wish, returned home to China in 695 (midsummer in the month of 5th, the first year of Zheng-sheng 证圣元年). His biography recorded in the “*Sung-Gao-Seng-Zhuan*” 《宋高僧传》卷一《义净传》, enumerated the grand welcoming scene of I-tsing’s return to the Capital Luo-yang:

“I-tsing was abroad for twenty-five years (671-695) and traveled to more than thirty countries, and that he came back to China at midsummer in the first year of the Zheng-sheng 证圣元年 (695) of Empress Wu (684-704). He brought home some four hundred different Buddhist texts, all in a total of 500,000 śloka, a real plan of the diamond seat (vagrāsana) of the Buddha, and three hundred of relics. Empress Wu herself welcomed him at the eastern entrance of the palace, and there was a prayer and hymns parade by numerous Buddhist monks from other temples to lead at the front row. I-tsing first resided at the Fo-Shou-Ji Temple 佛授记寺. He was initially working together with the monk Śikṣānanda 实叉难陀 to translate the “Mahā-Vaipulya-Buddhāvataṃsaka-sūtra” 《大方广佛华严经》. He

started his self-translation after the first year of Jiushi 久视元年” 【原文：“经二十五年歷三十餘国。以天后证圣元年乙未仲夏还至河洛。得梵本经律论近四百部。合五十万颂。金刚座真容一铺。舍利三百粒。天后亲迎于上东门外。诸寺緇伍具幡盖歌乐前导。勅於佛授记寺安置焉。初与于闐三藏实叉难陀翻华严经。久视之后乃自专译。”】

22

Noticeable, it has been recorded in the “*The Collection of Quan T'ang - 914<sup>th</sup> volume*” 《全唐书》卷九百十四, saying that I-tsing successfully conducted a grand Dhamma-assembly of Higher Ordination transmitting the *Mūla-sarvāstivāda Vinaya*, which was granted permission by Empress Wu in the fourth month of the fourth year of Chang-an 长安四年的四月. The venue of the Higher Ordination Ceremony was at Song-shan Shao-lin Monastery 嵩山少林寺. This occasion, thus, indicates that I-tsing not

---

<sup>22</sup> 赞宁 (n. d.). 《宋高僧传》卷一《唐京兆大荐福寺义净传》，中華電子佛典協會 (CBETA) 大正新脩大正藏經，50，2061.

Retrieved from

[http://buddhism.lib.ntu.edu.tw/BDLM/sutra/chi\\_pdf/sutra20/T50n2061.pdf](http://buddhism.lib.ntu.edu.tw/BDLM/sutra/chi_pdf/sutra20/T50n2061.pdf)

only could stand firmly along with the mainstream but also able to spread and to sow the seeds of his advocacy.

### **Finding (3): The supportive conditions in Śrīvijaya**

Śrīvijaya, a great Buddhist Empire, also a maritime and commercial kingdom that flourished between the 7th and the 13th centuries, mainly in what is now Indonesia. The kingdom originated in Palembang on the island of Sumatra and soon extended its influence and controlled the Strait of Malacca. Śrīvijaya's power was based on its control of international sea trade. It established trade relations with the states in the Malay Archipelago and with China and India<sup>23</sup>.

I-tsing, in his masterpiece of translation work, the '*Mūla-sarvāstivāda Vinaya*' 《根本说一切有部百一羯磨》 asserted the following advice to exhort Chinese monks who wished to seek Dharma in the West (India) to stop at the passage of the Śrīvijaya. He wrote:

“In the islands of the South Sea, they are

---

<sup>23</sup> Britannica (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/place/Srivijaya-empire>.

respecting and have faith in Buddhism. The Lord of man's Kingdom is blessed with wellness and prosperity. In Śrīvijaya, there are monks of more than a thousand. Learning is the priority, and they are practicing alms-round (begging food from the household). The learning attitude and the studying atmosphere is not much differed from India. The monastic disciplinary practices are the same. If the monks who are intending to pursue their study in the West, it is most advisable to set foot here (Śrīvijaya) for one- or two-years period to equip themselves before proceeding their journey to India.”【原文：义净在其所翻译之《根本说一切有部百一羯磨》一书中是这么劝勉欲向西行求法的中国僧人首先停留佛逝学习的一段话：“又南海诸洲，咸多敬信。人王国主，崇福为怀。此佛逝廓下，僧众千余。学问为怀，并多行钵。所有寻读，乃与中国不殊。沙门轨仪，悉皆无别。若其高僧欲向西方为听读者，停斯一二载，习其法式，方进中天，亦是佳

也。”】<sup>24</sup>。

The narration above indicated that I-tsing was very familiar and has an in-depth knowledge of the overall condition of Śrīvijaya. He, through his own traveling experience, knew that Śrīvijaya was located at the very advantageous geographical location in between China and India. It was at the midway of the sea-route between China and India. Therefore, I-tsing was proclaiming Śrīvijaya the best “transit-hub 中转站” for Chinese monks who wished to travel westbound to India. Thus, on his record, as stated above: *“If the monks who are intending to pursue their study in the West, it is most advisable to set foot here (Śrīvijaya) for one- or two- years period to equip themselves before proceeding their journey to India”*.

I-tsing was very encouraging and invoked Chinese monks to stay for a short while before continuing their journey to India, as the condition of Śrīvijaya is very similar to India. This is what I-tsing said, *“In Śrīvijaya, there are monks more than a thousand. Learning is the priority, and they are practicing alms-round (begging food from the*

---

<sup>24</sup> 义净 (n. d.). 《根本说一切有部百一羯磨》，中華電子佛典協會 (CBETA)，大正新脩大正藏經, 24, 1453. Retrieved from [http://buddhism.lib.ntu.edu.tw/BDLM/sutra/chi\\_pdf/sutra11/T24n1453.pdf](http://buddhism.lib.ntu.edu.tw/BDLM/sutra/chi_pdf/sutra11/T24n1453.pdf)

*household). The learning attitude and the studying atmosphere is not much different from India. The monastic disciplinary practices are the same.”* Therefore, the condition is conducive for a Chinese monk who was determined to study in India first to lay a firm foundation and do preparatory work in Śrīvijaya, including studying Sanskrit, as well as observing and learning about the daily practice of the monks there. This is undoubtedly a valuable contribution of I-tsing through his personal learning experience and observation to proclaiming the Śrīvijaya as the dynamic transit-hub to his fellow Chinese monks who had the same mission with him.

Furthermore, if viewing from the perspective of I-tsing himself, setting foot at Śrīvijaya was the right option while waiting for the right time and condition to return home in China. Under various advantageous circumstances, I-tsing was able to carry on his missionary works without wasting time. For instance, the advantage of the Sanskrit language allows I-tsing to continue carrying out his translation work, which he had started while studying at Nalanda University in India. Sanskrit, also known as the Brahma-language in Śrīvijaya, was a common language practiced among the people there. Moreover, he had laid his firm foundation by

learning Sanskrit for more than six months in Śrīvijaya during his first visit in 671, before proceeding to India. Hence, it is doubtless the advantage of the language is to be one of the predominant supports for him to set foot in Śrīvijaya before returning home.

The practice and the observance of *Mūla-sarvāstivāda Vinaya* is another advantage for I-tsing to set foot at Śrīvijaya. As stated in his Record, he found most of the monastics (Buddhist monks) in Śrīvijaya, upholding and observing *Mūla-sarvāstivāda Vinaya*. He asserted: “*In Śrīvijaya, there are monks more than a thousand. Learning is the priority, and they are practicing arm-round (begging food from the household). The learning attitude and the studying atmosphere is not much differed from India. The monastic disciplinary practices are the same.*”<sup>25</sup> “the same” here is meant for the *Mūla-sarvāstivāda Vinaya*. I-tsing also authored and completed his first two books in Śrīvijaya. One of his books, named as “*A Record of The Inner Law Sent Home from The South Seas*” 《南海内法寄归传》, recorded every single detail of the monastic rules and manner

---

<sup>25</sup> 义净 (n. d.). 《根本说一切有部百一羯磨》，中華電子佛典協會 (CBETA)，大正新脩大正藏經, 24, 1453. Retrieved from [http://buddhism.lib.ntu.edu.tw/BDLM/sutra/chi\\_pdf/sutra11/T24n1453.pdf](http://buddhism.lib.ntu.edu.tw/BDLM/sutra/chi_pdf/sutra11/T24n1453.pdf)



of living of the monks in India and the islands of the South Sea as observed by him.

These were the two supporting resources, which I-tsing gained from the nature of the social conditions in Śrīvijaya to support his works. Of course, there were many other supportive conditions. For instance, the generous support of the Imperial provided I-tsing with all the basic necessities, such as food, lodging, transportation, safety and medication throughout his stay in Śrīvijaya. As Śrīvijaya was a flourishing Buddhist kingdom, the presence of I-tsing was celebrated and well-received by the imperial and the Buddhist community there.

## **Conclusion**

The researcher has articulated the analyzed outcomes into THREE insightful findings as a response to the research inquiry. The three findings are as follows:

1. The disagreeable conditions for allowing I-tsing to return home.
2. I-tsing needed a conducive platform for his return to China.

### 3. The supportive conditions in Śrīvijaya

The above findings were illustrated in lengthy detail and supported with various valid and reliable references, documentary facts, and case studies of real-life stories.

### References

- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.)*. Thousand Oaks, CA, U.S.: Sage.
- Czarniawska-Joerges, B. (2004). *Narratives in social science research*. London; Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage.
- Holsti, O. R. (1969). *Content analysis for the social sciences and humanities*. Addison-Wesley.
- I-ching, & Lahiri, L. (1986). *Chinese monks in India: Biography of eminent monks who went to the Western World in search of the Law during the Great T'ang dynasty*. Delhi.
- Johnston, R. J. (1983). *Philosophy and human geography: An introduction to contemporary approaches*. London: E. Arnold.

- Polkinghorne, D. E. (1995). Narrative configuration in qualitative analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 8(1), 5-23.
- Spiegelberg, H. (1975). *Phenomenological Perspectives: Historical and systematic essays in honor of Herbert Spiegelberg*. The Hague: M. Nijhoff.
- Tuan, Y. F. (1976). Humanistic Geography. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 66, 266-276.
- Yijing, S., Li, R., & Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research (2000). *Buddhist monastic traditions of Southern Asia: A record of the inner law sent home from the southseas*. Berkeley, CA: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research.
- Yijing, & Takakusu, J. (1966). *A record of the Buddhist religion as practised in India and the Malay Archipelago (A.D. 671-695) by I-tsing*. Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal.
- 义净原著、王邦维校注 (1988)。《大唐西域求法高僧传》。中外交通史籍丛刊，中华书局，北京。
- 义净原著、王邦维校注 (1995)。《南海寄归内法传》，中华书局，北京。
- 佐藤达玄 (1997)。《戒律在中国佛教的发展》(上、

下册)。嘉义，香光书乡出版社。

义净 (690)，《南海寄归内法传》。Retrieved from

[http://tripitaka.cbeta.org/T54n2125\\_001](http://tripitaka.cbeta.org/T54n2125_001)

义净 (n. d.). 《根本说一切有部百一羯磨》，中華電子佛典協會 (CBETA) ，

大正新脩大正藏經, 24,1453. Retrieved from

[http://buddhism.lib.ntu.edu.tw/BDLM/sutra/chi\\_pdf/sutra11/T24n1453.pdf](http://buddhism.lib.ntu.edu.tw/BDLM/sutra/chi_pdf/sutra11/T24n1453.pdf)

赞宁 (n.d.). 《宋高僧传》卷一《唐京兆大荐福寺义净

传》，中華電子佛典協會 (CBETA) 大正新脩大

正藏經 , 50, 2061. Retrieved from

[http://buddhism.lib.ntu.edu.tw/BDLM/sutra/chi\\_pdf/sutra20/T50n2061.pdf](http://buddhism.lib.ntu.edu.tw/BDLM/sutra/chi_pdf/sutra20/T50n2061.pdf)

Britannica (n.d.). Retrieved from

<https://www.britannica.com/place/Srivijaya-empire>.