The BLACKS of PREMODERN CHINA

Don J. Wyatt
The Blacks of Premodern China
ENCOUNTERS WITH ASIA

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The Blacks of Premodern China

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For Athena and Isis
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Introduction

Within the span of the nearly three centuries of China’s illustrious Tang Dynasty (618–907), the year 684 is conspicuous mainly for two infamously related events. In the second month of that year the notorious Wu Zhao, or Empress Wu (Wu Hou) (ca. 625–705), initiated her successful bid to become the Middle Kingdom’s only female aspirant to emperorship in its four-millennia-plus traditional history. Almost from the first, her usurpation of power was resisted not only by the legitimate members of the dynasty’s imperial family but also by a disgraced aristocratic bravo named Li or, sometimes in the histories, Xu Jingye (d. 685). In the ninth month, proclaiming either his real or his fictitious intent of restoring the rightful emperor to power, Li Jingye initiated the first internal rebellion actually directed against the state in more than sixty decades.

These distinct but related events of 684 precipitated bloodshed on an unimaginably massive scale. Owing to the harsh gender biases militating against her ascendancy in the political arena, Empress Wu could claim and consolidate her supreme position only by means of the trail of poisonings and dismemberments that she initiated in 684 and carried out well beyond her imperial accession of 690. Once installed through this chain of usurpation as China’s first and only woman emperor, Wu Zhao would spend the next two decades as she had for at least a decade before that achievement—meting out death to all real or perceived threats to her power, including numerous members of the legitimate imperial family. By contrast, the tyranny of Li Jingye was far less long-lived. He rebelled largely because he had felt his personal honor besmirched and seen the privileges of his noble standing curtailed. Therefore, he directed his suddenly amassed forces of one hundred thousand in bringing death to countless thousands through his revolt. Wu Zhao met Li Jingye’s rebels with a three-hundred-thousand-man army of suppression of her own. Li, however, did not live long enough to witness the complete destruction of what he had ignited, for he met his own end in short order—when a treacherous subordi-
nate, seeking to collect a reward on his defeat and, through dissociation, save his own life, elected to behead him. Thereafter, as was customary repayment at that time for sedition against the throne, all of Jingye’s known surviving family members were exterminated to the last person, and their tombs were desecrated by obliteration.\(^4\)

With few exceptions, most subsequent scholars have regarded the usurpation of the empress and the insurrection of the renegade as assuredly the two most noteworthy events of the year 684. This is an entirely understandable assessment, given that each produced ramifications that emanated like seismic shock waves, profoundly affecting nearly every aspect of the future fortunes of the Chinese Tang empire’s remaining two-plus centuries of life. However, there was yet an additional act of violence—smaller but hardly unnoticed—that transpired in that same critical year of 684. Occurring in the interim months between the previously mentioned cataclysms, this incident constituted a much lower order of violence than either of the aforementioned disruptive events of 684 that framed it, and it therefore understandably has generally not garnered attention on a level that is commensurate with its significance. Yet, we can scarcely overemphasize the portentous nature of this event, and it would prove no less consequential in its implications for the subject of this study than either of the other two has customarily proven to be to any study of Tang politics or institutions. The event in question is the sordid and unseemly murder of the civilian official Lu Yuanrui, who, during the seventh month of 684, died savagely while serving as governor of the remote and still somewhat marginally incorporated southern Chinese port of Guangzhou, the future Canton.\(^5\)

\textit{Kunlun} Exposed and Evolving

By the standards of our culture and times, by most accounts Lu Yuanrui was not wholly undeserving of the fate that befell him. He was a petty man and a rapacious bureaucrat, so much so as not to merit independent treatment anywhere in the authoritative sources, despite his relatively high position. Consequently, we first learn about Lu only because of the survival of a terse description of his death—and nothing more—that is included in the officially commissioned biography of the successor to his post. Nevertheless, in the eyes of certainly what was a preponderance of his countrymen, Lu’s deficiencies as a functionary and as a person hardly made him deserving of what happened to him, for from the single, unadorned entry on his fate in the \textit{jiu Tangshu}
(Old Tang History) we learn the following: “The territories of Guangzhou border the Southern Sea. Every year, the kunlun merchants arrive in [their] ships, laden with valuable goods to trade with the Chinese. The previous governor tried to cheat them out of their goods, so a kunlun had come forth with a concealed knife and killed him.” The assailant was not content simply to cut Lu Yuanrui down on the spot. Wielding his knife or perhaps knives (the original Chinese is actually unclear), he also, in what must have been a horrifically savage bloodletting, dispatched a dozen or possibly more members of the governor’s immediate entourage. Moreover, adding insult to the considerable injury, by effectively evading all pursuers and avoiding capture, the culprit managed to put out to sea and thus escape justice. Now as well as then the deed itself was grave enough. However, the matter was made all the more deplorable by the single individualized reference to the perpetrator as a kunlun, a term essential to our present purposes because it was the first certifiable signifier to emerge in China for identifying a kind of person considered by Chinese standards to be utterly unlike themselves—that is, someone construed by premodern Chinese to evince the characteristics of being ethnically black.

In Chapter 1 we will revisit the violent death of Lu Yuanrui and deliberate in still greater detail than we have thus far on all that is implied by his manner of death. A reason as sound as any for focusing on this episode at this early juncture is its prime functionality as an initial signpost for all our further deliberations on premodern China’s relationship to its blacks. Whereas Lu the man is easy enough for us to relegate to obscurity, we will find that the circumstances of his death are not, and they will collectively come to serve as well as any compass to point us in the direction of the crucial questions that will most preoccupy us. Indeed, it is the reality of his death at the hands of some variety of kunlun that catapults us forward into engagement with the intermeshing themes that dominate the discourse entailed over the remainder of this book. In sum, the importance of the recording of Lu Yuanrui’s murder lies principally in the fact that it comprises the earliest and least equivocal historical documentation we now have of the undercurrent tensions and occasional outright enmity that had, by the ninth century if not well before then, evolved to become a fixture of Chinese-kunlun relations.

The specific matter of Lu Yuanrui is also of supreme value to us at this stage for the seminal kinds of questions it evokes. Not the least weighty but certainly among the more expected questions for us to ask are, who were the kunlun and, since they were no more imaginary than the merchants who seasonally ported at Guangzhou and on one infamously unfortunate occasion claimed the lives of Lu Yuanrui and a good number of his subordinates, from
where did they come? We shall discover that, much like these queries, the answer to each question is locked in interdependency because we will learn that over several centuries the Chinese of premodern times affixed the appellation *kunlun* to an expanding array of peoples, most of whom by our contemporary standards should have represented quite distinct nationalities and ethnicities to them. Moreover, and somewhat counterintuitively, we will witness how this succession of peoples to which the designation *kunlun* was applied actually underwent expansion even as Chinese knowledge of the greater world commensurately increased. Increased geographical exploration, initially to the south but later in the westward direction, and greater exposure to peoples not previously encountered had the effect of contributing to a swelling rather than a diminution of those included under the *kunlun* rubric. We will come to regard the still larger questions elicited by such discoveries as this one as contributing immeasurably to the arresting engrossing quality of our inquiry.

By the time of Lu Yuanrui’s murder, the Chinese had already experienced perhaps a half-millennium of contact with an expanding succession of peoples whom they designated as *kunlun*. However, even if it was sustained, as the case of the use of Guangzhou as a port of call certainly implies, we should not assume that contact over the centuries had necessarily become generally more cooperative or felicitous. Familiarity need not assure contempt, but neither is there sufficient reason for our believing that Tang Chinese perspectives on the peoples they sometimes indiscriminately called *kunlun* had advanced greatly beyond their initial exposure to them in the early centuries of the Common Era. Despite their vaunted reputation for cosmopolitanism, the Chinese of Tang times were also heirs in large degrees to the far less pluralistic ages that had preceded them. Just as we today are inclined to wonder whether life “as we know it” abounds on some other planet, Chinese of the first centuries C.E., like peoples of ancient times elsewhere who were often cut off from all but incidental and near-miraculous contact with those geographically remote from themselves, doubtless reflected on the relative similarity or dissimilarity to themselves of the few alien peoples they chanced to encounter. Often even the fundamental humanness of foreigners was debated, for it was considered far from a certainty.

The topic under scrutiny is admittedly exotic, even for other sinological specialists. However, the approach adopted in the present book is strictly pedestrian. Hence, herein there are no grand explanations of the vast history of cross-cultural human experience; as I have already intimated, I have sought merely to provide answers to a provocative yet quite strictly circumscribed set of questions. Foremost among these questions of concern is, to the best that
INTRODUCTION

we can determine, precisely when did individuals of Chinese ethnicity, by dint of contact stemming from actual sightings and interaction, first become aware and therefore knowledgeable of individuals whom they, just as we are disposed to do today, considered black? In other words, when exactly did peoples of or descended from African ancestry first enter upon the consciousness of the people of China? What historical event or series of events first provided the Chinese with palpable evidence of the existence of black peoples, and how was this evidence received and internalized?

This task of detecting how or under what circumstances Chinese first became aware of blacks is just as challenging as ascertaining when such awareness arose. Moreover, there is every reason to believe that obtaining tenable answers to the former question has the potential for being substantially more rewarding than any answer to the latter. Any success in answering with any thoroughness how such a consciousness arose undeniably makes a profoundly more valuable contribution to the early history of cross-cultural intercourse than just answering when. This opinion has served as the motive impetus behind my writing this book.

However, ultimately our capacity for determining the how as well as the when in the dawning of Chinese cognizance of peoples whom they perceived as black goes well beyond any self-seeking aggrandizement of our own interest and knowledge, for it can result only in a narrative with the widest and most fascinating of historical implications. Simply in the telling we should expect this story of the first face-to-face contact between Chinese and blacks to illuminate, even if only partially and somewhat incompletely, all comparable histories of meetings between members of two vastly culturally dissimilar peoples—peoples without confirmed previous exposure to each other. Thus, such a story should also be historically edifying because it would enrich our overall understanding of the dynamics at work in the initial interactions between previously unexposed cultures at all prior and subsequent stages in world history.

The version of the story of earliest detectable Chinese-black contact furnished here presents all of these potentialities. Yet, I have become convinced that even to imply that it is a self-contained “story” is itself a distortion. As is herein revealed, Lu Yuanrui’s sensationalistic murder notwithstanding, there never was any single watershed occasion of interaction between Chinese and blacks. Instead, what we confront is a protracted sequence divisible into several clusters of salient events, with each spaced discretely and discontinuously across premodern times; thus, the tale to be told—the saga, for lack of a better term—is truly episodic. By as late as the turn of the sixteenth century
of our Common Era, interaction between blacks and Chinese had already infrequently occurred for more than a millennium before direct and regular Sino-European contact began. We should not be surprised that those occasional interactions were characterized qualitatively by the complete spectrum of human emotions, ranging—at different times and by turns—from mutual awe to mutual indifference to mutual disgust.

Before beginning in earnest, we should recognize that there are three other prominent dimensions of the saga of premodern Chinese-black interaction that we will profit from bearing constantly in mind. Regardless of whether we approach the story as historian specialists or as general observers, these considerations will assist us immeasurably by functioning as kinds of cautionary intellectual beacons. Without heeding the informing light cast by these beacons at all times, the potential for self-misdirection is enormously heightened and perhaps unavoidable.

First, we need to bear in mind that over the course of the history of their premodern contact, with virtually no exceptions that can now be ascertained, the status roles of the Chinese and the blacks with whom they chanced to come into contact remained constant and unchanging. Such is not to say that we should construe status relationships as having been static and immutable within each of the two distinct groups. Regardless of his own social status, a Chinese of that time would certainly have regarded a *kunlun* emissary to the imperial court, whether encountered or not, as possessing higher status than a *kunlun* merchant or a common *kunlun* slave, even if only in relative terms. Nevertheless, judging from the documents we have, these status relationships were surely invariant in the sense that they were never reversed or inverted between the two groups. In other words, the Chinese were always the more powerful party in terms of status, possessing the proverbial “upper hand” in all relations with the blacks. Surely in all the instances of domestic interaction for which we possess records, even after they became facilitated by Arabs via their prolific slave trading in Africans from approximately the ninth century c.e. onward, we must see the Chinese as having initiated contact with the blacks, typically through the act of seeking to procure them as slaves, and also thereby as having controlled its terms, often to the detriment, subjugation, and degradation of the black subjects with whom they came into intercourse. The historical record gives no indication that members of these culturally disparate peoples ever met or interacted on terms of equality, and therefore the indulgence of the kind of delusional thinking that allows such to become the case should not be permitted.

Second, for any aspect of Chinese-*kunlun* relations that are subjected to
scrutiny, we should remain vigilantly mindful of the exclusively one-sided nature of the combined record of contact. In the single directionality of its narration, the story of earliest Chinese perceptions of the blacks they encountered approximates what we are coming to learn, for instance, about the perspectives of the citizenry of continental Europe during the Renaissance or, with more circumscription, those of the English of Tudor (1500–1603) and Stuart (1603–1714) times on the nascent but growing communities of Africans, East Indians, and eventually African Americans in their midst. However, even granting this single parallel of the largely one-way nature of the racializing discourses evinced in both of these comparable cases, the contrasts we are forced to draw between the continental European situation in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and the British situation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries versus the Chinese one from the seventh through the twelfth still seem far more extreme and more numerous than the similarities. The medieval Chinese records are preciously fewer, less comprehensive, and less consolidated than their Renaissance European or, especially, their early modern British counterparts are. Moreover, whereas literacy in the vernacular languages and particularly in the colonizing language of English did eventually exhibit itself increasingly as a significant trait among the black populations of the Continent and Britain, such was never the case in the Chinese context.

Indeed, the complete absence of writing of any kind among the Chinese-encountered African blacks throughout this initial age of contact and yet the presence of an already age-old, long-cherished, and continuous employment of writing among the Chinese of that time has resulted, by default, in all documentation of interaction generating entirely from one side of the contact—that is, the Chinese side. Just as the blacks of the premodern age were never regarded as equals of the Chinese in terms of their status as individuals, neither was their “civilization,” in large part because it lacked writing, ever regarded as even remotely rivaling China’s in collective terms. Moreover, from the Chinese perspective, there was a direct, intimate, and almost perfectly congruent equivalency established between these two levels—the individual and the collective—that resulted in glaringly negative appraisals of both. Thus, we can hardly deny that the “history” of contact between blacks and Chinese—whenever construed exclusively as the unprocessed data that form the body of documentary evidence for historical construction—is overwhelmingly a “winner’s history.” Recognizing this fact should rightly prepare us to be wary of certain attitudes expressed in the received record. It should also incline us to be critical of the kind of triumphalism that can run rampant in the writing of any chroniclers who viewed themselves as representatives of a
culture so vastly superior as that of the Chinese in comparison to all the blacks they either did or did not encounter. Our principal obligation is to strive for greater objectivity in our day, even if it in the end eludes us.

Third, and perhaps prompted by my allusion above to the latter-day Arab slave-traffickers who functioned as facilitators of contact between Chinese and blacks, especially whenever it involved Africans, we cannot lose sight of the reality that we are about to immerse ourselves in a story in which Europeans played no discernible role because they simply were not present until extremely late in the overall continuum of interchange. Whereas we must, of course, accept the fact that the Chinese experience of blacks ultimately became much mediated by the Europeans who came to China, with their black slaves in tow, from the sixteenth century onward until the nineteenth, such was not the case during earlier centuries—the period of more than a millennium before Sino-European contact began, the capacious span of time during which the present saga unfolds. Hence, I caution Western readers that they now verge on entering a less commonly depicted and less thoroughly familiar world in which Europeans not only played no mediating role in any interactions but also were in fact precluded from doing so by their absence. Consequently, what follows herein is a portrayal of Asian and ultimately Afro-Asian realities—that is, a reconstruction of what was preeminently an experience of protracted mutual entanglement involving basically three groups: ethnic Han Chinese; other Asians, including Muslim Arab West Asians, of increasingly broad geographical distribution; and East Africans, predominantly of Somalia but also Kenya and possibly points further south. As I have demonstrated especially in conclusion, whereas they did have their contributing role to play in this untold saga of contact, continental Europeans who ventured into China at its end point added to the story in only an indirect and incidental way.

One Hue throughout Three Vistas

The chapters that follow constitute key episodic installments in the saga of premodern interaction that transpired between the peoples of various other heritages who came to be designated in the Chinese sources as black, including especially in later centuries those of African ancestry, and the specific representative subgroups of the Chinese population with whom they were often forced to have dealings. Even while great in its implications, this is an unheralded saga in which the particulars have largely lain undisclosed, and my intent is to provide the kinds of guideposts that will lead to it becoming bet-
ter known. However, as crucial as their exposition here is, these installments should not be construed by readers as either exhaustive or conclusive, for they cannot conceivably account for or encompass every instance of contact, interaction, exchange, and confrontation that actually did occur. Even allowing for the unmatched comprehensiveness of the voluminous traditional Chinese literary corpus, meaningful but unrecorded and thus forgotten exchanges between groups and individuals doubtless did take place. There is also always the possibility that a document of the most revealing kind has either been lost or remains as yet undiscovered. Consequently, what I have labored to provide here are reasoned interpretations about this momentous saga of contact based on the frequently fragmentary, impressionistic, and inconclusive evidence—again, all of it from the Chinese side—that remains. Educated though they may be, these interpretations of the evidence on my part ultimately can never escape their consignment to the realm of postulation. Still, that being the case, postulate I must, for I believe the service rendered by even an imperfect version of the story to exceed by far the damage done by continuing to allow it to remain untold.

Chapter 1 is foremost devoted to answering the specific question of precisely when a Chinese consciousness of peoples who are black first arose, and toward that purpose it explicates not only the incremental emergence of the traditional Chinese construction of otherness but also, over centuries, that of the much lesser known construction of blackness. However, even in concentrating on the *when*, we find that we can never entirely divorce our deliberations from the *how*. Nor, evidently, can we afford to dismiss all consideration of the *where*. In this chapter we find that the first encounters between the Chinese and those they deemed black occurred not in China proper so much as in the various proximate archipelagos and islands that comprised China's southernmost oceanic frontier. Moreover, we learn that the Chinese construct of blackness exhibited great elasticity. Under its rubric we discover that the Chinese included not only an array of verifiable blacks, such as Malays and Khmers, with whom they were known to have interacted but also a number of sundry peoples so described whose exact identities cannot be verified. Additionally we find that we cannot avoid a consideration of the Chinese entertainment of the existence of wholly imaginary blacks, who were indeed beings who occupied that shadowy middle ground between the human and the animal. Yet, most importantly, this chapter demonstrates that prior to their actual historical encounter with African blacks, the Chinese already maintained an abiding, if semifantastical, internal concept of what being black—as opposed to Chinese—necessarily meant.
Chapter 2 provides an unusually enlightening portal of interiority by bringing us to China proper and thereby to a consideration of blacks brought to and inescapably inserted in—if neither really immersed nor integrated into—the Chinese cultural context. In this venue we find that three factors dominated. First is the localization or even confinement of this particular set of blacks exclusively to the southeast coastal city of Guangzhou. Second is their invariant status as slaves. Third is the ethnogenesis—the formation as an ethnic group—of these slaves as having derived from their original homeland (or, as is shown to have been the case from the Chinese perspective, habitat), which—based on the accrued evidence—we are led to conclude can have been nowhere else than Africa. In the end, however, despite what it reveals, our encounter of the blacks in their Chinese setting is perhaps as frustrating as it is revelatory because for every aspect of their apparently wretched existence that is revealed to us there remain countless other aspects that are destined to hopeless irretrievability. Moreover, although it thematically transverses the entire book, readers will find that the important subtheme of slavery dominates as the central subject of concern only in this second chapter.

Chapter 3 relocates us to what probably is, at once, the most expected and yet least explored venue for our unveiling of and exposure to premodern China’s blacks, and this setting is the northeastern coastline (incorporating specifically the Horn) of Africa. This occasion for Africa as venue for the consequential interaction between these two distinct peoples was afforded entirely by the unprecedented voyages embarked upon to this and other Indian Ocean lands under Chinese imperial commission between the years 1405 and 1433. However, heretofore, the voyages themselves have commanded greater sway over the attentions of scholars—and, by extension, the public—than any encounter between the Chinese and a single people or collection of peoples resulting from them. In this chapter, by focusing to the exclusion of all else on this often vaguely referenced but inadequately explored or understood story of encounter between Chinese and Africans in the native place of the latter as opposed to the former, I have endeavored to rectify this situation. My approach aims at raising this singular moment of intersection to the level of something more than a sidebar. Thereby, while stopping short of augmentation that is either exaggerated or misrepresentative, I hope to have made the potency of the first known arrival of the Chinese in Africa and its relevancy to the more extensive history of China’s premodern dealings with its blacks not only better known but also better felt than previously.

Needless to say, reconstituting the saga of encounter between premodern Chinese and the diverse array of peoples they described as black, whether
inside or outside of China, is a complex enterprise. Any reconstitution of the story, no matter how earnest and engaged, must necessarily also reflect its convolutions. In the attempt provided herein I hope to avoid the summary pitfall forecast near the middle of the previous century by the preeminent Asianist Paul Pelliot (1878–1945), who theorized insightfully that trying “to unravel such an entangled skein would require a whole monograph, only to reach perhaps an indifferent result.” In the end my labors reflected here may well not advance us as significantly toward the objective of untangling Pelliot’s most aptly described skein as might ideally be desired. Nevertheless, with any luck I have—at the very least—eluded such an ignominious fate in this matter as rightly befalls one who tenders only the kinds of conclusions that will elicit indifference.
CHAPTER ONE

From History's Mists

Even the mere suggestion of the existence of blacks in the China of pre-modern times no doubt strikes many readers as a novel, if not wholly outlandish, concept. It is an idea that the mind seems to resist reflexively, and even as so much of today's revisionist scholarship continues its contestation of the myth of ancient-world isolation, many factors also conspire to elicit this unyieldingly incredulous manner of reaction to the suggestion. In my making the counterintuitive case for a black presence in early China, my situation strikes me as not differing greatly from that of the historian Jack Forbes, who—in his recent study of the speculative transatlantic forays of early native Americans into European waters—remarks, "Most people generally have probably never heard of the idea that ancient Americans might have traveled to other parts of the globe." In other words, whether possessing the corroborating evidence or not, for one to tender such a contention is at least to run the risk—perhaps justifiably—of inviting disbelief.

Although I will make the contrarian case for its rapid diminution in the concluding chapter of this book, the resistance, even outright hostility, customarily incited in the modern mind by the idea of contact in remote antiquity between representatives of cultures situated on widely dispersed continents is far from extinguished, and several conventional assumptions serve to reinforce it. We need only return to the case at hand to begin to account for some of the factors that engender disbelief in the idea of contact anciently between China and continental Africa.

We can begin by simply acknowledging the sheer distance separating the two places. As if this objective fact were not daunting enough, we cannot deny that this distance was likely all the more vast psychologically, almost to
the point of being unfathomable, in the days before sail-powered, compass-directed navigation emerged to provide the most advanced of all means over the almost unthinkable concept of travel by horseback or on foot between these disparate regions.

Whereas the physical distance in mileage between China and Africa serves as an obvious and objective divisor for everyone, especially for Westerners with limited knowledge of either place, we must also add a subjective factor—that is, the mental distance created by the inability to penetrate the residual veneer of exoticism attached to both locations. The proclivity for succumbing to the notion of China and Africa as inherently "exotic"—and thus existing apart from our normal realm of experience—not only has the potential for veiling each locale hermetically from the other but also can lead to the stifling of earnest inquiry by inclining us summarily to preclude all possibility of conceivable interchange between the two irreducibly distinct geographical zones. Therefore, an overweening susceptibility to the influence of exoticism can result in a kind of masking or shrouding mental partition that interposes itself between us and China or Africa, thus resulting in an insurmountable mental barrier that reinforces the isolation of each place from the other, rendering them both mutually impenetrable.

Surely most prominent among the conspiratorial factors that engender incredulousness at the very idea of the presence of substantial numbers of blacks in early China is empirical. It is also the most simplistic and insidious factor because it involves our incapacity to refrain from projecting the present-day situation onto the past. As any visit to China today is likely to reveal, blacks, meaning individuals of African ancestry and descent, are certainly by far the most underrepresented of all those ostensible races or ethnicities either temporarily or permanently now inhabiting the Chinese landscape. Therefore, based mainly on our observation of the paucity to near-total absence of blacks from the Chinese contemporary scene, it is quite natural to impute a comparable dearth of "blackness" back onto the past of several centuries ago. Consequently, hindsight informed by present-day realities leads us to the same conclusion with regard to the plausibility of blacks ever inhabiting early China that we would likely draw regarding the circumstances of any people who are scarcely and marginally represented in a particular place at any time. We assume that if they are not there in discernible numbers now, then they cannot ever have been so. Yet, while this kind of assumption is understandable and uncomplicated, as is so often the case with history, the truer and more intriguing conclusions emerge from those many instances in which the presumptive conclusion proves to be false. The present inquiry represents precisely such an
example in which the imputation of the present situation back onto that of the remote past could not be more misguided or erroneous.

Moreover, in addition to the need to prepare ourselves for the adoption of an accepting attitude toward the historical complexities and outcomes involved, we cannot account for the experiences of blacks in China and among the Chinese of early historical times without also undertaking and effectuating some crucial recasting or reorienting in our thinking. Two such reorientations are absolutely crucial. Surely the first reorientation required of us is that we at least accede to the idea that blacks might well have long ago lived in China—that is, through a suspension of our initial disbelief, we must accept the premise that they might have actually been present there at some remotely earlier time of a millennium or more ago. A second and equally important reorientation demanded of us is that we immediately endeavor to expand our ethnological notion of what blackness means and how this condition of being might now differ ontologically and crucially from what it might have meant in the early Chinese context.

To be sure, the principal concern herein is with the peoples of African heritage and descent in their engagement with the Chinese. However, it is by no means with such an engagement that our story can begin, for premodern Chinese thought of and referred to a great variety of the peoples whom they encountered as black. At the same time that it remains foremost, we must endeavor to permit the Sino-African nexus to become our culminating concern because, as Frank Dikötter remarks in his landmark work on modern race consciousness, The Discourse of Race in Modern China, numerous peoples became black for the Chinese, even if, owing to a dearth of contact with them, they had not previously been regarded as being so prior to those times.² We will learn that, especially with their more frequent interaction with neighboring foreigners resulting from the extensively expanded maritime activity of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries of the Common Era, the Chinese cast this ascription of blackness ever more widely. This hypothesis of accretion and conflation whereby Chinese first attributed the trait of blackness indiscriminately and somewhat uniformly to any and all peoples of darker complexions than themselves seems more than plausible. It was first hypothesized by Paul Pelliot, who suggested that the attribute of blackness may well have been first assigned to “Indonesian Negritos,” who, of course, bear no connection to “African negroes,” and yet over time became extended and affixed, without any particular distinctions, to both groups.³

Thereby, largely resulting from increasing exposure to ever-larger numbers of peoples rarely or never before encountered but also out of ignorance
stemming from confusion over the origins of the profusion of new populations confronted, the Chinese gradually came to affix the designation “black” to peoples of widely divergent and far-flung locales, all of whom are now recognized as representatives of distinctly different ethnicities. Documents of the Tang Dynasty and earlier refer to the Nam-Viet peoples of Champa as black. In subsequent writings the Khmers, Malaysians, and Malaccans (in Malayu, Melakans) are considered black. Blackness also became attributed indiscriminately to the Ceylonese (Sri Lankan), Malabar, and Bengali peoples of the Indian subcontinent as well as to those inhabiting the Andaman Islands. Much of the assignment of blackness to these various foreign groups was arbitrary and subjective and involved relative description. Moreover, it resulted largely from a process of ascription mainly by contradistinction, for as Dikötter points out, premodern Chinese had, from ancient times, been inclined to think of themselves, at least in comparison to many of their darker-skinned outer neighbors, as white. However, for our purposes, of greatest significance is the fact that, once they were encountered in later centuries, there was nothing to preclude the easy inclusion of Africans under this generalized, indeterminate, and randomly amorphous rubric of stigmatizing blackness. Needless to say, their consignment to this category of being would prove to be fateful from the very time it began, just as it still is.

Geographies of Otherness

A distinguishing feature of Chinese civilization is that place of origin or habitat has consistently predominated over skin color as a marker of foreignness and hence otherness. Beginning with the numerous references in such classical literature as the Zuo Commentary (Zuo zhuan) of the classic Spring and Autumn Annals (Chunqiu), the four principal clusters of “barbarians” (siyi), the Yi, Di, Rong, and Mán, against whom the Chinese struggled for mastery of the Central Plain (Zhongyuan) in the first millennium B.C.E. were foremost denoted not by any perceptible physical distinctions in appearance or even culture (though the latter was certainly a level of distinction made) but instead by distinctions in location. Although there were numerous subgroups incorporated under each heading, the Yi, in addition to becoming the most common generic term for “barbarian,” eventually evolved to denote strictly those non-Chinese tribes of the east; the Di, the north; the Rong, the west; and the Mán, the south.

Such cultural distinctions as in language must surely have existed between
what eventually emerged as the ethnically Han Chinese and their non-Han or fan neighbors. However, even while scholars have made progress in their reconstruction, these linguistic differences remain highly imprecise and largely dependent on speculation. Conversely, we can be certain of the fact that these surrounding tribes occupied different and, by and large, prescribed locations in relation to the Chinese that nonetheless set them physically apart from them. Consequently, in China from earliest times geography has been perhaps the most powerful determinant in demarcating us from them, and—as a construct for distinguishing the distinctiveness of the other—it has remained constant and exceptionally resilient, continuing up to contemporary times. Historically, much as is still the case, distinguishing the other was a process marked first by determining alienness in the most literal of senses—that is, by construing that the other in question necessarily hailed at least originally from a different place.

Nonetheless, if only because of its overwhelming importance nearly everywhere in our times, the comparative unimportance of skin color to the Chinese as an indicator of foreignness is striking. Differentiation in skin color persisted as only a secondary determinant of foreignness well into modern times, and the fact that such was the case for as long as it was invites explanation. We can begin by observing that, at least in prehistoric and earliest historical times, the skin colors of the different peoples the Chinese confronted and with whom they coexisted likely varied only within a fairly narrow range. In other words, limited in their contacts largely by topographical constraints and barriers, the ancient Chinese tended to meet others who were not that dramatically different in terms of the physical feature of skin pigmentation from themselves. Relative geographical isolation as well as other constrictive factors in comparison to other major world civilizations would lead to this situation not changing for China and its inhabitants for a substantial length of time. As such, the exposure of Chinese from earliest historical times only to peoples not drastically differing from themselves in terms of skin color stands as one of the very few myths of an “unchanging China” that evinces any credibility.

Nevertheless, as was to be the case in every other area of cross-cultural interaction, Chinese insulation from exposure to various peoples of markedly different skin coloration was destined inevitably to change. The first encounters between Chinese and persons they described as black, including the subset of those who were very possibly of African origin, occurred significantly earlier than we might think. Writing in The Star Raft: China’s Encounter with Africa, a study that was heretofore singular for its combination of informed scholarship and accessibility on the subject, Philip Snow saliently—if some-
what indeterminately—observes, “Dark-skinned people were talked of in China as early as the fourth century” of the Common Era. However, perhaps as noteworthy as the physical presence of the blacks among them is the fact that the Chinese elected to refer to these people not by a term denoting color but instead by one with its roots firmly entrenched in geography—that is, by a place-name that primordially and preeminently denotes location and not color. In sum, given a multitude of choices, whatever term is used to signify the other always seems preferentially to have indicated a different situation within the Chinese world order in spatial terms rather than an often quite obviously discerned difference in skin color.

Although we know that its history of usage is quite venerable, we can never expect to determine precisely when the term kunlun first entered into Chinese parlance. We can, however, know with absolute certainty that the term initially had nothing whatsoever to do with skin color, let alone blackness of skin. Kunlun first appears in the literature in association with the biography of Mu Wang or King Mu (r. ca. 976–922 B.C.E.), the fifth monarch of the Zhou Dynasty (ca. 1050–256 B.C.E.), for he is said to have several times visited—by means of a royal chariot drawn by eight magnificent steeds—the range of mountains that today bears that name. The Kunlun Mountains—a genuine site—comprise the dominant massif of the northwest quadrant of China, extending into Tibet. The source that provides us with this information—Mu Tianzi zhuan (Biography of Son of Heaven Mu)—is anonymously written and of indeterminate age. However, just as important as its reportage on King Mu’s alleged travel to the distant Kunlun Mountains is the fact that it also designates this mountain range as the abode of the Queen Mother of the West (Xiwangmu), the ancient Chinese deity with foreign precedents that was eventually appropriated by religious Daoism as a goddess of immortality said to rule over its western paradise of immortals.

The brief foregoing explication, of course, purveys information that is at the intersection of legend and myth. Nonetheless, drawing upon it we can, at the very least, make two unambiguous observations regarding kunlun as a term. First, we can note that from its inception kunlun was fundamentally geographical in conception, and centuries before the Common Era the mountains it designated were conceived as numinous but nevertheless tangible. Second, it is clear from our exegesis thus far that ancient Chinese construed kunlun as denoting someplace that was—and eventually some places that were—extremely remote, if not altogether verging on the foreign. We may in fact make the extrapolation from kunlun connoting “remote” to its connoting as “foreign” fairly early in its evolution, for its variable written orthography—with at least
six different versions of it appearing in the ancient literature—attest to its
highly probable derivation from non-Sinitic antecedents, with the Chinese
being consistent with an attempt to approximate a term found in an unrel-
lated language. The ideas of foreignness that kunlun came to evoke are fur-
thermore important because whereas the term never completely lost its root
meaning foremost as a toponym, we nonetheless find that, as time progressed,
it amassed a plethora of additional associations. Kunlun evolved to denote a
widely dispersed variety of different geographical locales, both real and imagi-

nary. In sum, it in fact eventually evolved to bear no more of a restrictive
connection with the Kunlun Mountains than it was to forge with a host of
other, quite disparate locations.

By far most important for our purposes and most germane to the set of
deliberations in which we will henceforth engage about kunlun is a plainly
evident lexicographical shift the term underwent with its progression into
the Common Era, one whereby its original yet highly amorphous geocen-
tric meaning as a place-name eventually gave way to a very different mean-
ing. This transition is attested to in early-to-middle imperial-period Chinese
sources of wide-ranging genres, and being confronted with clear evidence of
its occurrence led scholars such as Pelliot to conclude straightforwardly, “Suf-
fice it to say . . . that the name [kunlun] was applied by the Chinese to black
curly-haired (or frizzy-haired) races at least as early as the [fourth century].”

Julie Wilensky is equally trenchant in remarking on this striking instance in
lexicographical transference whereby this new meaning of the term kunlun
displaced and superseded the original when she states, “Sources from the
fourth and fifth centuries use the term kunlun to describe people with dark
skin.” Thus, despite its substantial vintage as a geographical ascription, by
the 300s of the Common Era kunlun had found a new application as the Chi-
nese began to affix the multivalent term not only to people but specifically to
all peoples they distinguished from themselves primarily on the basis of their
culturally undesirable and stigmatizing dark complexions.

Nevertheless, from our modern-day standpoint, despite its dramatic shift
in meaning and perhaps precisely because of its capacious application, kun-
lun remains—like most past and present terms intended to mark distinctions
among human beings exclusively on the basis of skin color—a curiously sub-
jectivist and therefore imprecise term. Even as an emergent term indicative
of the observable human trait of comparatively dark skin coloration that we
today call “blackness,” on the one hand, kunlun is expressly used in the sources
to refer to uncommonly dark-skinned Chinese or commonly dark-skinned
neighboring peoples such as Malaysians. On the other hand, kunlun is also
used, especially beginning with sources immediately predating those of the Song Dynasty (960–1279), to refer to dark-skinned foreigners of indeterminate extraction, regardless of whether these individuals originally hailed from Southeast Asia or Africa or elsewhere. Clearly, in the former instance the application of the term was *endogenous*—intended to refer to uncommonly dark skin coloration among those who were nonetheless members of the Chinese cultural context—and in the latter instance the application was *exogenous*—meant to denote the same distinguishing pigmentation in individuals on the margins or from completely outside the Sinitic world order. However, in neither case was the bundle of associations believed to be constituent of the term *kunlun* statically fixed. Beginning in early times the Chinese have regarded those they designated as *kunlun*—including those who are culturally indigenous but especially those who are not—with an amorphous mixture of revulsion, fascination, and most of all opaqueness of understanding. To put it another way, in either case, whether attached to the native or to the foreigner, *kunlun* was at best a neutral if exotic label, and as the negative attributes associated with it began to amass over the centuries, the term became applied only pejoratively, signifying—more typically than not—a hopelessly inferior, limited, and stigmatized condition of being.

The Chinese evidently possessed long-standing knowledge of the existence of the foreign *kunlun*. Nevertheless, the first wave of these peoples encountered in substantial numbers began verifiably appearing in China proper only as early as sometime between the eighth and tenth centuries. The sources inform us that these individuals were at first “presented” in association with the normative tribute exchanges in often exotic goods and animals with the Chinese emperors. Only subsequently did they become known to the considerably less exalted but relatively wealthy commoner citizenry, for in every known instance these foreign *kunlun* had the misfortune of entering China only as slaves. The official *Songshi* (Song History) is unequivocal on the question. In its sixth chapter on interstate relations with “foreign countries” (*waiguo*), the Song History describes the slaves attached to an Arab delegation that had arrived at the Chinese court from what is now modern-day Iran in 977: “their servants had deep-set eyes and black bodies. They were called *kunlun* slaves.”

Yet, such concise and clear-cut references notwithstanding, questions about the actual identity of these early black-bodied sojourners in China—as defined by specific place or places of origin and not by any discernible consistency in skin color—have persisted. For legitimate reasons, not the least of these being the gulf of time and cultural distance that separates us from the
setting, we are compelled to regard as intractably difficult to resolve these questions of whom the Chinese were referring to when they wrote of these specific kunlun and what the realities of their bondage were. While their exploration confronts us with some daunting challenges, these issues are not insoluble. To prove the point and best facilitate some answers, I have elected to confine the preponderance of my present deliberations temporally—to restrict them to the pivotal era that has become accepted as the middle imperial period or simply the middle period. This Chinese time frame roughly parallels and is mostly coterminous with the medieval period (sixth to sixteenth centuries C.E.) in the West, but in sociocultural, intellectual, and especially commercial terms much of it certainly better corresponds to the Western early modern period (seventeenth to eighteenth centuries C.E.).

 Nonetheless, even while answers are obtainable, exacerbating the challenges is our condition of being so little aided in the endeavor by any paradigm of comparative slaveries. Although it remains imperfect, whether for the middle period or for any subsequent age, our knowledge of the Chinese practice of enslaving other Chinese as well as near-neighboring non-Chinese who were not kunlun, such as Koreans, Thais, and various aboriginal groups, surpasses by far what we have learned to date about the existences and the fates of the numerous foreign slaves from truly remote areas (the so-called guinu, literally “demon” or “devil slaves”) who entered, lived out their days, and died in China. We are at a painful loss in any attempt to bring the one system of enslavement into the service of informing us about the other because any linkage between the two seems tenuous at best, if not altogether nonexistent.

 We furthermore can reasonably assume, if not completely prove, a stark disparity in numbers, and this factor is also surely one of those contributing to this relative shallowness of our knowledge about the enslavement of distantly foreign slaves in premodern China. While even approximate numbers elude us, we cannot doubt that the Chinese have—over the passage of several millennia—enslaved untold numbers more of their own countrymen than they have foreigners either within or over any specific span of history. This age-old and uninterrupted practice of Chinese endogenous enslavement is a sobering historical reality that should rightly dissuade us from attempting to mount the case for any special perniciousness to exogenous slavery.

 Nevertheless, our awareness of the presence of truly foreign and especially ethnically black slaves—that is, those possibly originating from the African continent—on Chinese soil remains undiminished as a somber and cogent fact. For Westerners generally and for citizens of the United States especially, perhaps because of our own lamentable connections to black enslavement, the
revelation of the existence of black slaves in eleventh-century China evokes a natural curiosity about the circumstances leading to their arrival there as well as the conditions under which they were held captive, lived out their lives, and died. Our curiosity is fully understandable. After all, no less so than any other aspect of the practice of institutionalized slavery anywhere, the Chinese enslavement of culturally dissimilar peoples, populations unrelated to themselves, despite having heretofore garnered only scant scholarly attention, nonetheless constitutes a vital component in the much larger and almost invariably tragic story of the human trafficking in humans as commodities over the course of history.

Intimations of Blackness and Deficits of Culture

Even as it conforms so fully to a convention that is perhaps ageless, the primacy placed by Chinese on distinctiveness based on geography over that deriving from physical features such as skin color in their earliest accounts of contact with blacks contrasts antithetically from the earliest descriptions offered by Europeans of the classical age in their initial encounters. As Frank Snowden makes clear in his influential work Before Color Prejudice: The Ancient View of Blacks, skin color rose to become immediately forthcoming in the nomenclature with which the ancients of Europe referred to the blacks they met. As he writes, "Among the Greeks and Romans who have provided the fullest descriptions of blacks, the Africans' color was regarded as their most characteristic and most unusual feature." However, in this very observation we discern an essential variable that possibly aids us enormously in accounting for the dissimilarity in what was considered signature in describing the different populations encountered. In truth, the populations really were different. Whereas the blacks delivered into the Greek and Roman worlds were certifiably Africans—mainly the Nubians and Ethiopians (the latter name derived from the generic Aithiops or Aethiops, coming from the Greek and literally meaning a "burnt-faced person") of Egypt and northeast Africa's southern reaches—those who entered the Chinese world, at least initially, most assuredly were not. Nonetheless, we should not interpret this revelation to mean that skin color simply did not matter to the Chinese as a marker of black otherness. On the contrary, for the Chinese as well as the Greeks and Romans, even while it did not yet apply to the Africans who were still unknown to them, extremely dark or black skin eventually came to serve as an unavoidable and indelible marker of alterity, and we must intuit that it had come to represent such by fairly early times.
Yet, despite its assumed cross-cultural status as an overt indicator of otherness, in stark contrast to what we uncover in the writings of the Greek and Roman forebears of European civilization in the last centuries of the first millennium B.C.E.,\textsuperscript{28} we find the documentary references in Chinese sources of the same period for black skin coloration as an indicator of racial or ethnic distinctiveness to be, while not wholly absent, nonetheless surprisingly sparse and moreover ambiguous. Indeed, our search for early Chinese literary references of the preunification period (that is, before the year 221 B.C.E.) that specify human blackness tends only to confirm the relative scarcity of any mention of skin color as an elemental descriptive marker of what we today would term \textit{ethnic} difference, thus bolstering the contention that geography trumped coloration in this distinguishing role for most of China's premodern history. All the same, even while they are exceedingly rare, these very occasional references nevertheless merit our attention, for they are in many respects cogent and highly provocative.

The first of all references in Chinese traditional literature specifically to a black man (\textit{heiren}) appears in the well-known philosophical work \textit{Mozi}, which is now thought to be the product of the indirect as well as direct disciples of the shadowy but possibly historical figure Mo Di (ca. 480–ca. 390 B.C.E.), who, in turn, was better remembered by the same name as the extant book attributed to him.\textsuperscript{29} Apart from the core first thirty chapters of this seminal text, which can perhaps be ascribed to Mozi's earliest followers, there exists a separate, later collection of Mohist writings dating from approximately 300 B.C.E. and thus assuredly the work of later generations of adherents.\textsuperscript{30} A constituent section within these later writings is titled \textit{jingshuo} (Explanations of the Canon), and it is devoted exclusively to an exposition of the comparatively minor Chinese philosophical tradition of disputations in logic, with the aim of perfecting a logical method.\textsuperscript{31} The arrangement of the text is in corresponding but separated couplets of canon (\textit{jing})—essentially a kind of terse maxim or even catechism—and explanation (\textit{shuo})—a succeeding, usually more expansive interpretive gloss.\textsuperscript{32} One such canon recorded in the text is “If the standard differs, then look into what is appropriate in it.”\textsuperscript{33} As the text is now constituted, immediately succeeding this canon, we find the following explanatory gloss: “In picking out this and selecting that, inquire about the reasons and look into what is of appropriateness [in the standard for doing so]. Taking what is black and what is not black about a man to be the extent of [being a] ‘black man (\textit{heiren}),’ and taking the [acts of] cherishing some men and not cherishing others to be the extent of ‘cherishing men’—which of these [standards] is appropriate?”\textsuperscript{34}
All mystery attending the foregoing passage results precisely from what the later Mohists conceivably meant by the term “black man.” What did this term, which is now very much a “loaded” one for us, mean for its ancient Chinese authors? Exactly what or whom did it denote? Largely stemming from the Western preconceptions that we bring to the analysis of this passage, many of us are likely to assume that this earliest of references to a black man in Chinese sources is not really a reference to skin color at all and that it is in fact a kind of character descriptor, employed in the same manner as the English term “black-hearted” as a designator for the person who by nature exhibits the qualities of a malevolent or evil nature. Explanations of the Canon is not entirely devoid of ethical content. However, with their text being predominantly a treatise on logic, the likelihood that the later Mohists offered their term “black man” chiefly as a morally laden construct is infinitesimally small. For them to have done so would be contrary to the overall intentionality behind the text, in violation of the general spirit that pervades it. Internal evidence also contradicts the moralist interpretation.

By proffering their “black man for philosophical discernment,” the later Mohist writers of the Canon and its Explanations sections of the Mozi most assuredly did intend to emphasize skin color. However, we can also be reasonably certain that, in stark contrast to our latter-day reception of the concept, the later Mohist heiren—far from being living, breathing, and signifying otherness—represented only a heuristic device. Their term “black man,” much like their famously paradoxical “white horse is not a horse” discourse, which they debated in common with their rival nominalist and dialectician counterparts Hui Shi (ca. 380–305 B.C.E.) and Gongsun Long (b. 380 B.C.E.?), was little more than a hypothetical abstraction, invented entirely for the purpose of advancing arguments toward a comprehensive theory of language that leads to knowledge. Their main aim was to illustrate their cardinal precept that any given term has the capacity for “picking out” only a limited part of reality.

Therefore, on the one hand, the black man of these ancient Chinese writings was very much intended as a repository of color. However, on the other hand, whether construed from an ethical or an ethnological standpoint, he was also intended to be rather colorless, for he bore neither the figuratively immoral nor the racial associations for the later Mohists that we automatically attribute to the term today. Moreover, given that they could not claim knowledge of the existence of real black persons—that is, Africans—at such an early stage of history, the later Mohist black man was, at best, native in constitution as well as in conception. Consequently, even if we take the unwarranted step of going to the extreme of granting this novel construct a concretized reality,
we can nonetheless be confident that whatever the later Mohists had intended for their black man to represent, he most assuredly was not, in their view, a living and breathing African.

There is an uncanny dimension of surreal serendipity in the later Mohists of China's preimperial age arbitrarily positing the hypothetical existence of a corresponding segment of humanity that fully existed in reality a half-world away from them. In their time, had they even been aware of it, there would surely be little reason to think that such a correlation would ever matter. However, coincidences between the theorized and the true can be prophetic, and in light of what was to come, we as moderns find that this first Chinese reference to a black man, even as an abstract and invented intimation, can hardly be emptied entirely of its alteric resonance. Inherently, the heiren represented to his Chinese imaginers something quite different in kind from themselves. We will discover that, beginning with this first archaic instance, just as heiren is more than merely suggestive of skin color for us, premodern Chinese too came to regard this particular attributive term as not only denoting the idea of black-skinned but also connoting many additional stigmatizing associations. For these reasons, even upon its first very early emergence, the term heiren prefigured implications for the future reception of black-skinned individuals by Chinese that would be immense, decisive, and inescapable.37

If the first of all Chinese references to a black man or black people is to be found almost incidentally in the somewhat obscure portion of a major philosophical work, then we should perhaps not be surprised to find the second reference surface, with nearly equal happenstance, in one of the most significant mythological writings in the Chinese cultural heritage. Interestingly, this second reference succeeds the first by a maximum of only a couple of centuries, for it appears in the earliest and most celebrated of China's geocosmological topographies, the anonymously written Classic of Mountains and Seas (Shanhaijing),38 which was “compiled no later than the beginning of the first century B.C.E.”39 In this protean but peculiar work, which the translator Anne Birrell has described as having “less to do with geography than with cosmology and mythogeography,”40 within its eighteenth and final taxonomic book, “The Classic of Regions within the Seas” (“Haineijing”),41 we find the fleeting mention of the following: “There are also the black people. They have the heads of tigers and the feet of birds. Clutching a snake in either of their two hands, they are constantly chewing on them.”42

Like many of the Chinese writings dating from the beginning of the imperial age or earlier, the anonymously compiled Classic of Mountains and Seas possibly evolved over several centuries before achieving its present form. For
this succinct reference to black people and for other reasons we must regard the emergence of this work as a noteworthy development in several ways. As the historian Richard J. Smith points out, as a text the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* is clearly the product of a wide range of disparate historical, mythological, and divinatory sources, “including, perhaps, Greek, Middle Eastern, and Indian legends.” It is also significant to our inquiry because it represents “the earliest known illustrated account of barbarians in China,” though its status in this regard is problematized by our not knowing whether oldest editions contained illustrations or, if they did, whether the illustrations preceded and were in fact the genesis for the written text we now possess. Recognizing the age-old Chinese penchant for recording the fantastic as well as realistic descriptions of foreign peoples, of greatest importance to our concerns is Smith’s observation that the freakishly “barbarian” peoples cataloged in the pages of the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* are meant at least occasionally to identify “actual culture groups.” Indeed, several of the tribes of man-creatures featured in the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* may well correspond to real peoples, whereas many more may not. The seminal question for our purposes, to be sure, is what to make of the community of semibestial individuals that it only once refers to as black. We perhaps find an answer in a curious adumbration of the instance just discussed.

Remarkably, after its signal appearances in the later Mohist writings of probably the fourth century B.C.E. and the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* of no earlier than the second century B.C.E., the referencing of a specifically black man or black people occurs nowhere else in the entirety of the Chinese literary corpus until sometime in the early seventeenth century C.E., less than a half-century before the demise of the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), an amazingly long period of separation of perhaps as much as two millennia from the time of its first occurrence. Granted, despite the venerable vintage of its locus classicus, nothing precludes the possibility that the term had become employed in oral parlance during the gaping interim period between the time of the later Mohists and the subsequent *Classic of Mountains and Seas* and that of the Ming Dynasty. However, the total absence of *heiren* from the intervening written record is conspicuous, and because of the natural proclivity for the spoken language to be reflected in writing at least to some degree by the relatively late date that it at last recurs, this lacuna has the effect of rendering any argument for the widespread currency of the terms “black man” or “black people” quite suspect. Moreover, the fact that *heiren* was unwritten in any subsequent text for so long into the imperial age is made all the more odd by the new Ming demographic situation, for African blacks, now in the servitude of their Eu-
ropean as well as Arab masters, had become known if not altogether highly familiar fixtures of at least the Chinese coastal landscape. Yet, it is precisely against the backdrop of these much changed circumstances that the details of the Ming-period reference to a black man or black people are so unexpected and singularly strange.

Stunningly, the *heiren* of late traditional times that we encounter in the pages of the Chinese encyclopedia *Sancai tuhui* (Illustrated Compendium of the Three Powers), being a work that the reputable Shanghai scholar and official Wang Qi (fl. 1565–1614) compiled in 1607, is in every respect no more of an advance beyond pure fantasy than what we encountered in *Classic of Mountains and Seas*. In fact, considering the very changed times and circumstances during which it surfaces, there is every reason for our regarding this latter-day reference as a regression or at the very least a willful fiction. With this much later reference to a black man, we are confronted with an image that is contrary to our rational expectation of what enhanced knowledge acquired through increased direct exposure to peoples considered black, now even frequently including African slaves, might produce. We receive an implied forewarning of what we are about to receive by dint of the fact that the colophon description and graphic depiction of the *heiren* in the Illustrated Compendium of the Three Powers appear not in the work’s customary “attributes of man” (*renshi*) division but instead in its “birds and beasts” (*niaoshou*) division. Indeed, as we gaze upon the drawing of the Ming-era black man, we are reminded, in an almost verbatim but paradoxically more and also less detailed way, of the severely limited information on the same topic that we could extract from the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*. This time, however, we are also supplied with an accompanying image (see Figure 1): “Amidst the Southern Sea, upon Mount Bigsnake-follow, there exists the black man. He has the head of a tiger, and in each of his two hands, he grasps a snake. He feeds on them.”

Taken together, the closely related, if not fully identical, examples culled from the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* and the Illustrated Compendium of the Three Powers demonstrate the astounding consistency with which an identical term can be received, understood, and interpreted across time. We find that in two vastly different historical contexts separated by nearly twenty centuries little has changed. On the one hand, the earliest black man reference in the corpus of the later Mohists establishes the nomenclature but most assuredly does not establish the conceptualization for those found in either of the later, more encyclopedic texts. On the other hand, we can ironically observe that as a term, *heiren* is nonetheless relied upon in all three textual contexts to summon forth mentally entities that we today classify as purely imaginary.
Figure 1. Black man in Wang Qi, ed., *Sancai tuhui* [Illustrated Compendium of the Three Powers], vol. 6. (1607; repr., Taipei: Chengwen chubanshe, 1970), 2256. For those seeking it in a customary Chinese-bound edition of *Sancai tuhui*, this image is contained in the fourth of the six chapters of the division devoted to fauna, the thirty-third (Chinese recto but Western verso) page.
For its premodern Chinese imaginers, however, *heiren* was employed precisely as a kind of conjuring device, an evocative catalyst that was used to bring to mind and signify something believed to exist somewhere on the most remote periphery of civilization, even if it had not necessarily been personally encountered and thereby verified as existing in nature.

Yet, all the same, there is also a defining difference among the three examples that is altogether crucial. Whereas we must accept the later Mohist black man of the preimperial age as benign and hardly more than a hypothetical cipher, we can only receive the black man or black people of the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* and the Illustrated Compendium of the Three Powers as a fanciful and baleful specter. In these latter instances, especially when confronted with any of the accompanying pictorial representations that have been preserved, we struggle to deny that it is an image imbued with darkly malignant otherness. Furthermore, although it is delineated with the utmost concision (neither mentioning nor conferring a depiction that includes “the feet of birds” of the earlier version—perhaps a serious indication of an evolutionary shift in perspective?), the discourse of estrangement furnished by Wang Qi in the Illustrated Compendium of the Three Powers speaks proverbial volumes. Conforming as it does to the long-established Chinese convention of estrangement of the nonnative earlier discussed above, this caption, to be sure, defines the *heiren* in terms of his geographical remoteness (“Amidst the Southern Sea, upon Mount Bigsnake-follow”). Moreover, also in conformance to custom, it emphasizes his cultural deprivation (“and in each of his two hands, he grasps a snake. He feeds on them.”).

Most relevantly, even while he clearly represents a vestigial carryover from a much earlier age, the bizarre encyclopedic black man of the Illustrated Compendium of the Three Powers reveals no likelihood that the Chinese of the late Ming period either identified or associated the term *heiren* with any of the populations of humans with whom they were increasingly coming into contact—humans whom they structurally, if not nominally, nonetheless, regarded as black-skinned. We therefore must seriously doubt that the Chinese of the late Ming period were inclined to think of their black man as a *man* at all in the normative sense of the word. The Sinologist Roel Sterckx has commented on the tendency over the ages for Chinese to “portray barbarians who shared the habitats of the exotic bestiaries in the periphery of the Chinese cultural epicenter as having the inner disposition of animals.”\(^{50}\) However, surely, if we are to judge anything from the likeness of him depicted in the Illustrated Compendium of the Three Powers, the Ming black man was *outwardly* at least as much animal as he was human, perhaps signifying his condition of being
even further removed well beyond the periphery of that epicenter. Especially given the historical lateness of the context and the concomitantly heightened knowledge of actual black humans on the part of Chinese that we should expect, the Ming black man, far more so than his prototype of the Classic of Mountains and Seas, is truly more it than he, and we can readily substitute that pronoun throughout the description to profoundly revealing effect. Our doing so presents us with a mental image that was every bit as dehumanizing in the late traditional Chinese context as it remains in our contemporary Western one: “Amidst the Southern Sea, upon Mount Bigsnake-follow, there exists the black man. It has the head of a tiger, and in each of its two hands, it grasps a snake. It feeds on them.” Through our substitution of the pronoun it, we recover historically a black man that was dramatically closer to the premodern Chinese perceived reality, one that was not only estranged from the Chinese in particular by geography and culture but also in every respect irredeemably separated from overall humanity in general.

Preconditioned for Bondage

Thus, we can find no extant Chinese literary evidence that, prior to modern times, substantiates whether the term heiren was ever used to refer directly to black humans, not to mention whether it was reserved expressly to be applied to Africans. Nevertheless, well before the beginning of the seventeenth century the presumed fusion between blackness of skin and the grave condition of being incapable of achieving any level of cultural attainment had already become firmly fixed in Chinese consciousness. Similarly, equally fused and entrenched in the Chinese mind had become the connection between blackness and innate, if not inveterate, savagery. Interestingly, whether in the example in the Classic of Mountains and Seas or that in the Illustrated Compendium of the Three Powers, one finds that actual skin coloration, while ascribed nominally and implied by context, goes unexplored. In neither case can we accept the tiger’s head of the heiren as having absolutely no basis of inspiration. A tiger’s head on an otherwise humanlike body is by any standard as fearsome a symbol of ferocity as need be imagined, much less encountered. Moreover, in reality, even if heiren was not the name by which they were contemporarily called, black-skinned humans—that is, the kunlun—must have struck the still relatively few Chinese of late traditional times who actually encountered them as not only alien but also intimidating and, much like the tiger, emblematic of bellicosity.51
An air of menace is integral to a substantial number of the accounts of contact between the Chinese and the succession of peoples they collectively called kunlun. Sometimes merely undercurrent and other times overt, dread of the kunlun in fact constitutes a kind of thematic thread coursing throughout most reports. Fear on the part of the Chinese, even if latent, often beset their interactions with the kunlun, and extant documentary records confirm this fact with enough frequency to make it difficult to ignore. From these sources we learn that the quality of Chinese-kunlun relations ranged across the entire spectrum of interactive possibilities, from the cooperative to the merely fractious to the foreboding. Our earliest information regarding the last category of engagement comes from a striking entry, already cited in the introduction, first officially preserved in the Old Tang History and dated as having occurred in 684 C.E. It involves the previously described death in that year of the Guangzhou governor Lu Yuanrui, who evidently was a man so lightly regarded both in his time and later that even his death is prosaically first recorded not independently but instead in the biography of the successor to his post. From this terse and unadorned entry we learn that “The territories of Guangzhou border the Southern Sea. Every year, the kunlun merchants arrive in [their] ships, laden with valuable goods to trade with the Chinese. The previous governor tried to cheat them out of their goods, so a kunlun had come forth with a concealed knife and killed him.”

The blandness of description in this rendition of the occurrence notwithstanding, in short order Lu Yuanrui’s murder became highly sensationalized. In addition, despite the passage of several centuries, his ignominious end still remained conspicuous enough to be recorded again in the celebrated Zizhi tongjian (Comprehensive Mirror Aiding Government) of Sima Guang (1019–86), which was surely the preeminent historical work produced during the Song Dynasty. Sima’s preservation of this same episode in one of the most renowned of China’s privately written histories some four hundred years after it had transpired attests to its lingering resonance as a source of morbidly salacious fascination. His more embellished rendering of the event also clues us to its symbolic significance. Most of all, we are meant to remember Lu Yuanrui for the manner of his death—that is, at whose hands it occurred—as well as for the irresolution of its disposition:

In the autumn, on wuwu (mouwu) of the seventh month [Western date: 8 September], the governor of Guangzhou, Lu Yuanrui, was killed by a kunlun. Yuanrui was stupid and cowardly, and his subordinates were unrestrained and devious. Whenever merchant ships would arrive, his
subordinates would ceaselessly seek through extortion to divert profits for themselves, causing the merchant barbarians to complain to Yuanrui. Yuanrui [finally] sought to address the situation by calling for cangues, wishing to have [one group of foreign merchants] bound as punishment for their complaints.

[Lu Yuanrui's actions] enraged this group of barbarians, such that there was a kunlun among them who entered directly into Yuanrui's offices, bearing a sword that he concealed in his sleeves. He then killed Yuanrui as well as more than ten of the people surrounding him and fled. No one [at the scene] dared to approach the kunlun [to prevent his escape]. The murderer boarded a ship and set to sea; the ship was pursued but could not be overtaken.56

The murder of Lu Yuanrui proves in many respects to be a watershed. From the two foregoing accounts in succession of the death of the ill-fated extortionist Guangzhou governor, we can extract a wealth of information about the nature and tenor of Chinese-kunlun intercourse during the fatefully momentous transition from Tang to Song times. Some of this information we glean is factual, but a good deal of it is also dispositional. Drawing from among the factual elements, we learn that in their earliest designation the kunlun were probably of Malay ethnicity, or to frame the matter conversely, that they were almost assuredly not Africans. Confirmation comes from the fact that the Chinese had since at least the beginning of the seventh century C.E. engaged in regular and thriving maritime trade along the South China Sea coast with the people they called kunlun. The expansion of trade precipitated by the removal of such rapacious officials as Lu Yuanrui indeed emboldened the kunlun and their Javanese neighbors to such an extent that they undertook raids of aggrandizement in 767 as far afield as the northern coastline of Vietnam, all for the purpose of, as the modern scholar of the Chinese Southern Sea (Nanyang) diaspora Wang Gungwu observes, establishing their “commercial supremacy” over the region.57

Additional corroboration of the highly probable Malay identity of the original kunlun and the location of their domain within greater Malaysia comes from the fact that a commentarial note dating from the Yuan Dynasty (1279–1368), appended to the account in the Comprehensive Mirror Aiding Government by its editor Hu Sanxing (1230–1302), definitively informs us of the location of Kunlunguo, the fabled “kingdom of Kunlun,” or perhaps better put, it supplies us with some highly impressionistic directions for how to get there. We are informed: “The kingdom of Kunlun is located to the south
of Linyi (Champa); [to travel there] one goes beyond Jiaozhi (Tonkin, present-day Hanoi) by sea for more than three hundred days. Customarily, in writing, Kunlun is the same [place] as Poluomen [Brahman?] (formerly constituting the entirety of the west coast of India, from Kulam in the south to the mouth of the Indus River in the north). A Song History entry of approximately the same vintage rather generically replicates at least Hu Sanxing's approach to, if not altogether his specific landmarks for, finding the land called Kunlun by utilizing instead the kingdom of Shepoguo (Java) as the primary reference point: “Java is located in the Southern Sea. One arrives in this country from the east by means of a month at sea. Then, with a half-month's rowing, one arrives at Kunlunguo.”

Clearly there seems to be no premium placed on the accuracy of these “directions,” even if we are inclined to consider them as such, and it is difficult to discern which one of the two sets is more suspect. Were one to follow, for instance, strictly the latter set, then—quite implausibly—as the scholar Zhang Xinglang (also Chang Hsing-lang) (1888–1951)—who will loom as a large presence in our subsequent deliberations—observed, Kunlunguo “must be none other than Thailand (Xianluoguo).” Such improbabilities notwithstanding, from such “directions” as these provided in the Yuan sources we can at the very least discern that the Chinese of the Tang and Song eras had regarded the inhabitants of Kunlun with whom they periodically interacted and interchanged through mercantile activity as hailing from some generalized region far to the south but also to the west—that is, from some vaguely defined place remote from China and not altogether lacking in proximity to points much further west, including, incidentally, the eastern coast of Africa.

The historian Feng Chengjun (1885–1946), writing nearly seven centuries later in his milestone Zhongguo Nanyang jiaotong shi (History of Chinese Southern Sea Transit), offers us only slightly more specific parameters than does Hu Sanxing, stating: “Since ancient days, the kingdom of Kunlun has been imprecisely designated as a single zone, defined by the various countries extending to Annam (Zhancheng) in the north, to Java (Zhuawa) in the south, to Malaysia (Malaibandao) in the west, to Borneo (Poluozhou) in the east. At its severe extreme, it extends even to the east coast of Africa. We can think of all of this area as incorporating the territory of Kunlun.” On the basis of its sweepingly immense area, Feng Chengjun’s “Kunlun” is defined only loosely, to be sure. However, the expansive boundaries that Feng offers adumbrate the point earlier made that we should always be prepared to think of Kunlun as geographically denoting a potential panoply of locations, ranging from its namesake range of mountains in Tibet to a substantial portion of an
entire oceanic zone (see Map 1). Moreover, we can also intuit from Feng’s description that there may well have been, over the course of history, numerous “kingdoms” of Kunlun, with the precise location having been largely dependent on the time period of the reference. Such an understanding provides us with ample justification for believing that although the kingdom of Kunlun specifically referred to by commentators on the Comprehensive Mirror Aiding Government such as Hu Sanxing was no longer so near at hand as the landlocked mountains of Tibet, neither was it so distant from China proper as is the East African coast. This reasoning all the more reinforces rather soundly the view that the peoples to whom the Chinese of the Tang and Song periods initially affixed the appellation *kunlun* were more or less, especially at the farthest western extremes, exclusively Malaysians.

Moreover, we are fortunately not solely dependent on Hu Sanxing’s particular notation for directions to the kingdom of Kunlun, which was sometimes in Song-period texts alternatively called Kunlunshan—with the suffix *shan*, in instances such as this one, somewhat counterintuitively denoting an “island” rather than its more standard translation as “mountain.” Writing perhaps a century earlier than Hu but only a half-century later than Sima, Zhao Rugua (1170–1231), in his *Zhufan zhi* (Description of Foreign Peoples), remarks succinctly that by “sailing the sea half a month [to the north of Shepo], one arrives at the kingdom of Kunlun.” Although we need not dismiss the vague directions of Hu Sanxing outright, certain realities should incline us to give due credence to those supplied by Zhao Rugua. The genealogical records of the Song History do inform us of Zhao Rugua’s descent from a collateral branch of the dynastic imperial clan. However, of all his contemporaries, only the famous Song-period bibliographer Chen Zhensun (fl. 1211–49) conveys anything to us about Zhao Rugua’s life, and Chen indeed informs us of very little, stating only that when he “served as a supervisor of maritime trade in Fujian, Zhao Rugua recorded [names and descriptions of] the various foreign countries and the commodities issuing forth from them.” Yet, from this terse entry on the noteworthy Zhao family library contained in his important *Zhizhai shulu jieti* (Catalog of Books with Explanatory Notices of the Zhi Studio), we can further deduce that Zhao Rugua, in his official capacity as a maritime trade commissioner (*shibo shi*) at the major port of Quanzhou, must assuredly have had frequent interaction with foreign as well as Chinese traders. Therefore, we can deem much of the information he provides in his book on such far-flung locations as Ceylon (Xilan) or modern Sri Lanka, Malabar (Nanpi), the Somali coast (Zhongli), Misr or Egypt (Wusili), and Sicily (Sijialiye) to have come to him through direct oral transmission.
In appraising the overall value of the work as a primary source, the anthropologist William Lessa was compelled to comment that Zhao Rugua's Description of Foreign Peoples "is so specific and detailed as to cause us to realize the extent of intercourse there was between China and the outside maritime world." The historian John Chaffee is even more emphatic in his appraisal, calling Zhao's work "a uniquely important account of the Asian, African, and even Mediterranean maritime world as it was known to the Chinese in the thirteenth century, describing, first, countries and cultures, and second, the varieties of goods imported into China." Other extant texts, including the somewhat earlier *Guihai yuheng zhi* (Description of Mountains and Forests of the Region of the Southern Sea) written by Fan Chengda (1126–93) in 1175 and *Lingwai daida* (Notes on Lands beyond the Mountains) written by Zhou Qufei (j.s. 1163) in 1178, with varying degrees of detail catalog the extensive maritime world of late or Southern Song (1127–1279) times and refer especially to the southernmost reaches of the empire as well as various of the now indeterminate locales situated in the seas south of the Chinese mainland. However, in the estimations of later traditional Chinese as well as contemporary Western scholars, upon its completion in 1226 Zhao Rugua's Description of Foreign Peoples has remained unsurpassed, leading Chaffee to conclude summarily that it has "expanded the Chinese literati's knowledge of foreign places and objects and has been an invaluable text for the history of maritime commerce ever since."

Just as important to us as the sources citing Kunlun and the location of this remote place is what it meant as an idea—that is, what by Tang and certainly Song times it had come to signify in the minds of its not-remote-enough Chinese observers. Thus, the hazy geographical coordinates provided notwithstanding, we must return to the above accounts of the vicious murder of the ethnic Han official Lu Yuanrui and his immediate entourage at the hands of a lone *kunlun* assailant for answers. They reveal information of greater meaning than the purely factual as they combine to contribute amply to our understanding of the Chinese premodern dispositional perspective toward the *kunlun*. From them we can be certain that those Chinese engaged in these early centuries of interaction with the *kunlun* unquestionably regarded them warily and with a conterminous mixture of condescension and trepidation, scorn and fear, no matter what they construed their majority nationality or ethnic composition to have been. Between the first notices on Lu Yuanrui's murder in the late seventh century and that of its detailed summation by Sima Guang for all posterity at the end of the eleventh, additional source material of the most interesting kind on the *kunlun* was contributed to the intervening
historical record by various individuals. Nevertheless, this material beclouds as well as enlightens, for in its tone it tends to reinforce long-established ideas about the perceived savagery prevailing among the *kunlun* and mostly thereby only reifies the threat posed to Chinese by them. As the famed Buddhist lexicographer Huilin (737–820), for example, observes in his expansive *Yiqiejing yinyi* (Pronunciations and Definitions for All the Scriptures), employing a variant form of the name generally assigned to them and equating it with the most generalized Chinese term for *barbarian*, “They are at times in vernacular speech also called *gulun*. They are the barbarous peoples (*yiren*) of the great and small islands of the Southern Sea.”

Yet, for all they do confirm about what we earlier could only hypothesize or surmise, these tandem accounts of the death of Lu Yuanrui are also keenly deserving of our interest for what they fail to reveal on the matter that is of greatest pertinence to our present deliberations. Whereas much in them is obviously directed at conjuring up utter and unreserved disdain for the *kunlun*, in neither account is there any mention of skin color. On the one hand, the skin coloration—the unalterable darkness or blackness—of any man of that time who, like the murderous assassin of Lu Yuanrui and his entourage, was described as *kunlun* might very well have been implicitly understood, and thus it simply dictated no explicit comment. On the other hand, however, it is also possible that, at least inasmuch as is reflected especially in the official and quasi-official reports, the inveterate *foreignness* of the culprit loomed larger in premodern Chinese consciousness than such a seemingly distinctive aspect of his appearance as *color* would for us today. As of old, the distinctiveness of foreignness may well have simply trumped that of appearance in these particular accounts. Yet, we need not look far for countervailing evidence, accounts of the *kunlun* that, in the transitional centuries of increasing contact between Tang and Song, place their skin color and all of its threatening associations on display. For proof we need but return to the remainder of Huilin’s observations:

Being extremely black, they bare their naked frames. They are capable of taming and cowing ferocious beasts, rhinoceroses, elephants, and the like. There are many races and varieties of them, and thus there are the Sengqi, the Tumi, the Gutang, the Gemie (Khmer), and such. All are base and lowly peoples. Propriety and rightness are absent from their domains. They rob and steal for a living, and they delight in chewing up and devouring humans, just like *luocha* (*rakshasas*) or evil ghosts. Being different from those spoken by the various [other] foreigners, the lan-
guages that these peoples speak are perverse. They excel at entering the water, for they can remain there for the entire day and not perish.72

Having been primarily a linguist, Huilin's ostensible interests would have concentrated on the place of the kunlun in the Chinese lexicon, and in fact, the title of his entry in his important early dictionary is precisely that—"Kunlun Speech" (kunlun yu). This focus should not surprise us, for anciently as well as presently dissimilarity in language, particularly the perceived degree of unintelligibility in comparison with one's own, has served as one of the cardinal demarcating factors between the civilized and the uncivilized. Moreover, linguistic discordance, bundled with certain other specific factors, has assuredly served with particular tenacity as a marker of difference in China. As the historian and philologist Mu-chou Poo has observed, and as will be subsequently shown, "Language and lifestyle, including dietary habits and dress, seem to be the major differences that caught the attention of people when they thought about the cultural differences between Chinese and barbarians."73

The extent of Huilin's direct exposure to the various varieties of kunlun he describes remains an open question, and his description of these "barbarous peoples" in what would appear to be their native habitat, while probably something less than a total fabrication, is almost certainly not a firsthand account. Nevertheless, through it Huilin clearly exceeds well beyond the initially circumscribed concern with language to touch upon all of the criteria that Mu-chou Poo tenders as standard demarcators of difference in the Chinese context, and we can therefore take his effort as actually representing the first steps taken toward the construction of ethnography. Obviously, by our modern standards, Huilin's protoethnography of the kunlun is overtly crude and prejudicial. Nonetheless, we can little dispute its consonance with what likely were the prevailing attitudes of his times. In other words, we can hardly expect him to offer an account of the kunlun that differed radically from what his potential audience wanted to read. Ironically, the early Tang period is renowned for what scholars have long contended was a highly cosmopolitan outlook, one that incorporated with relative tolerance all varieties of peoples. However, Huilin's words expose us to the limits of this supposed tolerant outlook. Clearly, the accommodating disposition of the early Tang was reserved only for those peoples whom the Chinese perceived as possessing at least a semblance of culture; it was never meant to extend to those peculiar classes of outlanders whom they regarded as savage, cannibalistic, or black.

In keeping with the spirit of ethnography as a genre, through Huilin's brief entry we can discern much more about how the Chinese actually tended
to regard the *kunlun* than how they defined them. We learn that at least some Chinese recognized different groups or “races” of *kunlun*, a fact that, given the Chinese emphasis on the geographical basis for determining otherness, implies they were understood neither as all occupying nor necessarily as all originating from the same locale. Even while they are described as “base and lowly peoples,” there is no denying the undercurrent of dread in Huilin’s comments, which seems precipitated by the mere black and exposed physical presence of the *kunlun* and which was no doubt compounded for his contemporary readers by his chilling reference to them as “delight[ing] in chewing up and devouring humans, just like *luocha* (rakshasas) or evil ghosts.” We do discover that the Chinese doubtless found traits in the *kunlun* that they could admire or, perhaps better put, marvel at in a grotesque sort of way; these include their reputed capabilities for rendering wild animals docile and their nearly fishlike natural aquatic abilities. Most of all, though, Huilin’s description of the various breeds of *kunlun* is tempered by disgust. Even if we deem his to be among the more generous descriptions (which for that time it was), we can neither overlook nor diminish his general tone of revulsion at the barbaric customs of the *kunlun*, which—from a Chinese standpoint—were not even deserving to be designated as customs. We can only conclude that Huilin, perforce, like countless numbers of Chinese before and after him, felt he had no choice but to consign the *kunlun* to the lowest possible rung of the ladder of humanity. The complex of dread and repulsion that Huilin felt at the very idea of being in their presence, which stemmed not least from their blackness—after all, the first attribute to which he refers—must have left him no other option.

In the premodern world of which Tang China was a part, one universally recognized solution to the threat posed by confrontation with the other was the submission to higher authority yielded by the imposition of enslavement. From the most ancient times an acceptable response to the threat posed by the other has been to subdue him. As Frank Dikötter has astutely theorized, that critical discriminatory sequence of reasoning whereby *black* becomes equated with *slave* was arrived at fairly early in Chinese history, which might well have been exceptional in its rapidity because, in accounting for the European historical case, we encounter at least one surprising counterexplanation for the delayed occurrence of this equation that we assume to be universal.74 Deducing exactly why Chinese of the premodern period might have come to conflate blackness so intimately with slavery and why they did it so early is not difficult. For the Chinese, enslavement was, after all, a less costly means of dealing with the dark outliers of their known universe, with whom—if Huilin’s remarks are representative—they recognized no shared ethnic traits, than by perpetual warfare waged against
them. Enslavement was also preferable and more cost-effective than war because the Chinese themselves were not fated ultimately to be the principal slavers. By and certainly after the eighth century C.E., when the other as African became perhaps as prominent as the enslaved Melakan or Khmer, the chore of actually procuring most of those slaves was primarily left to the Arabs. There were also simply fewer impediments and hazards—legal, moral, and otherwise—involved in enslaving foreigners of any type, not to mention *kunlun*, than in enslaving other Chinese. Indeed, in many Chinese minds of that time the attractions of enslavement for dealing with either the authentically or the seemingly obstreperous foreigner cannot be overstressed, and it is interesting and ironical to note that its tangible trappings of physical restraint had been resorted to even by the unfortunate governor Lu Yuanru. We can little doubt that he had regarded shackling the unruly foreign merchants on his watch as the best and safest answer to his developing problem. Yet, we can also note that it was his own misstep in aggression, his fatal threat to bind his threatening guests, that sealed his doom more than anything else he said or did.

If the foregoing rationales represent primarily reasons of expedience, then—before moving forward with the narrative—we should at last ponder that impetus behind the Chinese enslavement of the *kunlun* that arguably surpasses all others in importance. Especially in relation to the menacing *kunlun*, the Chinese came to favor enslavement such that it became a predilection, and its status as an almost instinctual response intended to mitigate danger led to its perpetuation. From ancient times, for the Chinese as well as for other peoples similarly positioned in relation to the other, enslavement was doubtless construed as the optimal means of negotiating and navigating spatial coexistence with those thought not to be of one’s kind. It was also a way of restoring cosmic order and balance in the Chinese confrontation with an encroaching, malignant force—that is, by relegation, regulating the other, a being who was normally held in check and at bay by the remove of physical distance. In this connection, a clause excerpted from Huilin’s “ethnography” is quite suggestive; he refers to the capacity of the *kunlun* for “taming and cowing ferocious beasts, rhinoceroses, elephants, and the like.” Conversely, such “taming and cowing” are precisely what the Chinese sought to visit upon the *kunlun*. In the broadest sense, these motives were compatible with the Chinese pattern of managing dealings not just with the *kunlun* but with all variants of the other, for if the foreigner, the stranger (interestingly, in middle literary Chinese often the identical term, *keren*, can also mean “guest”), could not be banished to or contained at a greater distance, then he must be controlled. Enslavement is, of course, the ultimate controlling device.
The perceptible cultural shortcomings that all *kunlun*, regardless of breed, exhibited had the effect only of encouraging Chinese designs on their enslavement and reinforcing the moral legitimacy of the practice as beneficial to the enslaved, much in the same way that the “white man’s burden” premise justified the most egregious imperialist actions whereby Victorian Britons subjugated millions of people of color around the globe in the nineteenth century. The *kunlun’s* cultural deficiencies, in other words, made him ripe for being dominated by those who were not deficient, and this domination was seen as fitting. To be sure, from a realistic perspective, the Chinese did probably realize that there must have been gradations of acculturation obtaining among the varieties of *kunlun* they encountered. However, at the root of their prejudices was the familiar stereotyping that diminishes distinctions and accentuates commonalities—the same seemingly eradicable dynamic that has always fueled antagonism and hatred toward the other. Chinese, in sum, saw the chasm of culture between themselves and any of the *kunlun* as so unfathomable as to permit these disparities among the latter always to be disregarded. Beholding only cultural vacuity when they gazed upon the primitive *kunlun*, the Chinese thus judged them exclusively by the physical denominator they had in common while ignoring the occasional differences, such as wavy versus curly or kinky hair. This common physical denominator, shared to one degree or another by all, was their relative blackness.

Chinese successes over time in enslaving the *kunlun* seem not to have relaxed the compulsion for doing so. During the first half of the sixteenth century Chinese merchants involved in trade with the newest foreigners—by this time Europeans such as the Portuguese and the Spanish—employed the *kunlun* of Melaka not only as laborers but also on occasion as go-between interpreters. Moreover, for their part, by the latter half of the same century, when they began gradually but more copiously to trickle into the empire, China’s European visitors were hardly remiss in emulating the willful pattern of subjugation of their hosts. We may take as a prime example the Italian Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), the first and greatest of the Jesuit fathers in China. In the years before acquiring his legendary mastery of Chinese, Ricci relied on native blacks (Malays?) as interpreters and imported blacks (Africans?) as servants—that is, before he was eventually compelled to change over to Chinese for both purposes upon learning and coming to appreciate that, as the historian Jonathan Spence relates it, “these blacks frightened the Chinese.” This observation by Spence is doubly revealing. On the one hand, it is reflective of the fact that blacks—understood by our definition as probably Malays—were commonplace enough throughout late sixteenth-century Chinese society as to
provoke little comment in the indigenous literature. However, on the other hand, it reflects the fact that there must also simultaneously have existed blacks of African extraction in China, for why else would the natives be “frightened” by them? In other words, the only logical way of explaining the fear evoked in the hearts of Ricci’s Chinese contacts at the sight of peoples by this point ostensibly so familiar is to acknowledge that they were actually not that familiar, not at all *kunlun* of some customary stock but instead those who were just as much products of imagination as they were of reality.

Such, then, were the meager limits to which the Chinese perception of blacks had, by the end of the premodern era, progressed. In the end, one can justifiably quibble with whether, in the Chinese context, blackness, as Dikötter claims, “had always been a symbolic expression for slavery.”77 After all, other scholars, such as Raymond Dawson, have argued that chief among the Chinese distinguishing criteria between civilization and barbarism was neither social nor political organization, neither religion nor race, but instead cultural attainment.78 However, this argument is most compelling only when applied to the dealings of the Chinese with peoples, such as even the customary *kunlun* of probable Malay ethnicity, whose racial constitutions they perceived as not differing altogether drastically from their own, and it becomes far less compelling when we extend it to what would be the future encounters between Chinese and Africans. Yet, these contentions notwithstanding, the fact remains that by the time the Chinese had genuinely established contact with and developed a true cognizance of the peoples of Africa, the “symbolic expression” to which Dikötter refers, whereby they had come to equate blackness fully and categorically with slavery, had already been well in place and robustly intact for a period of considerable duration. Sadly, it would endure for centuries, and its legacy lingers with us even now.
CHAPTER TWO

The Slaves of Guangzhou

From what has preceded, the southeastern coastal city of Guangzhou has already emerged as a pivotal locale, for it serves as a conspicuous nexus for helping to further not only our knowledge of the circumstances of China’s premodern “blacks” but also our understanding of their situation in relation to the Chinese institution of slavery. What follows is an exposition and analysis of what—apart from the official histories—appears to be the only nonfictional source within the slim body of available evidence that strongly suggests the substantial presence of what we by convention would deem to have been racially or ethnically black slaves inside middle-period China.1 As the late scholar C. Martin Wilbur prosaically observed: “Foreign slaves were very popular with the cosmopolitan upper classes of the [Tang] period. . . . Dark-skinned [kunlun] slaves, certainly negroid, were very popular; references to them go back to the fourth and fifth centuries. In [Tang] times some [kunlun] slaves may have been African negroes imported by Arab traders.”2

The account of the surprising existence and servitude of such slaves of African origin as Wilbur describes presents us with their circumstances during the succeeding era of the Song period. Constituting more clusters or groupings of discrete individuals than real colonies, these slaves were by no means geographically dispersed across China but preponderantly aggregated in only one place, what was already by then the populous coastal locality of Guangzhou. This site, if recognized by latter-day Westerners at all, was—until remarkably recently—far better known in later centuries by the peculiar imperialist corruption of a name it came to bear, Canton. (See Figure 2.)3 The record on which I rely and which affords this discerning description—the earliest and most extensive privately written one of which I am aware—is called
Pingzhou ketan (Pingzhou Chats on Things Worthwhile), a relatively short work in three Chinese scrolls or fascicles called juan, which serve functionally as chapters. Its author was a scholar and minor official of the Song Dynasty named Zhu Yu (1075?–after 1119).

However, at the same time that I hope to exploit this crucial text, I am also compelled to begin with a cautionary caveat. Even when pored over and mined exhaustively, Pingzhou Chats on Things Worthwhile offers us a picture of eleventh-century Guangzhou's black slaves that is still far less complete than any of us might like to have, and anyone who anticipates a description extracted from this source that is either definitive or conclusive is destined to be roundly disappointed. On the contrary, the description is neither precise nor expansive; the depth of detail that we as moderns desire to have and to which we have grown accustomed to expecting is simply not forthcoming; the resultant portrait hardly surpasses being much more than a fragmentary and fragile allusion. Thus, on the one hand, my own inclination to bring this description to light is interlaced with and tempered by ambivalence about its ultimate value. By my assessment, the description afforded is yet another classic example of one of those all-too-frequently-encountered and all-too-vexing discoveries that, for the historian, raises perhaps even more questions than it does answer. However, on the other hand, if our knowledge about the shad­owy intersections in the histories of disparate cultural zones—specifically two such zones that are conventionally interpreted as having been so disparate as Africa and China—is to be advanced at all, then the description of the black slaves of China offered in Pingzhou Chats on Things Worthwhile deserves greater exposure than it has heretofore had, for it surely represents one that is worth the telling.

Of Text and Context

For someone so well positioned as a potential participant within the main­stream of the civil service ideal of the Song period, Zhu Yu, the author of Pingzhou Chats on Things Worthwhile, remains a man about whom we know painfully little. Although known to have hailed from the region that is now modern coastal Zhejiang Province, an area that supplied many of the state's bureaucrats from mid-Song times onward, no record mentions that Zhu Yu ever served in an official capacity. This situation forces us to conclude that he was never elevated—either through the channel of the civil service examinations or by recommendation—to any official post. Thus, in the case of Zhu
Yu, one of the most reliable portals for our acquiring in-depth knowledge about the lives of even relatively minor Song figures— that is, a career of any duration as an officeholder—is unavailable to us.

However, this dearth of knowledge about the author of Pingzhou Chats on Things Worthwhile as an independent personality is not fatal, for it is abundantly compensated for by what we know of the career, pursuits, and experiences of Zhu Yu’s father—the much more prominent and diversely experienced government official Zhu Fu (1048–after 1102). Moreover, to our great fortune, the research of the contemporary scholar Li Weiguo, in his 1986 foreword (qianyan) to a punctuated edition of Pingzhou Chats on Things Worthwhile, affords us some indispensable details regarding Zhu Yu’s family origins and the nature of his standing within the family lineage. We learn that Zhu Yu’s

Grandfather was Zhu Lin [fl. ca. 1025–90], who served as an official in the post of assistant director in the Palace Library (bicheng) and who, among his works, wrote the Personal Record of the Spring and Autumn Annals (Chunqiu siji) and the Outer Record of the Spring and Autumn Annals (Chunqiu waiji).

[His] father was Zhu Fu, who was styled Xingzhong. While he was young, Zhu Yu was dependent on his mother’s Hu family and resided at Changzhou. Later, he accompanied his father during his service as an official to Kaifeng and such prefectures as Lai and Run. At the beginning of the Chongning era (1102–7), they arrived at Guangzhou; they had only a short time earlier gone to the Southern Sea (Nanhai) to see Su Shi [1036–1101].

The visit with Su Shi had to have occurred between the years 1097 and 1100. The fact that Zhu Fu was on intimate enough terms with Su, who was probably the most highly regarded litterateur of the day, to visit with him in the region of the Southern Sea affords us important clues regarding not only the grandeur of the elder Zhu’s social and intellectual connectedness but also very likely the directions of his political courage, for Su was, at that time, the loser in a factional power struggle and in the midst of his second and final exile from court and capital on remote Hainan Island (Hainan dao). Hainan was a sweltering and pest-infested zone of mostly aboriginal population that constituted then, as it does now, the southernmost extreme of the Chinese world. Especially during Song times, which were rife with factional infighting, to visit with the vanquished who had been consigned by the victors to banishment in
such a remote and hostile place was to make a loud and clear statement, and it suggests that Zhu Fu felt owing to no one with respect to the advancement or the retardation of his career.

By contrast to that of his father, Zhu Yu’s “career,” should we choose to call it such, being an unusual one by the standards of his times, must be assessed quite differently. Even as an adult estimably in his twenties, the younger Zhu evidently spent much (if not all) of his time as a kind of voluntary shadow of his more distinguished father, literally trailing after him on his various assignments during his years of sundry service. To be sure, the proof of how well connected Zhu Yu was via his father Fu is clearly borne out in the passage by what appears to have been more than a passing acquaintance with the great Su Shi. However, one senses strongly that Zhu Yu was included in such a vaunted social circle only because of the friendship between the prestigious literatus and his father.

Indeed, Zhu Yu does not appear to have ever voluntarily endeavored to establish either a name or a position for himself. While it was unquestionably an uncommon path to take for that time, there are nonetheless some plausible explanations for his having taken it. However, the absence of a certifiable rationale for it notwithstanding, foremost in importance for us is that we prepare ourselves for the exertion of the “partnership” between father and son on the content of Pingzhou Chats on Things Worthwhile. This connection through lineage of the two Zhus will profoundly influence our understanding of and appreciation for the text that Zhu Yu wrote. This is the case because, if the contentions of traditional scholars are indeed correct, the observations, encounters, and experiences that supply much (if not most) of the material for the narrative of the book are predominantly those of the father Zhu Fu channeled and, on occasion, perhaps filtered or embellished through the son Zhu Yu.

Evaluation of the internal chronology of Pingzhou Chats on Things Worthwhile also supports this conclusion that Zhu Yu’s main contribution throughout the book was that of providing the extensive prosopopeial service of speaking in the voice of Zhu Fu, bringing his likely already deceased father’s views and observations back to life, for the generally accepted date of authorship for the work is the year 1119. Scholars have deduced this date mainly from the fact that the events—some noteworthy and others quite ordinary—recounted in Zhu Yu’s book all occurred between the years 1056 and 1118. However, there are also sound reasons for proffering a somewhat earlier date of composition, one near the conclusion of the eleventh century, for the material pertaining to Guangzhou. Such is the case because Zhu Yu prominently
mentions the years 1086 and 1099 with reference to that city, with the latter year especially closely corresponding to the period of Zhu Fu's tenure of office there. Consequently, yet another tenable explanation of Zhu Yu's role in relation to Zhu Fu is that, as the son of a high official, the author mainly functioned quite intentionally, deliberately, and self-effacingly as recorder and raconteur of his father's far richer life experiences.

Beyond these inquiries into matters of authorship and composition, before turning to the work itself in earnest, my translation of the title of the book as Pingzhou Chats on Things Worthwhile (Pingzhou ketan) demands some tentative justification. We can legitimately turn to ponder the title because it elucidates—probably to a far greater extent than was generally the case for comparable Western works of historical miscellany—the intentions of the author. The place-name in the title, Pingzhou, was the small village in the district or county of Huangzhou where Zhu Yu resided—a site located forty miles to the east of the modern Wuhan area, in eastern Hubei Province. The initial component of the compound term ketan—the verbal ke of ketan, which typically means "allowable," "permissible," "presentable," or "admissible"—in this particular instance has the added force of "must." Hence, by extension, it is here suggestive of conversations that, because of their topicality or their inherent entertainment value, are worth having and that, given that they pertain to matters one feels almost compelled to discuss, might even verge on the irresistible. The compound ketan is thereby suggestive of the anecdotal means and secondhand manner whereby a good deal of the material for the book was probably acquired. We need not for an instant doubt that much of the material Zhu Yu recorded unquestionably resulted from his own direct observation. However, we can also surmise with a fair degree of confidence that much in those sections of the book wherein Zhu Yu fleetingly refers to foreign slaves—namely, those extensive passages consisting of intricate descriptions of maritime customs protocols, merchant seafaring, and possibly the foreign community at Guangzhou—was acquired indirectly, via either oral or written exchanges with his father, Zhu Fu, who by dint of his assigned official duties was far more exposed to and experienced in these matters.

The younger Zhu may well have even acquired some estimable portion of the intricate material he included on maritime affairs through what likely amounted to a kind of dictation of it by the elder Zhu. If this dictation was indeed the case, then both custom and the prescriptions of filial piety would demand that any eventual publication of these exchanges by the son should become, to some indeterminate extent, contingent upon the assent or approval of the father—at least while the elder man was still living and probably even
well after his death. Hence, although it is sacrificed in my English rendering, we nonetheless also find that we mentally can neither completely ignore nor eschew the element in the Chinese title connoting "allowableness" or "permissibility." It implicitly suggests the imposition of the demand for some measure of selectivity regarding the constituent content of the book. Thus, it would appear that, ultimately, the substance of Zhu Yu's book could no more escape Zhu Fu's consent than it could elude his influence.

While it is of greatest immediate interest to us because of its bearing on the present topic of slavery, the conduction of maritime trade relations by no means exhausts the subjects encompassed by Zhu Yu in Pingzhou Chats on Things Worthwhile. Even as it chronicles the major milestones in Zhu Fu's career and his interactions with even more prominent political actors, the first chapter or juan largely constitutes a kind of selective overview, based on the intrinsic interests of Zhu Yu, of major eleventh-century policies effectuated by and at the Song imperial court. The second chapter is crucial to the purpose at hand because all mention of foreign slaves is confined to it. However, beyond its value in this respect, the chapter also presents us with a surfeit of maritime affairs information (including technology) as well as much unprecedented and therefore invaluable ethnographical data. Different yet again is the third and final chapter, for it consists mainly of didactic observations based on well-known events in the lives of noteworthy personalities. There are also brief notes on freakish phenomena, attempts at prediction, and interpretations of prophetic dreams.

Nevertheless, it is the crucial second chapter that is at the absolute center of our inquiry and deliberations, and it begins in the following way:

The Maritime Trade Superintendency at Guangzhou has been long established, having begun with military and transport commissioners concurrently taking on the responsibilities of providing supervision for maritime activity. During the time of my forebears, these individuals were called maritime trade commissioners. Quanzhou in Fujian circuit and both Mingzhou and Hangzhou in Liangzhe circuit all border on the sea, and they also all have maritime trade superintendencies.

With the commencement of the Chongning era (1102–7), the three ports each installed officials who served as maritime trade superintendents. But, of the three regions, Guangzhou is the most prosperous. Still, whenever there are instances when the supervisory officials misappropriate their fish catches, the merchants then change locations. Therefore, for their parts, the three regions have undergone repeated
fluctuations in prosperity. The imperial court once [even] aggregated all of Quanzhou's ships and ordered them to proceed to Guangzhou. That was an occasion on which the merchants were much inconvenienced.  

The conspicuous importance of this opening passage is clearly the extent to which it confirms the primacy of Guangzhou as the hub of Chinese southeast-coastal commercial maritime affairs—a status the provincial capital had in fact enjoyed since the Han Dynasty (202 B.C.E.—220 C.E.). This status became considerably more enhanced after the city was officially decreed open to interstate trade in 971. However, significantly, up until the ninth century and, in certain respects, even well beyond it Guangzhou was also considered by many to be a cultural wasteland. At the very least, it was widely recognized in official circles for its cultural distinctiveness, situated as it is on what was at that time the most remote coastal extremity of the Chinese Empire. Nevertheless, on the basis of Zhu Yu's description, the fact that Guangzhou had—by the beginning of the twelfth century—become fully accepted, at least in terms of overseas commerce, as perhaps the maritime pivot of the empire seems incontrovertible.

Before turning in earnest to the promised primary evidence on foreign slaves, we are well served by noting that pursuant to the region's flourishing as a bustling and thriving commercial center there was the establishment in Guangzhou of a foreign community whose members were not slaves. As the late Edward Schafer was to express what must have been the prevailing flavor of that colorful city during the Tang Dynasty, "of all the cities of the south, and of all the towns where foreign merchants congregated, none was more prosperous than the great port of Canton, the Khanfu [Qanfu] of the Arabs, the 'China' of the Indians." Various indigenous non-Sinicized groups, such as the tribal White (Western) Mân and Red (Eastern) Mân barbarians, were also represented. Among its foreign elements, this community at that time was impressively diverse and included many Persians, Malays, and Singhalese, who together with the other outlanders are known to have numbered in the tens of thousands amid Guangzhou's sizable overall population of maybe two hundred thousand. For reasons that will become starkly apparent, our accounting for the conditions under which these nonslave foreigners in Guangzhou lived will shed considerable light by approximation on what the prevailing circumstances must have been like for the foreign slaves. In the most extensive privately written account that describes probably what was the largest concentration of nonbelligerent foreigners ever in China up until that time, Zhu Yu offers a fascinating portrait—one that, despite its predominantly journal-
istic tone, affords us a curious framing of his own personal values within the broader cultural mores of his age.

Perhaps not surprising, Zhu Yu begins with a description of the imperially sanctioned foreign quarter of Guangzhou, or more properly, the compound to the south of the Pearl River (Zhu he) and outside the main city to which the foreign merchant community was in theory restricted. While in Guangzhou, the foreign merchants are believed to have enjoyed at least some privileges of extraterritoriality,24 and according to John Chaffee, many of the wealthiest among the sizable population of Muslim merchants actually eschewed the compound altogether.25 However, many more were not so fortunate, and as revealed through an accompanying description of the punishments meted out to those who contravened Chinese law, Zhu Yu perhaps unconsciously makes all too apparent what the compound foremost represented from the standpoint of the Chinese authorities—control:

The foreigners' compound at Guangzhou is where all the foreigners from abroad collectively reside. From amongst themselves, a headman is appointed who manages the public affairs of the foreigners' compound. Specifically, when one wants to personally invite foreign merchants to submit tribute, one uses this foreign official to do it. In every respect, with regard to dress, this man is like us Chinese.

Whenever a foreigner commits a crime, the Guangzhou interrogator is summoned and dispatched to the foreigners' compound. The interrogator straps the offender to a wooden rack and then, using a rattan cane, beats him from head to toe. Every time, he administers three strikes with the cane, alternating these with a single strike with a large stick.

It seems that the foreigners generally do not wear trousers, and they enjoy sitting by stooping on the ground. Therefore, applying the rod to their buttocks makes them sorrowful, for they can no longer sit. But the perverse among them have no fear of the rod upon their backsides. Thus, those who are guilty of grave crimes must be forced to quit Guangzhou.26

The fact that at least some foreigners would have been subjected to the severe punitive treatment here depicted should not surprise us because, as Derek Heng has observed, "The increasingly diverse nature of China's maritime trade in the eleventh century led to the development of a hierarchy within the foreign community . . . based largely on the scale of the commercial activities of the various groups."27 One's extent of exposure to such punishment was
doubtless directly proportional to one's position within the hierarchy, and we can assume that those at or near the bottom were far less protected than those nearer the top. Moreover, the objective of control deserves reiteration and can hardly be overstressed. The preoccupation of the Chinese with controlling the foreigners in their midst and the lengths to which they have gone throughout the centuries of contact with foreigners to maintain such control by constraining their movements and thus their behavior when in China is indeed one of the most enduring themes in the history of Chinese interstate relations. As for its relevance to the topic at hand, let it suffice to say that the Chinese felt no compunction about routinely subjecting the transgressing free foreigners in eleventh-century Guangzhou to such forms of interrogation as above detailed, with the expectation that it be executed through the intermediary of the foreign headman rather than through their authority. If these free foreigners could expect such treatment, then we need only briefly imagine the kinds of punishment that might likely await a foreign slave found to have committed even the slightest type of infraction.

Having thus dealt with the subjects of where the foreign merchant community stays and what happens to them if they transgress, Zhu Yu next turns to an interesting comparison of contrasting attitudes toward food consumption:

Whereas the foreigners differ from Chinese in the clothing they wear, what we eat and drink is the same. In some cases, however, they say that their deceased ancestors once served Gautama [the Buddha] and accepted the admonition against eating pork and, therefore, they still do not eat pork, and that is all. In other instances, they say, “If you must eat [meat], then you must kill it yourself.” Their meaning in saying this is that it must be a matter of killing your own meat and eating it. Thus, to this day, there are foreigners for whom if it is not the case that they themselves have put the knife to one of the six domesticated animals—the horse, the cow, the sheep, the chicken, the dog, or the hog—then they will not eat it. Yet, when it is either fish or the fresh-water turtle, without concern for whether it was alive or [already] dead [prior to being prepared], they will, in every case, eat it.

Despite its obvious value in revealing a general uniformity in habits of food consumption across comparably advanced eleventh-century cultures, Zhu Yu's foregoing observation would seem to have little direct bearing on our present concern with foreign slaves. However, as in the case of the previous theme of the threat of punishment, the issue of food plays an even more
decisive and crucial role in determining the character of the nature of interaction between Chinese slaver and foreign (and specifically black) slave.

Zhu Yu completes his discussion of the Guangzhou-based free foreign merchant community by affording us some insight into other aspects of consumption that may well reveal his—or probably far more likely, his father, Zhu Fu's—avidly mercantile sensibilities. His distinct attention in such detail to these features of consumption is suggestive, if only obliquely, of the time-honored but conventionally understated association that prevailed in China between the attainment of official office and the entitlement to lucrative wealth. By Song times, for better or worse in the popular mind, this association had become rather firmly fixed and something more than a tacit assumption. In other words, one who had succeeded in securing rank and office was expected to be amenable to garnering wealth—or, at the very least, appreciative of its value, for wealth had by then surely become regarded as concomitant with such achievement. Zhu Yu possessed an “eye” for wealth, especially in its opulent aspect, and thus he duly recorded:

The hands and fingers of the foreigners are always adorned with precious stones. The settings used are all either gold or silver, in order to display one's [relative] poverty or wealth, and they are called finger rings. One may encounter even a base man and one still finds that he can appreciate their value. A single ring can fetch a hundred gold cash.

The most prized [of the stones] is called tiger-eye. Then there are the jades—bright and blazing, with a luminosity that shimmers—they truly are as if alive. Upon inspecting them, however, one finds that they lack other differences [from ours]. Still, the reason why the foreigners wear them on their clothing is not known. But then there is the rubbing (mosuo) stone. It serves as medicine for counteracting the venom of snakes and insects. The foreigners wear it fashioned as a finger ring, and when they suffer a venomous bite, they suck on it and are thereby immediately cured. This stone is truly capable of preserving life.

As at so many other junctures in one's reading of Pingzhou Chats on Things Worthwhile, the most startling revelations are often in the incidentals. In this instance we can note that Zhu Yu describes finger rings as if they are quite novel. Evidently, even by Song times, the finger ring as a jewelry accessory was either unknown or not widely worn as a common adornment in China. However, Zhu Yu provides no further information on exactly what the medicinal stone to which he alludes is and no further guidance on whether we
should assume it to have been a presumably polished object that cured by—in addition to being placed in the mouth—being simply fondled in the hand or by being directly applied as a massaging agent to detoxify a wound. Whatever the true nature of this rubbing stone, Zhu clearly marveled at its properties, and his saying less than he might have about it is perhaps a way of saying more about his respect for its miraculous healing powers.

In this same peripheral as well as elliptical spirit, Zhu Yu's first reference to foreign slaves in Pingzhou Chats on Things Worthwhile appears as precisely such an incidental—indeed, as a kind of byline within the main context, which is essentially a description of Chinese maritime traders in action. However, in prefiguring this reference, in perhaps a conscious effort at consistency with what has come before, Zhu Yu invokes some familiar themes by reiteration—most prominently of all, there is again the theme of control, intermixed with the imminent threat of punishment:

The prime directive is that the larger of the seafaring ships carry several hundred men and that even the smaller ones carry something more than a hundred. Each ship has the more prosperous merchants act in such various capacities as chief disciplinarian, vice disciplinarian, and so forth. The Maritime Trade Superintendency invests these men with vermilion seals [of authority], and permits them to flog their crewmen in order to maintain discipline. In the event someone dies [from such a beating] or is lost at sea, these officers appropriate the man's property. Merchants say that only when the ship is large and the crew is full does one dare to venture forth at sea. The outer seas are thick with robbers and thieves. Moreover, it is the case that those who plunder do not reveal their nationalities, for—if they were to do so—you might discern their native towns. But, in some instances, ships become lost at sea and suffer the true sacrifice—which is when the ship and all of its contents are seized. The pirates tie up the crewmen and sell them, saying, “You should not have come here in the first place.” Even though one's craft might carry no merchant funds, [the pirates of] foreign countries will still plunder and kill, calling what they steal “the giving of presents.” It matters not whether one's goods are plentiful or spare. One precedent is enough to [rightly] accuse them of [committing] these crimes; therefore, there is no advantage in small ships.

In each case, the depth and width of a ship is several ten fathoms. When the merchants divide up and stow goods, they must allow several feet. Below, they stow the goods and, at night, they sleep on top
of them. The goods themselves are often pottery, with large and small items collected together. There is no place where there is even a small space.

At sea, there is no dreading of wind or billows. The only fear is hearing from the tower, when attempting to moor, that they are about to run aground in shallows. If they cannot succeed in throwing off [ballast], the ship suddenly springs leaks and there is no way of entering below and managing it. [At such times,] they order their foreign slaves (guinu) to repair the ship from the outside by using knives to plug the leaks with wadding. The foreign slaves are good at swimming; they enter water that is murky.33

On the one hand, Zhu Yu's use of the term "foreign slave" or perhaps "demon slave" or "devil slave" to refer to the individuals he describes denotes a signal moment, for my investigations reveal it not only to be the locus classicus or first instance but also, surprisingly, the sole instance of the appellation in the traditional written literature.34 However, on the other hand, in almost every other respect Zhu Yu's foregoing reference to the foreign slaves is one that he could hardly have made more casually or with any greater sense of assumed assurance of collective understanding of what he meant. Clearly, taking their existence for granted, neither Zhu Yu as author nor his maritime merchants as contemporary subjects appear to have viewed the slaves as anything more than a communal resource to be prevailed upon in a time of exigency. On the basis of the above passage and in the absence of evidence that is in any way more expansive, modern readers can only be left with the impression that the slaves, on the basis of their superior aquatic skills, existed solely for the purpose of protecting the profits of their Chinese owners by extricating them from the perils of travel at sea. For us, Zhu Yu's abrupt journalistic reference to the slaves springing into action seems to spring forth out of nowhere. However, for Zhu Yu, like the Chinese slave-masters on whose activities his above description focuses, the place of origin of the slaves does not even arise as a question. We can surmise that it did not arise either because it constituted such common knowledge among Chinese of that time as to be assumed or because it mattered so little to them as to warrant neither thought nor comment. However, for any modern Western observer who, more than a millennium after the fact, seeks to penetrate and decipher this most unexpected of references in a premodern Chinese text, understandably and justifiably, endeavors to reconstitute the context of Zhu Yu's striking commentary depend most of all on the question of origins. In short, who were these slaves?
In seeking an answer to this all-important question, we are fortunate in that Zhu Yu—perhaps stemming from nothing more than a curiosity that reflects the long-standing Chinese penchant for recording encounters with the exotic, the bizarre, or the prodigious—provides us with one—and only one—additional observation on this subject. In so doing, he supplies us with considerable ethnographical detail. However, even more important than the capsule ethnography he offers is the fact that by the end of his observation Zhu Yu has at least supplied us with a set of extremely vague coordinates for further pursuit in our own speculations, if not with a concrete and decisive answer to our query. At a subsequent juncture in the same chapter, before never addressing the subject again, Zhu Yu writes:

The wealthy in Guangzhou maintain numerous foreign slaves. These slaves are unequalled in strength and are capable of carrying—on their backs—several hundred catties (jin). Neither their language nor their passions bear any connection to ours. Their natures are simple; they do not attempt to flee. For their part, the people of Guangzhou call them “wildmen (yeren).”

As for the color of these slaves, it is as black as ink. Their lips are red and their teeth are white. Their hair is curly (quan) as well as ochre-colored. They are both male and female, and they inhabit the various mountains across the sea.

They eat raw food. But once they are acquired as slaves, they are fed cooked food. They thereupon endure days of diarrhea, which is referred to as “converting the bowels (huanchang).” As a consequence [of this switch to cooked food], they occasionally die of illness. But if they do not die, then they are capable of being socialized. After a long period of socialization, they become able to understand what people say [to them], even though they themselves are incapable of [our] speech.

There [also] exists a kind of wildman that lives near the sea. These slaves are able to immerse themselves in water without batting or blinking their eyes. They are called kunlun slaves.

We can observe that these so-called kunlun slaves were so important to the functioning of the vessels they repaired that they lent their name to them. As the historian Leonard Andaya has observed, “The principal vessels carrying goods to and from China were termed by the Chinese kunlun bo or ‘kunlun ships.’” Yet, despite how necessary their presence was, they were also perniciously absent. Except for those times when their charges were in distress,
these same vital preservers of China's seaworthy ships were essentially all but invisible, hardly more than an afterthought in Zhu Yu's narrative record.

Their invisibility notwithstanding, one way we might be able to discern speculatively both who the kunlun were and how they might have arrived in China is to consider what is known, at least thus far, about how they functioned. Crucially, immediately above as well as in the foregoing passage concluding with the singular reference to the knife-wielding ship repairers, what we find most cited and most stressed about the kunlun is their prowess in association with seafaring in general and their aquatic ability as swimmers and divers in particular. (Even the above description of their capacity for lifting heavy amounts of weight is not necessarily divorced from a seaward or dockyard function.) Misconstruing somewhat the extant evidence and certainly overstating the case, the late historian Jung-pang Lo (1912–81) contended improbably that Chinese vessels of Zhu Yu's time, in contrast to their less plush Arab counterparts, afforded "the service of negro stewards," by which he seems to have meant African domestic servants, including wait staff.38 Yet, despite the implausibility of such a claim as this one, we can tenably advance the idea that these slaves did likely serve on board Chinese as well as Arab ships as a kind of subclass and that—specifically in the Arab case—they could then be jettisoned, disposed of at Guangzhou, Quanzhou, or other Chinese ports of call according to need and convenience. This theory assists us to some degree in "unifying" the two distinct categories of slaves that Zhu Yu above describes, for it could well be the case that the "wildman" differed not at all from the lifter of catties in racial or ethnic terms but merely was to be found (that is, captured) in a different locale and that he naturally possessed skills as a swimmer that were more prized by his enslavers. In other words, whether for Chinese or the Arabs, this "kind of wildman" possibly represented the fittest of the fit, the variety of kunlun deemed most seaworthy. This hypothesis may also explain why there are no discernible references anywhere in the Chinese sources for the period to any native markets for slaves, cities or sites internal to China where they were either bought or sold.39

Moreover, we find that a single tantalizingly provocative but curiously terse and insubstantial reference contained in a later, thirteenth-century text indirectly attests to the probable disposability of the kunlun slaves as well as to their inseparable identifiableness in Chinese eyes with their West Asian and/or Arab masters. In describing Guangzhou's sister port of Quanzhou, in his Fangyu shenglan (Topographical Guide for Visiting Sites of Scenic Beauty), the compiler Zhu Mu (?–after 1246), states that "The various foreigners are all of two types, black and white, and in every case they reside in Quanzhou,
which is called ‘the foreigners’ port.’ Every year, they come forth by sea aboard large ships, laden with ivory, rhinoceros [horn], tortoise shell, pearls, crystals, agate, exotic fragrances, and black pepper.”

Yet, what can we say about the actual identity of these Guangzhou slaves whom Zhu Yu above describes? Two distinctly different possibilities arise. With regard to the demographics of its foreign community, Guangzhou by the beginning of the twelfth century had completed an important transition. As Derek Heng has argued compellingly, the composition of Guangzhou’s foreign population shifted dramatically from being predominantly Arab and, to a lesser extent, Indian to being preemminently Southeast Asian. This transferal perhaps resulted from a process whereby the established Dashi Arab community refocused its interests and diverted its activities to Quanzhou and thus permitted a variegated Southeast Asian contingent, consisting of such groups as Chams, Srivijayans (Sumatrans), Javanese, and of course sundry Malay groups, to move in and fill the mercantile vacuum. In light of this development and what must have been the obvious familiarity of the Chinese through proximity over time with these Southeast Asian peoples, problems arise when we attempt any reconciliation with the above description, which—by any measure—offers us a portrait of the alien in its most extreme. We must ask ourselves whether the people Zhu Yu describes in the above passage can be one and the same with any of these peoples comprising the Guangzhou foreign community with which the Chinese had long communicated and conducted regular commercial dealings. Would Zhu Yu describe these peoples as suddenly unintelligible? It would appear not. All of this leads us to the second stark possibility. Succinctly put, the *kunlun* whom Zhu Yu above describes—in either or both cases but far more likely that of the former description of the unskilled laborers of preternatural strength than the latter of the aquatically adept “wildman”—were African. Therefore, we can attribute their presence in China either to their being plausible castoffs of the far-reaching and prosperous Arab exportation of slaves from East Africa or to their having been acquired and intentionally dispensed there as commodified objects of that trade in the first place.

Additionally, based on our reading of Zhu Yu’s uniquely descriptive observations, another, somewhat less speculative investigative strategy becomes available to us, one that calls for our endeavoring to discern who these *kunlun* slaves were once they had physically—by whatever means—become ensconced in Guangzhou. This approach to the issue involves our grappling with the vexing yet resolvable question of precisely who might have owned them. One suggestion offered by Philip Snow that we must take seriously is
that many of the black slaves described in this passage were owned not necessarily by wealthy Chinese but instead by wealthy Arabs residing in Guangzhou at that time. Moreover, based on this premise of Arab ownership, we can reasonably assume a subsequent presence of the kunlun further north in Quanzhou, for a thriving Muslim populace and its influence were even more pronounced in this city, which had already superseded Guangzhou as the chief port of seaborne trade by the early twelfth century and, according to Chaffee, flourished with its “population in the hundreds of thousands, making it the most important port in the world.”

However, primarily for two reasons, a preponderance of the evidence militates against the foregoing conclusion. First, we have already witnessed Zhu Yu’s detailed account of the foreigners’ compound as the spatial zone to which theoretically all but in practice perhaps only most foreigners in Guangzhou were confined. Such confinement, of course, does not preclude those who resided there from either having wealth or owning slaves. However, the residency of such slaveholders within the compound would tend to undermine Snow’s further assertion about the nearly ubiquitous visibility of the slaves, that “the Chinese residents of Canton [Guangzhou] must have seen them daily,” because, as Heng has persuasively contended, whereas there was no strict prohibition against interaction between them, neither was there a real “process of integration” between Guangzhou’s Chinese and foreign communities. According to Heng, what little interaction there was occurred infrequently—being “confined to the boundaries of the prefecture,” with foreigners not permitted to travel or trade beyond these boundaries, and thus the day-to-day pursuits of the foreign community, “including cuisine, recreation, religious activities and judicial matters, remained only a curiosity for the Chinese literati.”

Second, there is much about the internal construction of Zhu Yu’s statement that, purely in linguistic terms, compromises Snow’s interpretation, largely because of the way in which the identity of the slaveholders is articulated. Chiefly, the Arabs were, of course, foreigners in Guangzhou themselves, and had they in fact been the principal owners of the slaves, Zhu Yu would almost certainly have described them in such a way as to denote them as the Arab (or at least foreign) wealthy—if for no other reason than to distinguish them from those wealthy Chinese who possessed slaves. On the contrary, all stress on foreignness in the passage applies exclusively to the slaves, whereas their owners are designated by the entirely neutral descriptive term Guangzhong furen. For this and other reasons, I am convinced that the slaves specified above were predominantly owned by Chinese rather than Arabs, or at least that many more of them were owned by Chinese than were not.
However, the importance of the question of the ownership of Guangzhou's black slaves is nonetheless superseded by the fact of their presence, and via his “final word” on them, Zhu Yu tenders a stark and irreducible visual image, with an ethnographical richness that is undeniable. Still, from the standpoint of early historical cross-cultural interaction, it is Zhu Yu’s reference to the Chinese convention of “converting the bowels” of the slaves—being at once both powerfully graphic and grippingly symbolic—that springs forth most saliently. This idea of “converting the bowels” consummately encapsulates the concept of Chinese cultural imperialism. Moreover, as a concept, the notion of “converting the bowels” is remarkably protean, for examination of it aids us in connecting and forming an interface between the quotidian and the supralocalized aspects of the Chinese existence of the black slaves.

We can and should first observe that for untold millennia the Chinese, like only certain other peoples of the world, have long assumed that nearly all foodstuffs for human ingestion should be thoroughly cooked. To cite the biological anthropologist Richard Wrangham’s observation, we are all evolved “cookivores.” Furthermore, even to this day in China food—again, almost invariably in its fully cooked form—has continued to remain an indispensable marker of civilization. Much like the national written language of China, the national cuisine—despite its many regional variations—represents a uniform signifier to which all ethnically Han Chinese can point as emblematic of their distinctive civilization. As the anthropologist Sidney W. Mintz has perceptively pointed out, referring to humankind at large, “it is our cooking that distinguishes us most clearly from other animals.” However, as Mintz also conversely observes, for the purpose of establishing social groupings, cooking remains a factor as significant as any other in distinguishing us from one another. We can therefore assume that a certain pride of distinctiveness and, by extension, superiority in the realm of culinary sensibilities also obtained in China during the Song era—a period that was noteworthy for its entrenched insularity spawned by the search during that time for the indigenous and hence original foundations of an authentic but probably mythologized Chinese culture. Notwithstanding the question of whether they were truly accustomed to consuming only raw food, that the black slaves held in bondage by the residents of eleventh-century Guangzhou should have become exposed, if not habituated, to Chinese eating conventions and not vice versa is simply a given. Moreover, such exposure implies a move toward conformance to dietary norms on the part of the slaves that would have been motivated as much by basic survival as by the power of their Chinese masters to induce or enforce it.
Furthermore, we need to consider an underlying but cardinal link between food and the processes of acculturation, especially as it applies in the Chinese case; this is that dimension of Chinese cultural imperialism that we may call Sino-Confucian universalism—an ideological outlook most closely identified but not entirely identical with the mature version of Confucianism that had developed by Song times. One of the elements of Sino-Confucian universalism that displays the greatest indebtedness to Confucianism in its classical articulation is the bedrock belief that Chinese culture was endowed with an infinite capacity for “converting” or “transforming” the less developed cultures of non-Chinese peoples with whom it chanced to come in contact. Its Confucian believers held that this capability for transformation was so alluring to those as yet untouched by Chinese culture as to be irresistible.

Obviously, this transformative premise of Sino-Confucian universalism directly contradicts that of environmental determinism, which as Frank Dikötter has discussed, was a hallmark of the development of Yin-Yang Confucianism during the Han period. Its application to the case of the Guangzhou black slaves thereby exposes a profound interpretive inconsistency within Confucian tradition, spawning questions about which paradigm was thought to more aptly apply at that time. Unlike environmental determinism, the paradigm of Sino-Confucian universalism militated against suspicions of the complete incorrigibility of all peoples situated beyond the pale of Chinese culture. Indeed, according to its transformative ideal, the great agent of Chinese culture was none other than the Confucian morally perfected man—the junzi, who through his vested power of virtue could easily elevate any of the various surrounding non-Chinese tribes above their barbarism simply by living briefly among them. As Dawson maintains, such “then is the high-minded theory behind Confucian attitudes to barbarians. It is just a question of time before all are absorbed into the Chinese world as a result of the transforming power of Confucian virtue.” As strange as it may seem, this latter-day practice of “converting the bowels”—“transubstantiating the intestines,” “transforming the innards,” or “changing the guts,” if you will—to which Zhu Yu refers is nothing more than a concretized and yet contorted or even perverse internalization—based on the practical realities that always attend slave-owning—of this basic ancient Chinese ideal.

In this process of “bodily as cultural” transformation, the reference to the slaves as “capable of being socialized” is also significant. The Chinese term rendered here as “socialization” is xu, which can literally mean “to husband, or raise, or rear” as in the same manner that one either husbands crops or raises livestock or rears children. There is an undercurrent of animality that
in fact pervades the entirety of this brief account provided by Zhu Yu. As J. J. L. Duyvendak was so quick to point out, the very terms delineating the gender of the slaves as male and female in the passage are the same as those traditionally affixed by the Chinese to animals or, more specifically, to cattle. This animalistic element, moreover, suggests some interesting cross-cultural and transtemporal connections. Writing in his fascinating study *The Mark of the Beast: Animality and Human Oppression*, the philosopher Mark S. Roberts, in detailing the invidious influence of the justifying theory of slavery as classically espoused by Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.), has noted that “the inferior slave may, in many respects, differ little from the domestic animal; Aristotle considers it a fact of nature that, to fulfill his or her potential, the slave must be cared for and dominated by his or her master, much like the household pet or the barnyard chickens.” Roberts further states, “This idea, though clearly tendentious, persisted in the Western conception of the slave’s status.” We might add, based on the evidence presented in the foregoing passage, that there is little reason for thinking of this notion as necessarily confined to the West. It would also seem fully applicable in the case of China in the eleventh century, thereby serving, to offer Roberts’s conclusion, “as a means of justifying the enslavement of humans—that is, confirming their utter dependence on their superiors—but also as a way of mitigating the immemorial merciless treatment of slaves.”

There is perhaps another, equally essentialist way in which the instance with which we are presented via Zhu Yu’s testimonial breaks with the Aristotelian paradigm. It also makes absolutely clear to us the fact that the wealthy citizens of Guangzhou who had acquired these foreign slaves did tend to think of them—however subliminally—as capable of being *transformed*, in the sense of *culturally elevated* by means of the husbandry to which they were subjected, if only—as is simultaneously indicated—to an extremely limited degree.

Certainly we can attribute one of the clearest statements on the transforming power of the paradigmatic moral agent to Master Kong (Kongzi) or Confucius (551–479 B.C.E.). In the following way he expresses this foundational premise through one of his pithy exchanges in the *Analects (Lunyu)*, the seminal inherited record of his sayings: “The Master desired to reside with the Nine Yi (Jiu Yi) [tribes of the east]. Someone said: ‘Live among peoples so uncivilized—why?’ The Master said: ‘Should a gentleman ever settle among them, what about them that is uncivilized could there thereafter be?’” This same message of the transformative cultural mastery that the Confucian nobleman deservedly exerts over all peoples less civilized than himself is conveyed by a subsequent passage from the *Analects*, which this time involves an
exchange between Confucius and a known interlocutor, his worldly disciple Zizhang:

Zizhang asked how a man should conduct himself in order to succeed everywhere. The Master said: “If you speak sincerely and trustworthily, and act honorably and reverently, then even if you are in the reaches of the Mân [tribes of the south] and the Mai [tribes of the north], you will succeed among them. But being insincere and untrustworthy in what you say, and dishonorable and irreverent in how you act, even though you are in your own township, are you likely to succeed? When standing, observe these principles [sincerity, trustworthiness, honorableness, and reverence] right there in front of you. When in your carriage, see them resting against the yoke. Then you will thereafter everywhere succeed.” Zizhang wrote down these principles on his sash.62

To be sure, throughout the classical canon associated with Confucianism and especially in a work as central as the Analects, we find the cultural superiority of what was to emerge as the Han people to all the distinct and often threatening groups that surrounded them repeatedly stressed and reinforced. “The Master said: ‘Even with their rulers, the Yi and the Di remain inferior to the Xia (Chinese) states without theirs.’ ”63 Thus, given the unequivocal precedents such as these embedded in the classical literature, even while they were very much anchored by the graphic language of bodily physiology and the imagery of plant, animal, and human husbandry, the much later Song-period motives for procedures such as “converting the bowels” through dietary means and facilitating the broader process of “socialization” were consistent with the past. We can and should see these motives as underpinning a still larger civilizing agenda on the part of the Chinese slave-masters. To call their methods ritualized acts may perhaps be to go too far, but there is no disputing their ultimate purpose behind their pursuit. The objective of the Chinese slavers, even if it was neither conscious nor ever overtly stated, was without question that of overcoming the savageness of the slaves through a magnanimous transmutation of them by means of the beneficial civilizing virtues of Chinese culture. It was no doubt a cultural imperialist vision. The slaves were to be lifted out of their natural states of savagery by being culturally overpowered; convictions of the slave-owners about the relatively low level to which the slaves might ever be raised neither undermined nor contravened the perceived necessity for the process.

Inasmuch as the thesis of Sinicization—that is, the successful imposition
of Chinese cultural dominion over all or most neighboring peoples—holds merit, we should be prepared and inclined to recognize the superiority of universalism over environmental determinism as the normative paradigm for cross-cultural interaction that underlay a preponderance of later Confucian thought. However, ultimately the most we can surmise from the evidence is that the two conflicting outlooks continued to coexist in a kind of dynamic and unresolved tension. Whereas the view that those unfortunates beyond the bounds of Chinese civilization could be transformed through the adoption of signature elements of ethnic Han culture was orthodoxy, as a view, universalism was not universally held. “Not all Chinese saw the matter this way,” Richard Smith sums up the situation concisely; there were those who “believed that biology and geography were destiny.”64 Yet, to suggest that these mutually contradicting premises amounted to a schism within the community of Confucian adherents is surely to overstate the case. A far more persuasive conclusion to draw is that individuals could be and often were proponents of universalism and environmental determinism by turns or even conterminously, that they essentially entertained both beliefs, at the same time, as valid. Indeed, if we are to judge by the foregoing passage, there is no indication that universalism ever threatened to supplant environmental determinism. On the one hand, Zhu Yu deems the slaves “capable of being socialized,” even if only to a certain point; on the other hand, they remain for him “incapable of [our] speech.” Thus, whereas semihumanity was perhaps fully available to them, full humanity was arguably not accessible to them at all.65 In judgments such as Zhu Yu’s there are no signs whatsoever that environmental determinism had yielded any substantial ground to universalism by Song times.

Furthermore, amid the undisguised discourse on otherness presented in the foregoing description of the Guangzhou black slaves, the term “raw” resonates powerfully. From the earliest times the Chinese have imputed many diffuse but curiously related associations to the idea of rawness. Among the more innocuous associations are the characteristics of being merely unseasoned or nonconversant or unfamiliar—all of which are traits that Westerners are inclined to identify with the reference to an individual as being “green.”66 However, specifically within the classic antipodal compound of “the raw and the cooked” (shengshu), the term “raw” unmistakably signifies, in a literal sense as well as in the abstract, “the uncultivated,” and thus early on it very specifically became a metaphor for the other. When applied to humans, as was frequently the case beginning in the imperial era, “raw” typically was interpreted as meaning the non-Han or non-Chinese and hence the “barbarian” in its most extreme and unadulterated form.67
Moreover, we have good reason to be skeptical of Zhu Yu's almost paternalistically derisive reference to the black slaves as consuming only raw food and to call its veracity into question. Much recent research undermines this assertion. As Wrangham has further opined concerning human food consumption, "We evolved to eat cooked foods." If we bolster this claim with the available evidence of controlled-fire use in such places as China and possibly even southern Europe as much as four hundred thousand years ago and Africa as much as one-half million years ago, it would seem highly unlikely that, even prior to their transport to and enslavement in Guangzhou, these blacks of the early second millennium of the Common Era would have subsisted exclusively on a diet that was outside the pale of the conventional practices of cooked food in which humanity at large had evolved to engage. Thus, we cannot easily accept the notion that cooked food was an alien concept to the black slaves, and perhaps that is not what we are even meant to accept. Much more readily acceptable is surely the idea that Chinese-style cookery and cuisine certainly were foreign to them. Also plausible and quite likely based only on hearsay is that the slaves, prior to or during their capture in their native habitats, had either been observed or thought to have been observed consuming some significant quotient of their diet raw—an idea that, by custom, was both alien and abhorrent to the Chinese. Especially if it was wholly invented by their captors, we can deem such an ascription as calculated to fully dehumanize—or, more properly, animalize—the slaves and thus thwart any chance of their emancipation in their new Chinese environment. We hardly need to be reminded that during this period in global history, so much before the time when frequent transcontinental contact would begin to become commonplace, people were willing to believe or at least entertain even the most prejudicial and outlandish things about people foreign to themselves. The Chinese were by no means immune to such willfully misanthropic misconceptions.

For these reasons, I have become persuaded that we are not intended to take Zhu Yu's reference to the blacks as consumers of "raw food" so much literally as we ought to regard it as imbued with a much deeper and subtler social meaning than it at first projects. In the spirit of one actually "being"—to whatever indeterminate extent—what one eats, Zhu Yu most probably made his remark for effect. After all, for Zhu Yu and his contemporaries, the consumption of the raw denoted savageness of a kind that was at the greatest remove from "Chinese-ness." It is imagery that resonates to similar effect for Chinese even to this day, for customarily, aside from fruit and its juices, the varied cuisines of China include almost nothing that is eaten raw; indeed, the Chinese may arguably surpass all other peoples in their stringency regarding
this culinary demand. Thus, even while it is not likely to have been an accurate statement, Zhu Yu’s remark that “they eat raw food” is far more than a simple distortion. In every sense it attributes utter otherness to the black slaves and therefore is fully suggestive of their remoteness—at least with their bowels in an unconverted state—from anything having to do with Chinese culture.

However, returning to the ostensible purpose of this chapter, it is no doubt Zhu Yu’s foregoing reference to the foreign slaves of Guangzhou as “black as ink” that would seem to leap nearly off the page in commanding our fullest attention and demanding the fullest explanation that we can muster. “Black as ink” is an attribution as definitive as it is unequivocal, but ironically, it is with this clear attribution of blackness that our search for the most plausible identity of Guangzhou’s foreign slaves only just begins.

One Statement of Color, Many Questions of Place

The main problem with Zhu Yu’s single ascription of blackness in Pingzhou Chats on Things Worthwhile is that its potential ethnographical specificity is so much undercut by its ethnological bankruptcy. My framing of the reference in such terms deserves some further explanation. As the historian Joanna Waley-Cohen has observed, the Chinese have historically often used the designation “black” to refer to slaves of Malay origin.69 Andaya further contends that “The Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Yijing, who visited Sriwijaya and Malayu in the late seventh century, made a distinction between the kunlun, whom he described as dark and curly-headed, from the fairer inhabitants of the other countries in Southeast Asia.”70 These observations are, in fact, well documented by the primary evidence, and we need look no further than the Old Tang History—the source that first apprises us of the ignominious fate of the Guangzhou governor Lu Yuanrui—to find corroboration: “From Champa [present-day eastern coastal Vietnam] southward, all are curly- or wavy-haired and black-bodied (heishen), and we comprehensively call them kunlun.”71 Evidence as incontrovertible as this raises the question whether such designations of blackness as applied by Zhu Yu and his contemporaries were meant to denote a genuine consciousness of racial difference—as we have customarily thought of and employed it72—or merely an observable capacity to differentiate skin color. It also raises the question of the degree to which these bases for differentiation—race and skin color—were at all distinguished at that time and in that place in the premodern world.

These issues notwithstanding, in applying the term “black” to Malays
and therefore possibly a wide range of other groups, we can be fairly certain that the Chinese did not intend for it to be interpreted as a racial marker or perhaps even a marker of difference in skin color as much as a kind of stereotyped moral-aesthetic disparagement based on perceived differences in *culture*. Hence, in the Malay case Chinese probably intended the term to denote revulsion at the cultural dissimilarities as well as at the ugliness of physical characteristics they considered inferior. Analogously, but probably with an equal emphasis on the moral as well as physical side of the cultural basis for distinction, natives of the Indianized state of Champa, in addition to be considered black, were also often referred to in the literature as *naked*, most probably in order to denote their immorality by failing to approach Chinese standards of modesty in dress.73

Furthermore, here as elsewhere, we cannot afford to ignore the dominant interpretive problem that belies so much of Zhu Yu's testimony throughout Pingzhou Chats on Things Worthwhile. Despite its vividness in this and numerous other instances, we cannot be certain whether the experience being related is direct or vicarious—that is, whether it is the recollection of the son Zhu Yu or the father Zhu Fu. The text—as is standard for literary Chinese—simply does not typically stipulate and thereby does not clarify this matter. Thus, in accounts such as this one of the black slaves of Guangzhou, in which we can assuredly know the identity of the narrator (Zhu Yu) but not that of the actual observer (either Zhu Fu or Zhu Yu), there is always the looming threat of duplicity. The possibility perpetually lingers that Zhu Yu as narrator has essentially recorded an occurrence he never directly witnessed and thus described—no matter how vividly—individuals he never actually saw.

In addition to the challenges posed by the question of the meaning behind the ascription of blackness and that of authenticity of narration, particularly in the case of the Guangzhou black slaves, we must navigate beyond yet a final potential pitfall of confusion by accounting for the fact that whereas all Malays were potentially *kunlun*, not all *kunlun* were Malays. Therefore, in seeking a satisfactory solution to the real identity of the specific black slaves Zhu Yu describes to us, we are forced by necessity to exploit some other variable than skin color; while it is a necessary one, skin color alone is not a sufficient parameter for our exploration, and any information we seek to deduce from that variable alone will remain inconclusive. Thus, toward this purpose of expanding the range of inquiry, we are assisted by the fact that Zhu Yu has applied the qualifier *kunlun* to the captive slaves, and we are best served by interpreting this qualifier in terms of its original meaning as a place-name and using it as a guidepost to further our inquiry. In so doing, we are thus
compelled to redirect ourselves away from the issue of melanin content toward that of geography, to modify our original quest to determine who the black slaves were to one of discovering their geographical origin. Only in finding a solution to the latter question will an unassailable answer to the former be forthcoming.

On the most fundamental level, we should expect to have to reorient ourselves and redirect our investigation in this way. Inasmuch as we are willing to regard place of origin as a constituent of cultural identity, to ask where these slaves came from is tantamount to asking who they were. Moreover, few of us today would dispute the fact that—given the technological impediments to worldwide travel that prevailed in the past—place, without question, played a substantially larger role in determining cultural identity in the eleventh century than it does now. For our ancestors, who traveled little in comparison to most of us, place was simply a much larger part of cultural and therefore ethnic definition. Consequently, our most pressing need in determining at least one of the two categories of “foreign slave” to which Zhu Yu refers is that of locating Kunlun. Where then was this place?

In attempting to delimit the geographical possibilities for Kunlun, which—despite its indeterminacy—is in this context incontestably a place-name, we can, of course, appeal to its own terminological origin, but in doing so we immediately find that Kunlun is a name for many locations. Thus, in order to avoid potential confusion, we need to proceed in a manner that again stresses the above observation that blackness is not wholly irrelevant to our search. We will be best served by isolating and briefly examining the first reference that we can to Kunlun as adjectivally descriptive of “black.”

Kunlun as a signifier for blackness first appears in a quite early source, the jinshu (History of the Jin Dynasty), which is the official historical record of the dynasty that spanned the years 265 to 420 C.E. In that work, in the arranged biography (liezhuan) for Empress Li (“Xiao Wu Wen Li Taihou”), is the following remarkably revealing passage: “When the future Empress Li of Jin first entered the palace as a concubine, she used to work in the weaving workshop. Given that she was tall in stature and her complexion was dark, the [other] concubines called her Kunlun [or kunlun]. Alarmed by this, the ministers referred to her [instead] as ‘precious,’ . . . and she subsequently gave birth to Emperor Xiao Wu [r. 373–96].” My translation of the foregoing Chinese as “dark” derives from the same graph—bei—that is ordinarily translated in modern parlance as “black.” However, in this instance I have opted to render the term as “dark,” for the latter concept of blackness—that is, understood fully in the non-Chinese ethnic sense—clearly was not what the compilers of
this Chinese chronicle had intended. Nonetheless, the fact remains indisputable that Chinese as early as the fourth century of the Common Era already used *kunlun* to signify any and every coloration of the skin with a darkness that, in their eyes, verged on blackness. We know this because, thereafter, the use of *kunlun* to signify black persons appears widely in the literature of the succeeding Tang dynasty. However, ironically, we cannot use a single one of these incidences to appreciably advance our capacity for assigning a definite location to Kunlun as a place of origin for a black or *kunlun* people. Indeed, scholars made hardly any progress in this enterprise before the beginning of the twentieth century, and it has remained a complicated, highly speculative, and less than perfectly informed exercise in scholarly hypothesis to this day.

Fortunately, however, one highly able scholar was up to the task, and he has contributed greatly to the advancement of our understanding today by having already performed much of the guesswork required in locating the mysterious home of the *kunlun* slaves. Writing in 1930, in his still highly valuable and undeniably absorbing article “The Importation of Negro Slaves to China under the T’ang Dynasty (A.D. 618–907),” Chang Hsing-lang (henceforth Zhang Xinglang) devoted himself fully to the goal of isolating the most probable homeland of the *kunlun* slaves. Pursuing a basically lexicographical and exegetical approach to the issue, Zhang Xinglang drew upon an extensive battery of source materials. He also aided his own efforts by satisfactorily eliminating several recurrent but false possibilities. For example, he reasoned on persuasive grounds that, while they were most often enslaved and delivered into Chinese hands by Arabs—doubtless via the conduit of the Melakan (Malaccan) Strait and its surrounding islands—the *kunlun* slaves were not (as was often supposed) natives of any part of Arabia.

The evidence that is suggestive of the true place of origin of the *kunlun* slaves is varied and wide-ranging but strongest from the linguistic standpoint. Zhang Xinglang ingeniously linked two separate and independently appearing phonetic terms, *Sengzhi* and *Cengqi*—the first of which is found in a Tang official literary source and the latter in a Song nonofficial literary source—to the Latinized Arabic term *Zinj* (also *Zenji, Zanzi, Zanghi,* or Duyvendak’s *Zanggi*), which is found in the early sixth-century treatise *Topographia Christiana* by the likely Nestorian Christian author Cosmas (fl. ca. 535–47). On this basis and also by drawing upon substantial corroborating evidence, Zhang convincingly determined that the principal place of origin of the *kunlun* slaves of African derivation was the island of Zanzibar, just off the East African coast and contiguous with and now incorporated into the modern nation-state of Tanzania. However, as Zhang points out, the Arabs
applied the name Zanzibar (meaning “Region of the Blacks”) to the whole area extending south of the Juba River down to Cape Delgado—a full eleven degrees south of the equator—an expanse that, as the scholars Friedrich Hirth and W. W. Rockhill pointed out at the turn of the twentieth century, was called Cengba by Zhao Rugua at the beginning of the thirteenth century. What is more, Hirth and Rockhill interpreted the region that emerged in Chinese travel literature as Kunlun sengzhi or Kunlun cengqi as additionally having incorporated the continental coastline extending significantly to the south of Zanzibar proper—including the island of Pemba and possibly even that of Madagascar (see Map 2)—and to be fair, only in relatively recent times has our own modern conception of Zanzibar become restricted solely to the island of Zanzibar proper. Furthermore, Zhang Xinglang provocatively suggested that it is also not unreasonable to assume that black slaves were acquired and ferried eventually into China from the much larger island of Madagascar to the southeast.

Thus, through reasonable speculation, Zhang Xinglang was drawn inexorably to the conclusion that the term kunlun—especially when used as a prefix to modify either of the given geographical terms Sengzhi or Cengqi—probably means “black,” being almost certainly a Chinese phonetic reiterative qualifier that approximates or adumbrates either the Arabic or the Persian. Owing largely to the pioneering efforts of Zhang Xinglang in the early decades of the twentieth century, we therefore have little reason to doubt that the kunlun slaves that Zhu Yu describes as being the captive inhabitants of eleventh-century Guangzhou were indeed of African extraction and that they had been extracted from a fairly circumscribed region along the eastern side of the African continent.

Peripheral from the First

My primary purpose in this chapter has been to illuminate as much as possible a solitary shadowy aspect of the complex and variegated nature of premodern intercultural relations between eleventh-century Chinese localized to the city of Guangzhou and a small captive population of peoples of almost certain African origin. Manifold reasons have spurred this attempt, but all have been directed toward the long-accepted compensatory historical objective of advancing the cause of a marginal history such that it becomes more central and thus more readily available to apprehension by a larger pool of objective observers. To revisit the impetus with which I began, on the one hand, it is
justifiable that we should be mindful of the prehistoric foundations for slavery in China and respectful of the fact that countless numbers of Chinese have fallen and still will fall victim to this deplorable institution. On the other hand, our understanding of slavery in China will simply remain interminably impoverished if we persist—in a manner that is still largely the case, even among sinological scholars—in viewing it as a totally endogenous phenomenon, that is, one in which Chinese exclusively enslaved either other Chinese or non-Chinese who were either native or resided contiguously to China. To break with this myopic approach to the issue can only move us closer to more expansive discoveries and disclosures. Widening our own thresholds for enhanced receptivity to the possibilities can only help us to construe slavery in China less narrowly and thus more in the fluid manner that the Chinese themselves have for centuries.

To the extent that it has succeeded, this study yielded some additional, collateral revelations. Surely we must classify several of these revelations under the general rubric of microhistory. Accounting for the discovery of an abundance of black slaves in eleventh-century Guangzhou unquestionably casts a more revealing light on a previously unexplored and idiosyncratic aspect of that noteworthy Chinese city’s already distinctive history. Even these preliminary findings should incline us to rank the revelation of the existence of Guangzhou’s black slaves on a par with the better known of the heretofore “forgotten” Chinese urban-based subcommunities. Among the more noteworthy of these “lost” ghettoized enclaves are the fledgling Jewish community that flourished by as early as the tenth century in Kaifeng and the vestigial community of converted Catholic Christians that survived well into the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries in Hangzhou. We cannot deny that the matter of the black slaves of Guangzhou is by far the least completely documented of these examples—with the known and potential evidence for “fleshing out” the story being fragmentary in almost every respect. However, whether we choose to view it as a discovery with significant implications for Chinese or for world history, neither can we deny that the case of the eleventh-century black slaves of Guangzhou is, in every measure, the equal of the other two in importance.

However, ultimately, the most compelling lessons we are meant to draw from the curious case of the black slaves of eleventh-century Guangzhou are macrohistorical. We can certainly derive knowledge of macrohistorical significance by addressing the whole matter of the perceptible transformation in the Chinese perceptions of the blacks. Prior to the Song period, within the literary tradition of the Tang Dynasty and its conventions for the fictional short
story, a distinctly different *kunlun* slave had emerged. As Philip Snow details, the *kunlun* in these stories had command of Chinese language, subscribed to Chinese protocols of conduct, and enjoyed the affectionate respect of their Chinese masters. Like their later Song-period counterparts, the *kunlun* servants in these Tang-period literary accounts were uncommonly strong. However, in antipodal contrast to those who were to come after them, the *kunlun* of the Tang tales were courageous, resourceful, and skilled—especially when confronting situations requiring facility in martial arts for the purpose of the defense of either their owners or themselves. Writes Snow, “It seems clear from the stories that these few uprooted African slaves, strong, a little frightening, utterly mysterious, excited in Chinese minds a mixture of admiration and awe.”

The case of the fictional *kunlun* of the Tang era seems to have represented one of—to cite the proverb—“that which is seldom seen being that at which people marvel much.” As Snow also astutely observes, within a few centuries, when the *kunlun* were no longer the occasionally central subjects of fiction and had instead become the peripheral and spottily mentioned objects of the stark historical record, the image of them in Chinese eyes changed dramatically. Whereas they were once endowed with a savage and ethereal nobility that made them heroic in the fiction of the Tang, the *kunlun*, at least as they appear in the Song’s Pingzhou Chats on Things Worthwhile, have devolved into transplanted and decrepit misfits, hopelessly trapped and ill-equipped in their alien Chinese surroundings even for their own independent survival. As a result the attitudes manifested toward them shifted correspondingly away from respect toward disgust, away from wonder toward loathing. How are we to account for this precipitous degradation in the Chinese image of the black slaves in the passage from Tang to Song? Likening the circumstances for the blacks in China to the flourishing of the slave trade and the expansion of the slave market in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe, Snow contends that Chinese impressions of the *kunlun* slaves began to sour as soon as they—through no fault of their own—became numerous enough to be directly observed on a daily basis by commoners. That is to say, once they became widely observed in their state of bondage by those who by and large were not their owners, the slaves became targets of scorn and contempt. Of course, in contrast to the continentwide phenomenon of slavery that unfolded in Enlightenment-era Europe, the masses of *kunlun* slaves of Song-period China appear to have been restricted almost exclusively to a single port city and were not by any means dispersed throughout the empire. Still, if we are to judge from the record we possess by the hand of Zhu Yu, the unfiltered daily
exposure of the slaves—in their confined and compromised positions—to the
general populace of Guangzhou was likely a factor of sufficient potency to
nourish the tragically unfavorable impressions of them that would, over time,
only grow.

However, there is still at least one additional question from which, upon
deliberation, we can expect to draw macrohistorical insight of consequen­
tial significance, and we would certainly be remiss not to try to do so. This
question involves the whole matter of whether the slaveholders—in this case
eleventh-century Chinese—regarded their African slaves more as property or
as persons. One can, of course, opt for being simply dismissive and challenge
whether this was in fact a valid question—one that even arose in any of the
various mentalities reflective of the eleventh-century world. Our condition as
moderns living in the aftermath of the demise of institutionalized New World
slavery inclines us to think of this question as perennial. In truth, however, the
“property versus persons” debate is one of fairly late emergence; it is, moreover,
an especially peculiar product of the nineteenth-century American experience
with slavery that does not seem to have emerged anywhere else at that time.

Indeed, there is little evidence to suggest that the Western ancients ever
thought of their slaves as anything other than property and persons. That is
to say, even though the slaves were stripped of their humanity, their funda­
mental humanness was not denied to them. Thus, the question of whether
their slaves were actually human does not seem to have arisen for the ancients
as a legitimate question, as it most certainly did arise within the context of
the New World and especially for the American proponents of slavery. Clas­
sically, humanness was not at stake despite the apparent universal preference,
evolved from at least the time of the ancient Greeks forward, for enslaving
foreigners—those who were thought of as other than oneself and on some
level barbarous. Nor was it in question despite the language of “natural slav­
ery” developed and propounded by Aristotle that often associates but never
quite fully identifies slaves with beasts.

These circumstances notwithstanding and without being simply dismis­
sive outright, one might still make a credible case for the validity of the “prop­
erty versus persons” question in Asia generally and in China in particular. In his
impressive effort at the archaeological-sociological reconstitution of Chinese
slavery as it was anciently conceived and practiced, Robin Yates has incisively
commented on the definition of indigenous slaves as property (cai or caiwu) as
a fairly late-arising notion, datable by its appearance only in Tang-period and
subsequent sources to the mid-imperial age. Yet, for untold centuries prior
to that, while certainly regarded as property precisely because they were con-
Strued as “dominated non-persons,” slaves were also regarded as “much more than property,” Yates persuasively contends. Moreover, to be sure, throughout its tremendously long history and without interruption, traditional China was undeniably a relentlessly authoritarian, if not altogether despotic, setting in which the instances of what the poet Robert Burns (1759–96) famously called “man’s inhumanity to man” were surely commonplace enough by far to be regarded as normative. Nevertheless, in traditional China’s defense, these daily cruelties of life probably did not surpass those that occurred in other corners of the eleventh-century world in terms of their frequency. It is merely the case that, as in other areas of human activity, the inhumanity meted out in traditional China doubtless seems to exceed that occurring elsewhere only by dint of the number of accounts of it that have been committed to writing and thus preserved as records of a grievous kind for posterity.

In his groundbreaking study of the inception of chattel slavery in China, underscoring the legal constraints on the rights of an owner to kill his slave, Edwin Pulleyblank contends, “The Chinese did not draw the logical conclusion that if a slave was property he was a ‘thing’ and not a human being.” However, Pulleyblank’s deliberations on the matter pertain exclusively to the well-established, pervasive, and enduring phenomenon of the Chinese enslavement of other Chinese. Therefore, on the crucial question of whether these Chinese masters regarded the black slaves in their midst as human beings or mere chattel, we confront a conundrum.

Perhaps it is possible to extrapolate something of what the Chinese circumstances of the black slaves were like through an exercise in speculative triangulation. At this point in the history of their bondage the slaves were, after all, yet another commodity imported into the country through Guangzhou, its paramount seaport and port of trade, by the Arabs. The history of medieval Arab slave dealings is complex and only imperfectly understood. However, we do know that the Islamic harem system was, as the trailblazing historian of art and culture Jacob Burckhardt (1818–97) observed, “inconceivable without eunuchs and black servants,” the latter of whom were “much better off . . . than on the former American plantations” and were “treated like children of the house and . . . far above the rank of their Arab fellow house servants, the ‘chadams.’” Hardly out of the question is that there was a certain degree of transference between the Arab slave traders and their Chinese customers in the treatment of the slaves who found their way to China. Such need not be, out of hand, an outrageous assumption. However, it is complicated yet again by our utter lack of knowledge beyond guesswork regarding how black slaves in China, such as those confined to Guangzhou, were predominantly used. On
the one hand, Zhu Yu's testimonial expressing their capacity only to respond
to but not master Chinese speech militates against Arab analog, suggesting
that the slaves could not conceivably have been employed domestically within
the households of their masters. However, on the other hand, their legendary
matchless strength notwithstanding, the conspicuous deployment of the
black slaves for large projects in the construction of public works is also highly
doubtful because, as the institutional historian Lien-sheng Yang was to estab-
lish, as opposed to previous ages when combinations of corveé, convict, and
some slave labor were used, "[u]nder the [Song] dynasty, most of the public
works were accomplished with military labor."95

Transference in essentialist values between such disparate contexts as the
twelfth-century Arab states, influenced as they were by comparatively egalitar-
ian Islam, and the unified and hierarchical Confucian-dominated empire of
the same time period was rarely if ever complete or totalistic, and we therefore
must acknowledge the inescapable possibility that the Guangzhou Chinese
slaveholders viewed the black slaves who came into their possession as nothing
more than property. Further reinforcing this view is the fact that in a culture
that remains arguably more attached to and invested in the written word than
any other, no Chinese document that is strongly expressive of the contrary
outlook has yet been discovered. As C. Martin Wilbur was among the first
scholars to detail, the liberation or manumission of endogenous or native Chi-
nese slaves, either by government edict or by private contract, has a long his-
tory in China that dates back at least to the early Han Dynasty—that is, the
late third century B.C.E.96 Nevertheless, ironically, in a culture renowned for
the recording of very nearly everything—especially any occurrence verging on
the unusual or the bizarre—no Chinese record of manumission of an expressly
black slave has yet come forth97; no jottings, however brief or cursory, by a
Chinese owner pondering over and then rendering the rare kindness of libera-
tion unto his private black slave have yet been found. Indeed, the Guangzhou
masters of the black slaves may well never have even consciously considered
demonstrating such an act of magnanimity, and if we strive for honest objec-
tivity with respect to the issue and avoid the ahistorical trap of trying to hold
yet another set of ancients accountable to our modern standards, then we can
hardly fault them—in their time—for having viewed the bondage to which
they subjected their slaves as completely reflective of the naturally hierarchical
and expected order of things. In their time and for some considerable time
thereafter, precedent, after all, was overwhelmingly on the side of the outlook
of the Chinese masters. To put it another way, as the classicist Page duBois has
observed in her study of slavery among the ancient Greeks, with astounding
but unintended pertinence to the Chinese situation, "Of course slavery still exists in some places in the world, and it has been a feature of human history for much longer than has abolition."\textsuperscript{98}

On the other hand, are we justified in interpreting the inconclusive nature of so much of the speculative data just encountered entirely in the negative? How are we meant to interpret the data that are so specifically described as to be almost prescriptive, including practices such as "converting the bowels"? Even if something less than a rite, "converting the bowels" seems to have been a convention rendered unto the slaves as if it were some kind of civilizing medicinal cure. Toxic but still salubrious, it seems to have been regarded as a kind of purgative procedure—not entirely unlike our prevailing conception of the modern-day example of chemotherapy. Was it not the case that the Chinese owners of the black slaves subjected them to this treatment in the spirit and with the conviction of the adage that "what does not kill will make one stronger"? Are we to think of this procedure as entirely dictated only by practical concerns and nothing more? Were there perhaps other such "procedures of transformation" that Guangzhou's black slaves were expected to undergo in captivity and to which they were summarily subjected? Beyond its utilitarian goal, was there any larger \textit{intent} behind the actual \textit{content} of these meticulous and perhaps culturally prescribed efforts at "socialization"? Aside from the insistence on the conversion of their bowels, are we to believe that the overall process consisted of nothing more elevated than beatings and floggings so that the black slaves should learn to understand and heed the directives of their Chinese masters? Perhaps the Chinese masters were disposed to recognize some fundamental humanness in their black slaves after all. Thus, given what we can surmise as having been the generally prevailing world outlook for that time, the attitudes of these Chinese slavers might have been less exceptional than we were originally inclined to think.

The foregoing questions are unabashedly rhetorical, and in posing them, my modest aim has been mostly that of identifying the array of impediments that now obstruct and will likely continue to obscure our full apprehension of the black slaves of eleventh-century Guangzhou. However, it may very well be the case that nothing poses a more daunting impediment to our apprehension of our black subjects than our mental resistance to the reality of their existence, a resistance matched perhaps only by the total alterity that must have pervaded their lives of bondage once transported into their Chinese environs. In sum, factors such as the slaves' condition of otherness, their inhabitance of the extreme mental periphery, and their existence outside the sanctioned pale of Chinese cultural life—never equipped for or permitted access, not to men-
tion integration or assimilation, into its social matrices—all conspire to obfuscate our clearest perception of them. These factors have all led to our inability to "see" the slaves, no doubt even to a more impaired degree than was the case for their owners of that time. Indeed, the anthropologist James L. Watson and others have categorized the practice of slavery in China as exemplifying a formidably "closed" rather than "open" system—typified by the most radical separation of slaver and enslaved. In contrast to those at other times and in other places who engaged in a more "open" mode of slavery, the Chinese doubtless could never conceive of the black slaves, even if liberated, ever fully participating in Chinese cultural life, and similarly they must have found it unimaginable that blacks would ever become part of their kinship groups. Indeed, as we can extrapolate from the descriptions of their servitude in the primary accounts considered, even more so for the black slaves of Guangzhou in the eleventh century than for native Chinese slaves of any period, the system was utterly and profoundly closed.

While we may be doomed eternally to debate most of the many interpretive issues pertaining to the circumstances of the eleventh-century black slaves of Guangzhou, at least one issue is surely beyond dispute. We must consign all notions of their "benign" or "benevolent" captivity to this latter category of the nondebatable, and in my foregoing deliberations I have consciously avoided implying in the least that the medieval and/or early modern enslavement of blacks by Chinese was in any way less oppressive, less demeaning, or less virulent than its Western counterparts—with specific reference to the form of the institution as it existed in the late eighteenth- and early to mid-nineteenth-century United States. Slavery is at all times and in all places a condition for which we should be extremely loath to recognize degrees or gradations.

The unanticipated revelation that black slaves—whom we can now confidently accept as having been African—once lived, toiled, and died on Chinese soil is nothing less than astonishing. Moreover, this discovery informs us every bit as much as it shocks us, for it apprises us of yet another of the dark and tragic intersections between early world interstate commerce and the social construction of enslavement. Consequently, the historian in each of us compels and obligates us to uncover as much about the black slaves of Guangzhou as we can. However, not even the compulsions of the historian can diminish the fact that much mystery will likely always continue to attend the Guangzhou black slaves. Given the slew of formidable, if not altogether insurmountable, hurdles we confront in interpreting their experience—notwithstanding the paltry documentary evidence we now possess or, with luck, will perhaps...
uncover in the future—these black slaves of China are likely to remain forever shrouded in ways that prevent us from ever apprehending anything close to their perfect crystalline image.

Even if we are destined inexorably to return to the same complex of issues, we nonetheless find that our relationship across time with the black slaves of eleventh-century Guangzhou has progressed, and it has done so in ways that make their reality all the more captivating, arresting, and enduring. No longer will the question of whether the story of these slaves constitutes a particularly new story of slavery be the consummate focus of our inquiries, for herein there is much agreement and little argument: we can hardly dispute that it is a new story. Instead, the true question of questions that we will henceforth continually confront in our every charged but imperfect encounter with these voiceless black slaves of middle-period China is surely whether their poignant story constitutes, in any substantive way, a different tale of slavery. We can only hope that it is a question to which firm answers yet will be revealed.
CHAPTER THREE

To the End of the Western Sea

We need not doubt that the customary notion of the major ancient cultures of the globe as hermetically isolated—as having been entirely landlocked and having languished for centuries in shadowy separation and occlusion from one another—is fast eroding. Moreover, the complementary assumption that peoples innately foreign to one another were able only in relatively recent times to surmount the barriers of mountains and seas separating them has also become increasingly suspect—something that we as moderns subject to attack in ways that make it difficult to sustain. Both paradigms seem destined for almost unnoticed obsolescence. Especially for the scholarly, the near-daily discoveries of contemporary archaeology have contributed liberally to the expanding record of profoundly interactive, if irregular, contact between cultures formerly thought of as self-contained and inert. Also, from a layman's perspective, equally crucial in our widening estrangement from this concept of total continental insularity is the simple fact that with each passing day it becomes inexorably more foreign to everyday experience. The modern conveniences of rapid transcontinental travel and near-instantaneous communication that we take for granted are both the cause and the result of an acceleration in the erosion of this traditional view—formerly held by generation upon countless generation—of continents and their peoples in impermeable states of static and parochial suspension.

Without positing an argument for technological determinism, the steady advance of technological progress has nonetheless played a key role in these developments. Indeed, the sheer speed with which we now travel and communicate is perhaps preeminently indicative of this altered perspective that renders routine the coverage, for instance, of distances once regarded as un-
fathomable. As our capabilities are ever enhanced through advances in technology, we have become relentlessly inured to the once-commonplace and universal circumstances of the human condition—such as the impassability, by any means, of the globe’s great distances—that were once presumed unalterable. This accentuated pace at which we live insidiously exerts more extreme sway over our consciousnesses than we often even realize. Unlike the physically dispersed but largely confined peoples of the past, we now confront the risk of psychic confinement by our contemporary states of ever-advancing technological progress. In a world in which transcontinental travel occurs almost without thought, we daily advance closer to an insulated obliviousness to the reality that it is geography—and neither race nor class nor political economy—that remains the most elemental divider of humankind. After all, the very idea of ethnic separateness primordially implied geographical separation. To be sure, the same distances that once posed unbridgeable galactic gulfs for our forebears present only momentary hurdles for us, as we routinely surmount them by air within a few hours or send messages almost instantaneously from our side of the globe to the other. These and similar experiences have indeed fostered linkages that have assuredly led to a “shrinking” of our world. However, we should not allow them to extend to us the license of regarding the constrictions that once confined our ancestors to their largely landlocked states as either unreal for them or no longer relevant to our times.

This steady assault on the presumption of ancient cultures in impermeable isolation is, of course, in many respects a positive development, if only because of our continual rediscovery that it is often false. Moreover, we are now even witnessing a confluence of what were formerly the scholarly and lay causalities behind this shift in outlook. With nearly each passing day we unearth the unexpected evidence of human contact between disparate cultures that were heretofore thought to be unfathomably separated by space and occasionally time. Indeed, so frequently do these revelations of cross-cultural contact between early peoples now emerge as news items for popular consumption that they no longer shock or startle us. This situation is, on balance, a good one, for if the isolationist premise were to hold invariantly and without challenge or deviation, then this book could not have been written. However, in sometimes unfortunate ways, our experience of a “shrinking” world is as slyly undermining as it is empowering, for it can also engender an almost willful forgetfulness of past realities that is strewn with many habituated pitfalls. Among the most dangerous and unforgivable of these traps of habit is the egregious proclivity of taking the thesis of total isolationism to a kind of illogical extreme. There is a tendency of some to transpose the “small world getting smaller” mentality of
our times anachronistically onto the minds and achievements of our forebears, the proclivity to make free-flowing contact and interchange between peoples of widely dispersed regions and continents necessarily but unreflectively an operative condition of all past times everywhere. Such a stance risks the irredeemable mistake of rendering the world, to coin the current phraseology, as "flat" for our ancestors as it has become for us. It thus becomes a trap by which the unmindful are repeatedly ensnared.

In this connection, a proliferation of a certain strain of scholarship has emerged of late to abet this transition in mindset from the conventional premise of "everywhere in isolation" to a kind of hypothesis of whole-world convergence. Focusing on China in particular, we can safely observe that no recent production by any writer has better exemplified the damaging aspects of tendency to "forget" history or, perhaps better put, to relegate it to the whimsy of promoting the fantasy of a premodern globalism than that of Gavin Menzies.\(^1\) His books—especially *1421: The Year China Discovered the World*—serve as prime examples of a willful and excessive imputation of contemporary motives and capabilities back onto the actors of the past.

My own objections to such scholarship as Menzies's are far too numerous to itemize here. Suffice it to say that, the unfounded nature of its conclusions notwithstanding, little could be more reprehensible than the overall depreciatory effect of such scholarship, for it ironically achieves what I think of as being the polar opposite of what its authors intend. Instead of crediting the either unknown or greatly underappreciated accomplishments of the past actors of world history it chronicles, the recklessly unfounded output of Menzies and others tends only to trivialize them. Whether intended literally or as figurative illustrations, the claims of these authors that their subjects were in the forefront of the "discovery of everywhere" do far more harm than good. Emanating as they do in large part from ascribing our progressively advancing circumstances of the present, whether in the forms of motives or technologies, back onto the past, such claims as these are in fact pernicious. In addition to whatever distortions and falsehoods they perpetuate, these rash and inadequately defended theories of pancontinental contact unfairly diminish the accomplishments of the few who actually did succeed in traveling so far, and they impugn the struggles of the many who—upon death—fell short in trying. The result is counterfactual history in the most pernicious and injurious sense.
Antecedents to an Overshadowed Moment

By recognizing the hazards of viewing past possibilities too much in terms of what is presently possible we stand only to profit, for the failure to do so is as fruitless as it is misguided. However, when turning to the matter of the earliest Chinese apprehension of Africa, we cannot deny finding ourselves today engaged in struggles that are less concerned with conquering geographical than historical distance, for yet another byproduct of the “shrinking world” thesis has been its effect of reinforcing what for most of us is the already deeply ingrained idea of an ever-receding past. Despite the eternal optimism of the well-intentioned archaeologist, our knowledge of the long aftermath of China and Africa’s mutual discovery will likely always dwarf whatever we might conceivably learn about the historical movement toward discovery’s threshold. Moreover, given the fact that this aftermath, this period of several centuries in the wake of that discovery, has until recently constituted hardly more than a strange and unfortunate centuries-long exercise in misapprehension and misunderstanding in both directions, we must also guard against this largely perverse legacy of encounter coloring whatever we can glean about its prelude and initial phase.

I have already contended that bias of perspective inherently attends any installment in the telling of this story of two distinct peoples—Chinese and Africans—entering into mutual awareness for the first time. Yet, the importance of this crucial observation to our every interpretation of these occasions of discovery after millennia spent in total ignorance of each other’s very existence is so difficult to overstress that it invites still further adumbration. It may well be true that a preferred standpoint of reference must be selected—a side must be chosen—whenever seeking to present the history of interaction between any two discrete peoples; given all that we have in the way of documentation, we have found that we must credit China with subjecting Africa to a gradual unveiling, exposing the proverbial “dark continent” to a revealing light, and not vice versa. This favoring or privileging of the Chinese vantage point results not at all from a factor such as great droves of Chinese having set foot on African soil well before Africans were ever received in China. All that we have thus far learned, climaxing with our window on the experience of the Guangzhou black slaves, has served to demonstrate that such was categorically not the case and that, in fact, the reverse was truer. Instead, a wholly different contingency forces this choice for the Chinese side. It is one that we are impelled to make for no other reason than because it was select members of China’s citizenry—and not Africa’s—who, through the serendipitous
combination of their imaginations, experiences, and literacy, were capable of leaving behind written records of this protracted event, which—to our great fortune—they did.

Still, even while they assuredly exist for the centuries that have thus far preoccupied our attention, the Chinese records that either illumine or merely imagine Africa, not to mention those referring to Africans themselves in their native place, are rare in the extreme. For longer than we might ever have expected, the unveiling process—whereby Chinese became privy to Africa’s existence as a place apart from its peoples—was conducted only indirectly, largely through intermediaries such as the Arabs, who are known to have ensconced themselves along the continent’s eastern coastline and its offshore islands as early as the tenth century. However, based on extant textual evidence, we are truly challenged to find mention of any definite place on the African continent in a Chinese source prior to the mid-ninth century C.E. Nonetheless, for a culture so avidly committed to the documentary description of the exotic as was traditional China’s, such mention is perhaps to be anticipated eventually. Scholars beginning at least with J. J. L. Duyvendak have regarded the eclectic text Youyang zazu (Youyang Mountain Miscellanies) by the eccentrically prolific Tang author Duan Chengshi (d. 863) as probably the first work explicitly to name and proffer “definite information . . . on the countries beyond India”—that is to say, on an African location. In Youyang Mountain Miscellanies reference is made to a site called Bobali, which is now assumed to have been Berbera, or what is today the greater part of the general coastline of Somalia. As Duan Chengshi, the author of this initial record, relates:

The country of Bobali lies in the southwestern seas. Its inhabitants eat nothing of the five grains but consume only meat. They often pierce the veins of cattle with needles, and draw forth the blood, which they drink raw, intermixed with milk. They wear no clothes—except for covering themselves below the loins with sheepskins. Their women are without disease and chaste. The men kidnap the women from one another, and whenever they chance to sell them to foreign merchants, they procure several times their value.

The land produces only ivory and ambergris. Should Persian (Bosi) merchants desire to enter this country, they amass several thousand men around them by presenting them with strips of cloth. All, whether young or old, draw blood in the swearing of an oath, and only then will they trade in their ivory and ambergris.

Since ancient times, they have not been subjugated by any for-
eign country. In war, they use elephant tusks and ribs and the horns of wild buffalo to make spears and, donning [such] armored clothing [as breastplates], they sport bows and arrows. Yet, even though they possess 200,000 foot-soldiers, the Arabs still make frequent raids upon them.6

We know that Duan Chengshi could not conceivably have had firsthand experience of Bobali, and yet we correspondingly have no way of definitely discerning or tracing what the source of his information was or how he came by it, though long-standing theories abound.7 Some elements in his account, such as the “200,000 foot-soldiers,” are clearly fictive and hyperbolic. However, Duan Chengshi's brief notice exhibits just enough of a foundation in fact for us to accept his description of Bobali or Berbera as at least genuinely presented and imbued with some measure of historical substance. We need not, therefore, reject it outright as mere figment or fanciful digression; nor would we be especially well served by doing so. Thus, taken as such, Duan Chengshi's report of the mid-ninth century in all probability represents the first piece of writing in Chinese literature to describe conditions as they contemporaneously existed in an African country.

However, this first mental “sighting” of Berbera is, interestingly, followed by at least one other of note. This same exotic land—this time called the alternative Bipaluo—is also the subject of a subsequent, slightly more extensive account of the early thirteenth century. This account is contained in a source that we have already encountered, Description of Foreign Peoples by Zhao Rugua, wherein the author writes:

The country of Bipaluo is comprised of four cities, with the rest of its people settled in villages, where they feud with one another for supremacy. [As Muslims,] the city-dwellers pray to Heaven but not to Buddha.

The country produces camels and sheep in great numbers, and the people thus consume camel meat and milk as well as baked cakes. The country produces ambergris and large elephant and rhinoceros tusks. Some elephant tusks exceed a hundred catties; some rhinoceros tusks surpass ten. The land is also abundant in putchuck, liquid storax gum, myrrh, and tortoise-shell of extreme thickness, for which foreigners all flock to buy. Furthermore, there exists the camel-crane (ostrich), which measures at the crown six or seven feet; it is winged and can fly but not to any great height.

Among the four-legged beasts is the giraffe (cula), which resembles
a camel in shape, an ox in size, and is yellow in color. Its front legs are five feet long, whereas its hind legs are only three feet in length. Its head towers, and turned upward; its skin is an inch thick. There is also a mule with bay, black, and white stripes girdling its body. Both being variations of the camel, these animals wander about the mountain wilds. Being good at hunting, the people of Bupaluo, according to the seasons, take these beasts with poisoned arrows.\(^8\)

Curiously, even while it is more detailed, Zhao Rugua’s description of Berbera is both more and less replete than Duan Chengshi’s. To be sure, Zhao provides us a more thorough depiction of the copious range of products of this country that was vaguely located along what is now the Somali coast. That he should foremost supply us with an inventory of Berbera’s marketable goods is unsurprising, for—as we have already learned—such conforms entirely to what were his functional interests. After all, we do know that in 1224-25 Zhao served not only as Quanzhou’s trade superintendent but also as the port’s prefect and Southern Office administrator—the only person, as John Chaffee observes, ever “to hold all three posts at once.”\(^9\) However, by contrast, Duan’s short entry, despite preceding Zhao’s by perhaps more than three and one-half centuries in its composition and being most assuredly statistically erroneous (“Yet, even though they possess 200,000 foot-soldiers”), nonetheless does render a richer portrait of its people. Beyond doubtless exemplifying their own intrinsic interests, we should view the differing primary foci of each author’s description of this same country as, more than anything else, reflecting the dissimilar priorities of their times. Duan, living during the late Tang Dynasty—an age when maritime trade was already considerable—was nonetheless writing prior to the great apogee of seaborne mercantile activity that occurred during the late Song period. The fact that he might marvel foremost at the characteristics of the Berbera people that might diverge from Chinese cultural norms is therefore understandable. In his view, it was the people most of all who were new. By contrast, Zhao Rugua’s description of Bupaluo, in an odd way, reprises Zhu Yu’s depictions in the preceding chapter of Guangzhou society exclusive of the black slaves. Instead of conjuring up an exotic land populated by wholly dissimilar people, Zhao presents Bupaluo as little more than a westernmost extension of the new world of revolutionary seafaring commerce in which he operated—a world that, as maritime commissioner at Quanzhou, one of the Southern Song’s three principal ports of interstate trade, he sought to promote. Clearly, for Zhao, after the more than three hundred years of intervening contact from Duan’s times to his, even if it was
only occasional, the Berbera people had paled substantially in interest when compared to the commodities, many of which attained to the status of the wondrous, that could be procured from them.

Duan Chengshi’s Bobali was provocative, salient, and perhaps captivating enough to become well imprinted on the consciousness of succeeding generations. In addition to being contained in his own opus, his putative first of all notices on any African territory is also preserved, in redacted form, in the *Xin Tangshu* (New Tang History), the compilation of which was completed by the eminent Song-period scholar Ouyang Xiu (1007–72) by the year 1060, though the work was first published posthumously in 1077. Moreover, although it was evidently a locale frequently commented on as an example of where contact had been established with the countries and communities of the East African coast, Berbera was not the only Somali territory of which the earliest Chinese recorders were aware. In the New Tang History, in addition to the abridged rendition of Duan’s redacted record, there is another entry—with its provenance unknown—on the East African “country” of Molin—that is, the modern-day Malindi (formerly Melinde) of coastal Kenya. The anonymously authored entry is illuminating on many levels. Not the least of its contributions to our knowledge derives from how it reinforces the foregoing conjecture regarding the predilection of the earliest Chinese chroniclers of contact with Africa for focusing on the traits of the native peoples encountered as opposed to concentrating on the various indigenous products that they often found so abundantly available:

To the southwest of Fulin (Baghdad), once one has traversed the desert for two thousand *li*, one arrives at the country called Molin.

It is the former Bosa. Its people are black, and their nature is fierce. The land is pestilential—without herbs, without trees, without grains. Horses subsist on dried fish; people sustain themselves on Persian dates. They are unashamed in debauching the wives of their fathers and chiefs. Thus, they are barbarians at their worst, calling their actions those of “seeking out the proper master and subject.”

In the seventh lunar month [corresponding to Ramadan], they rest completely. During that time, they neither send out nor receive any items in trade but sit drinking [fluids] throughout the night.10

At face value, despite its summary negative judgment, the above anonymous dispatch on the “country” of Molin presents us with a complex of mixed signals. On the one hand, its population, through no fault of its own,
is unequivocally black and inhabits what is essentially a wasteland. Worse still from the Chinese standpoint, however, is the moral laxness of its people with respect to a taboo practice that could and should be well within the bounds of control—that is, the propensity for incest. However, on the other hand, we find that the inhabitants of Molin do endeavor to do the best they can with the limited resources at their disposal and that they are by no means lax in their observances of their religion. This latter description is highly revealing of how far and how entrenched among distant peoples Islam had become at a fairly early stage in its history.

Nevertheless, on balance, based on this very probable ninth- or tenth-century, earliest-available notice on Malindi as well as Duan Chengshi’s signal, if not categorically precedent-setting, description of the Somali coast of the same period, we can assess the earliest Chinese appraisals of their first realized or, more likely, imagined contact with the African mainland as, to say the least, grim. Also, with Zhao Rugua’s much later description being relatively positivistic or at least neutral in tone by comparison, we must weigh the possibility of whether these two earliest of the three records, given their severely pejorative tone, are nothing more than fabrications—that is, that they are merely fanciful constructions of the minds of their authors. After all, for the Song period and later, the time of Zhao Rugua’s account, the substantiation of a common and widespread knowledge of Africa on the part of the Chinese is unassailable, with the archaeological record providing the firmest evidence and corroboration. Excavators long ago—at the end of the nineteenth century—unearthed Song-period Chinese pottery shards and cash coinage on East African shores. This discovery, of course, serves as no proof that Chinese were the ones who brought and left these artifacts there, or as Duyvendak states the case, “there is no evidence that the Chinese, during the [Song] period, ever visited the [e]ast coast of Africa themselves.”11 Instead, the consensus view is that the ferriers at that time of these Chinese commodities into Africa are far more likely to have been Arab intermediaries. Nonetheless, it does bespeak, however vaguely and indirectly, some dawning awareness on the part of the Chinese of benighted lands situated somewhere at the extremity of the western seas, even if they had yet to journey there. In other words, whatever knowledge Chinese of the Tang era, such as Duan Chengshi, had of these remote locales probably came to them either via Arab merchants, who were doubtless deeply familiar with the African territories through direct contact and involvement in the enterprise of slaving, or via individuals—monks, soldiers, pilgrims, vagabond wayfarers, and perhaps even escaped captives or slaves—who had contact with these merchants. Another alternative is less direct, wherein, as Duyvendak has sug-
gested, knowledge of East Africa on the part of Tang Chinese may well have
developed through the increasingly thriving trade with territories still further
to the west that was conducted via transshipment through Southeast Asia by
Southeast Asians.12

Nevertheless, in this connection, we turn our attention to the final Chi­
nese source prior to the fifteenth century to make any quasi-verifiable refer­
ences to potentially African sites. This work is the Daoyi zhilue (Annals of
Island Barbarians) by Wang Dayuan (fl. 1340s); it was probably completed
in the year 1348 and definitely originally prefaced the following year, 1349.13

Through his engagement in trade, Wang Dayuan, originally a native of Nan­
chang in what is now modern Jiangxi Province, visited numerous foreign lo­
cales over the course of the Zhizheng reign period (1341–68), the last of the
Yuan dynastic eras. Although it rarely cites the earlier work, Wang’s book is
closely modeled on Zhao Rugua’s Description of Foreign Peoples.14 However,
Wang Dayuan’s work differs markedly from Zhao Rugua’s in that much of it
is based on firsthand rather than entirely secondhand information, for Wang
is known to have widely and personally traveled to many of the places he
describes. Still, there is absolutely no indication that Wang Dayuan ever jour­
neyed as distantly as the two certifiably African locales he includes among
his descriptions—namely, Zanzibar (Cengyaoluo) and the Berbera coast (as
represented jointly by Liqieta and Luoposi). Despite their having been sites
on which he almost assuredly never laid eyes, I nonetheless offer translations
of his separate descriptions of these remote “countries” to the extreme west in
turn as indications of the “knowledge” of them that was perhaps in fairly wide
circulation at that time. Of Zanzibar, Wang writes:

This country is southwest of the Arab countries. Its coasts are treeless;
most of the soil is brackish. The arable land is poor, such that there is
little grain of any kind, and yams are grown in its place. Any ship travel­
ing there to trade in rice makes immense profits.

The climate is irregular, [but] in their habits the people preserve
the rectitude of olden times. The hair of the people is tied up in knots
(wanji); they wear short seamless shirts. Their livelihood consists of net­
ting birds and beasts for food. They boil seawater to make salt and fer­
ment juice of the sugarcane to make spirits. They do have a ruler.

Native products consist of red sandalwood, dark red sugarcane,
tusks of the elephant, ambergris, native gold, and duckbill copper sul­
fate. The commodities they use in trade are ivory boxes, trade silver,
dyed satins, and such.15
As for the Berbera or Somali coast, remarking first on the territory called Liqjeta, Wang Dayuan states:

Even while it lies in the extreme western part of the world, the ruler of the country resides on the seacoast. The land is poor, yet produces millet. Tiers of stones comprise the dwellings of the people. They dig into the earth more than ten feet in order to store grain, which keeps without rotting for three years.

It is hot in autumn and cool in summer. Customs are plain. Men and women are long, lank, and strange in appearance. Their hair grows to two inches and does not seem to grow longer. They wear cloth tunics, belted with black sashes.

Seawater is boiled to produce salt and millet fermented to make spirits. People subsist on cow’s milk. Local produce includes the blue pearl-jade coral tree, which ranges from more than ten to seven or eight to only one foot in height. In autumn and winter, people board boats to collect it. Fastening a net to a wooden cross-pole, they then fasten rope to each end and the boatmen drag it along cutting off the trees that fill the net. The goods used in trading are silver, dyed satins, Wulun cotton cloth, and the like.\textsuperscript{16}

In a harrowing, yet provocative description of Luoposi, Wang writes:

This country abuts the mountains to the west of Mecca (Majiana), where a bizarre peak, shaped like a heavenly horse rushing away, juts upward. This place is close to the sea.

In their appearance, males and females here are strange. They neither weave nor wear clothing, and instead cover their bodies with birds’ feathers. They do not use fire in the preparation of their food and instead wolf it down, skin and all, and drink the blood. Their hovels are nothing more than caves. All are incapable of resisting [the protection that] silk and hemp—whether coarse or fine—[afford against] the succession of heat and cold. But, whether one travels a thousand li north or south of the Luo River, how can those differences in extremes of heat and cold compare to those which exist in these countries at the extreme end of the [Western] Sea?

This land is searing hot, so its inhabitants have no need for clothing, as they naturally migrate, moving in accordance with the chariot of space and time. We need little wonder why they gulp down their food,
for they have no control over where they dwell, and show no concern for trade. Theirs, after all, is the Heaven of remote antiquity.¹⁷

Wang Dayuan’s accounts of these African lands are, at best, indirect and only partially informed. Moreover, they are hardly likely to be devoid of invention. Nonetheless, they do emit a certain currency, conveying to us a clear sense of what at least must have predominated as fourteenth-century Chinese impressions of East Africa. On the one hand, these impressions appear to have advanced little with the passage of time, and therefore are deemed to be nearly as grim as those proffered in earlier ages. Chinese awareness of the expanding array of products to be extracted from these “countries” in the interest of mercantilism in no way offsets that of the abject misery and deprivation in which their populations are believed to have lived. However, on the other hand, taken collectively, Wang Dayuan’s “East African” reports do furnish us with a key transitional corpus. This corpus prefigures the analogous accounts of the subsequent age because what is perhaps most remarkable about his prosaic, almost inelegant descriptions of African lands is how the skin color of their peoples and specifically the trait of immutable blackness—so central in the descriptions offered by the Song-period writers Zhao Rugua, Zhou Qufei, and especially Zhu Yu—have subsided as obsessions and even as objects of comment. While doubtless not reflective of any disinterest, this sudden lacuna or even blind spot with respect to blackness of skin is certainly indicative of the increased familiarity of Chinese travelers with the reality and, by extension, Chinese chroniclers with idea of Africans, such that the coloration of the latter ceased to be a novelty and became more of an expectation.

We should not, however, take either the sharp diminution in the frequency with which most later Chinese authors elect to reference blackness or the decision of a few to omit all references to the trait altogether to mean that no lexicon of demarcation persists and that all language used by these chroniclers to distinguish the Africans from themselves simply vanishes. On the contrary, what occurs is a curious substitution. In so short a span as the transition from Song to Yuan times, we suddenly find that the former references to the blackness of skin coloration of the inhabitants of African territories are rather strikingly and yet consistently supplanted by many more abundant references to an equally old staple of difference—namely, hair texture. Assuredly by Ming times we find that, among the several possibilities of discernible physical difference from which to choose, what surfaces for later Chinese authors as the most readily citable distinction between themselves and the still utterly other and barbarous Africans they encounter is not their black
complexion but instead their coiled or knotted (quan)—literally, “fisted” or “clenched”—hair. This particular quan is a homophonic term that nonetheless differs pronouncedly in the intensity of its meaning from the quan that Zhu Yu used in the early twelfth century to mean “curly.” With its proximate yet dissimilar orthography in the Chinese, this latter quan, which evidently came into widespread usage only during the Ming period, suggests not only a lexicographical shift but a corresponding perceptual one because whereas it also denotes curled hair, to be sure, we are meant to perceive the curls in question as being visually far more extreme in nature. In other words, with these conjoined shifts in terminology and perception, we can see that the characteristic hair quality of the blacks encountered and not their skin shade has emerged as the preeminent principle of distinctiveness—serving simultaneously as the ethnological measuring stick applied for the purpose of lumping these savage African peoples all into one undifferentiated category and also as the divisor used to set them apart from the rest of humanity (defined implicitly as Chinese) and arguably even deprive them of humanity.

However, this intriguing detail notwithstanding, in light of the prevailing circumstances, wherein direct Chinese contact with the African mainland prior to the fourteenth century cannot be documented as having ever occurred and contact even as late as that time is highly improbable, the more historically important question still remains, precisely when did the Chinese first touch ground and make inroads into Africa? To put the query another way, exactly when did the true Chinese discovery of Africa, which arguably continues to this day, first begin to take place?

In connection with our attempts to arrive at a definite answer to these particular questions of when, the “country” of Molin will occupy a special place. Its uniqueness beyond all other African locales heretofore and yet to be discussed derives from the fact that it was one of the first, if not the first, African sites to enter Chinese collective consciousness. Molin—the modern Malindi—thereby, with respect to the entrance of Africa as an idea upon the Chinese mind, serves as a kind of mental first imprint or “take,” as it were. It also, unexpectedly, acts as a geographical fulcrum, representing a touchstone for the cumulative knowledge that had thus far been acquired but also as a point of departure for the discoveries yet to come. Having covered the former, we now turn fully to the latter story.
Close Encounters and Fateful Misconceptions

In order to begin to explain the conspicuous significance of Molin, or modern Malindi, in the premodern history of the emerging Chinese knowledge of the black peoples of Africa, we must first account for the context in which a dawning awareness of this specific locale first arose. This context was none other than the now increasingly more widely known series of maritime expeditions conducted under the command of the "Grand Eunuch of the Three Jewels" (Sanbao taijian), Zheng He (1371–1435). However, as I suggest in my introduction, the task at hand here is to see these increasingly well-known naval missions through something of a different lens and, if necessary, impose a new proportionality. As the late historian Edward Dreyer adroitly expressed it, "Most people who are only slightly familiar with Zheng He's voyages associate them with Africa." Yet, even while Dreyer's observation is probably true, I am not persuaded that this association in the popular mind has had much force beyond its simple acknowledgment as a fact. As such, it stands as little more than a locution devoid of real resonance. Many more facts about this critical linkage are assuredly deserving of our notice. Thus, with the ultimate goal of bringing the narrative of the premodern Chinese Empire and the Chinese people in relationship to their blacks to full completion, to the extent that the project of their reconstitution and reclamation is at all possible, what we may deem to be the most consequential of those realities are supplied here.

Completing our narrative comes only with certain unavoidable demands. First of all, it can be accomplished only in a different time as well as in a different setting. Readers should prepare for a temporal leap of about two hundred years. The data on which our narrative depends are also different, as we move from such sources as Zhou Qufei and Zhao Rugua of the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries to the entirely different set and type of source materials produced during the early fifteenth century. Nonetheless, it is also important to know that we can make these transitions with some key reassurances. Foremost among these is the fact that we can know with reasonable confidence that all contact between China and Africa, inasmuch as it might ever have occurred, remained at best indirect throughout the intervening decades separating those two centuries, with no record of Chinese ships ever once having made landfall on coastal East African shores.

Not only was what Zheng He achieved utterly remarkable, but so too, by any standard, were the unprepossessing life circumstances that led him to his achievements. The interest generated by historical scrutiny of his naval exploits has increasingly spawned a corresponding interest in his life, which
has led to the contours of his biography becoming known in some substantial detail. Zheng He, as he became later known, was born Ma He in what is present-day Yunnan Province during the spring of the fourth year of Emperor Hongwu (r. 1368–98)—originally named Zhu Yuanzhang (1328–98)—the founding emperor of the Ming Dynasty. As a member of China’s Hui minority, he, like generations of his family members before him, subscribed to the Islamic faith. As was typically the case upon the founding of a dynasty, the empire was far from being completely pacified. In 1381 the emperor embarked upon a military campaign to conquer Yunnan, by ridding it of residual Yuan Dynasty Mongol influence, and thus unify China. In the interest of maintaining the province’s autonomy, Yunnan’s indigenous population staunchly resisted Hongwu’s war of pacification. Ma He’s father, Ma Hazhi (1344–82), was an almost immediate fatality of this campaign. Ma He was taken captive, and although he was allowed to live and eventually serve in the military forces of the conquering regime, as the son of a leading member of the resistance he was subjected to the cruelly vindictive and ignominious punishment of castration.

Despite what we today might be inclined to regard as a condition of severe disability inflicted upon him by his captors, Ma He accepted his fate without malice, maintained unflinching loyalty to incipient Ming imperial authority, and—as he matured—developed a favorable military reputation for himself. In this way the eunuch Ma He attracted the attention of and was drawn into the service of the prince of Yan (Yan Wang), Zhu Di (1360–1424), subsequently destined to become the future Emperor Yongle (r. 1403–24). Even prior to his ascension to the throne, Zhu Di fully recognized that Ma He exhibited a talent for leadership, and certainly afterward, as Yongle, he exploited that talent and lavishly rewarded him. In return, Ma He vigorously assisted in consolidating the usurping emperor’s rule militarily, such that among the many rewards conferred upon him, as was the custom of the times, was an imperially bestowed surname. The surname Ma had become widely adopted among early Chinese Muslims, and it remains popular even to this day chiefly because it is a standard approximation of the first syllable of the name Muhammad, Islam’s preeminent prophet. However, in 1404, as a token of his imperial favor, Yongle replaced the “Ma” of Ma He’s name with “Zheng,” with the latter meaning “solemn” or “formal.” Moreover, as a further indication of his complete trust in the young man whose life in the imperial palaces had begun as a captive, neutered Islamic youth from distant Yunnan, Yongle also promoted Zheng He to the rank of director in chief of the Directorate of Palace Eunuchs (neiguan jian taijian).21
During the Ming Dynasty, just as had been the case during any dynasty of the past, all assumed a direct correspondence to exist between the foresight of a given emperor and the boldness of his particular initiatives. Perhaps driven by this age-old assumption as well as his own prerogatives, Yongle in the spring of 1404 decided on a plan for a series of naval explorations of the Western Sea (Xiyang), better known to us today as the Indian Ocean. Evidently, from the first this comprehensive venture was consciously planned to take place on an unprecedented and unsurpassed scale. As such, the emergent protocol for proceeding required logistical ingenuity of the first order on every level.

Whether Yongle's grandiose plan for supremacy of the seas arose from outsized insecurity or near-egomaniacal self-confidence, we cannot be certain. The argument favoring his insecurity derives from the following logic: that the planned voyages were nothing more than a ruse that would facilitate the mobilization of a comprehensive manhunt for his nephew Jianwen (1377–1402?), the designated imperial heir whose fleeting reign from 1399 to 1402 Yongle had just snuffed out by usurpation. In the chaos leading to his overthrow, Jianwen had simply vanished, rendering his death a nagging uncertainty. Yongle, naturally, would have regarded the survival of the rightful heir to the Ming throne as a potential rallying point to be quashed. Thus, viewed in this light, the planned ventures into the Western Sea were little more than the extension—on a significantly grander scale—of the court intrigues that had placed Yongle in power in the first place. However, the dubious necessity for such large flotillas—averaging over twenty thousand men aboard several dozen immense junks—being sent as far as what was then the ends of the known world not merely once but several times in a search—for a youthful emperor only rumored to be still alive points to other, far less nefarious motives. Should we accept this reasoning, then we are probably more accurate in thinking of Yongle's great maritime expeditions collectively as a kind of exhibition by installments initiated by a monarch brimming with overweening self-confidence. Understood in such a light, the voyages then become massive displays of power and prestige, shows of force intended to demonstrate the awesome capabilities of the realm over which the Chinese sovereign ruled and of his august capacity to bend that realm to do his bidding. Indeed, when one considers the visits planned to those countries within the traditional Chinese constellation of influence, tribute relations certainly become a major impetus behind these voyages. However, the plans also assuredly called for these fleets of commanding size to travel well beyond the conventional Sinic orbit in order to make abundantly known the name and capacity of the mighty Ming empire. Therefore, the justification that these "celestial voyages" were primarily
undertaken simply because they could be undertaken should incline us to accept this display factor alone as a basic motivating premise.

Yet, the inconclusiveness of their impetus notwithstanding, these voyages, sanctioned as they were by imperial decree, likely foremost reflected every aspect of Chinese seafaring and navigational technology at its traditional acme in the early fifteenth century. As true expeditions at least in part, they represented neither Yongle's first nor only extension of the maritime presence of his regime expansively into foreign waters. Belying the isolationist and “turned-inward” qualities that would subsequently emerge to become stiflingly characteristic of Ming dynastic nativism and evidently seeking to ensure his own legitimacy by legitimizing the investitures of others, Yongle immediately upon accession in 1403 sent forth eunuch-emissaries to proclaim his mandate and solicit the resumption of tribute relations with the states of Southeast and South Asia and the initiation of such relations with various states of the Middle East. Nevertheless, as Shih-shan Henry Tsai opines, “Of all Yongle’s sponsored maritime activities, Zheng He’s seven voyages (the last of which took place after Yongle’s death) are the most elaborate and most written-about events, and justifiably so.”

Over the long course of the Ming period’s two and three-quarters centuries, the functioning of eunuchs in positions of high military command would become commonplace. However, initially the divisive politics associated with the prestige of leadership of the pending voyages exposed much of the antipathy and distrust that would later define and pervade all aspects of the competitive relations between the imperial castrati, representing an arm of the inner court (neige), and the legions of bureaucrats, serving as the dominant representatives of the outer court (waige). Given the tremendously high stakes attached to the success of such a mammoth undertaking, Zheng He was hardly the obvious choice to lead it, and Zhang Fu (1375–1449), the vaunted military official, and Jian Yi (1363–1435), the eminent civilian official, competed vigorously for the distinction of leading these particular naval missions. Nonetheless, we may theorize with some confidence that as a venture, the prospective voyages were from the first an inner-court initiative, which by default afforded the emperor maximum latitude over the setting of objectives and, crucially, the allocation of resources, including the selection of leadership. Consequently, after due consideration of the prospective candidates, Yongle selected Zheng He to command the expeditions, no doubt because of the various advantages he felt the eunuch’s leadership would contribute to the enterprise and to the imperial person.

Many factors likely compelled Yongle to select Zheng He and entrust him
with the missions, but four are worth noting. First, in the intervening years
since he had been brought to the court at Nanjing as a captive adolescent
of eleven or twelve, Zheng He had proven his unflagging loyalty—first to
Hongwu and subsequently to Yongle. Second, notwithstanding his irrevers­
ible condition as a eunuch, much of Zheng He's allegiance to Yongle had been
displayed as valor in the battlefield in the continuing Ming wars of pacifica­
tion; by all accounts Zheng He was preternaturally impressive in appearance,
being tall, vigorous, and skilled in the arts of war from having served directly
as a personal adviser under Yongle in the field of battle.29 Third, Zheng He
was a devout Muslim and knowledgeable of Arabic, and he thus was deemed a
perfect admiral-envoy, one best fit for dealing with the predominantly Islamic
coterie of rulers that was expected to be contacted in the course of the voyages
(see Figure 3). Fourth, as Tsai further notes, “After Yongle assumed the emper­
orship, he promoted Zheng He to head the Directorate of Palace Servants, the
inner court agency in charge of all palace construction. It was probably in his
capacity as supervisor of court civil engineering and procurer of metals and
fireworks that Zheng became familiar with the nuances of weapons and ship
construction.”30 We may assume that all of these factors conspired in Yongle’s
mind to make Zheng He his odds-on favorite candidate to function in this
preconceived capacity as future imperial envoy to the most distant of lands.
Hence, the decision in the eunuch’s favor was perhaps a foregone conclusion.

The first of the expeditions departed Chinese shores in the summer of
1405 and returned in 1407 after having visited what now are Melaka (formerly
Malacca), Vietnam (specifically the former Champa), Java, Sumatra, the Mal­
dives, Sri Lanka, and the southwestern or Malabar coast of India (Kochi [Co­
chin] and Kozhikode [Calicut]). The subsequent second (1407–9) and third
(1409–11) voyages returned to the same previously visited locales but also
added what are now Thailand and Kampuchea. Only with the fourth voyage
(1413–15), ostensibly directed toward the sole purpose of journeying to Ban­
gladesh (then Bengal) and beyond Kozhikode to the wealthy port of Hormuz
(Ormuz) at the mouth of the Persian Gulf, was Africa proper first entered as
an indirect object of discourse in the conduction of the expeditions—and all
to a profoundly influential effect, given the oblique and almost tepid nature
of early interest in it as a physical location.31

While in either Hormuz or Kozhikode, Zheng He, “probably met mer­
chants from the [E]ast African city-states of Mogadishu, Brawa [Barawa or
Brava], and Malindi,” as Louise Levathes correctly observes in When China
Ruled the Seas: The Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne, 1405–1433.32 The year
of Zheng He’s chance meeting of these African merchants would have been
1414, and to the best of our knowledge, it represents the first physical meeting between the renowned Chinese mariner (or perhaps only a detachment of his crewmen) and any ethnically black natives hailing from the African subcontinent. However, from the Chinese perspective, it was not a meeting between these men of vastly different shores that produced the monumental character of this event. On the contrary, the importance of the meeting in Chinese terms stemmed almost entirely from the fact that it led directly to the first Chinese exposure to and therefore confirmation by sighting of one of East Africa’s most familiar products. This was the *cula*, likely a corruption of the Arabic *zurafā* (giraffe), the existence of which was first referred to, based on secondhand knowledge, by Zhao Rugua some two centuries earlier.
Curiously, having never before seen one, neither Zheng He nor any of the men attached to the fourth voyage chose to recognize the giraffe as a mere giraffe. Zheng He's fellow eunuch attaché Yang Min (fl. 1413–19), who was ordered to return immediately to China with the new king of Bengal and the latter's tribute gift of the giraffe from Malindi, elected instead to regard and present the strange beast he ferried to the Ming court as the fabulous qilin, an auspicious creature thought to appear only as a harbinger of impending utopia. Even if he was not exactly compelled to act in conformance to them, Yang Min's compliance in returning did coincide nicely with Chinese domestic geopolitical priorities of the time; in the autumn of 141434 he arrived home with the Malindian giraffe in tow precisely when Yongle had committed to marshaling all resources for the relocation of the imperial capital from Nanjing to Beiping, the site of his former princely fief and the future Beijing. This move was actually achieved between the years 1421 and 1423,36 but during the intervening years in advance of that occurrence what conceivable present could better ratify the sagacious correctness of the imperial prerogative of relocating the capital than the appearance of this singularly uncommon beast, with more of them on the way? Thus, for the Chinese of the Yongle reign period, who first came into possession of a giraffe only indirectly—that is, through the mediating agency of a vassal king—the decision was made either unconsciously or deliberately to transform the beast into a qilin, a reputed symbol of a dawning beneficent age, often (despite having one too many horns) equated with the Western unicorn. The irony of the failure of Zheng He and the crewman of this fourth voyage to recognize or accept the giraffe for what it was is perhaps exceeded by the irony that it required no actual trek on their part onto the east coast of Africa in order to secure the animal directly. Further referring to the East African merchants met in Hormuz or Kozhikode, who had no doubt initially apprised their Ming Chinese visitors of the existence of their giraffes, Levathes notes that Zheng He "persuaded [them] to return with him to China and pay tribute to the emperor—which they did."39

We need not doubt that the travel of these East African merchant-envoys to distant China and their entrance into that empire as the free representatives of what the Chinese regarded as sovereign, if subordinate, countries stands as a historical watershed. A clearer indication of the psychic distance traveled—from the concept of Africans as slaves to Africans as free men—we could hardly envision, for we are now well informed of how less than three centuries earlier those who were possibly the direct ancestors of these same emissaries had endured their own interminable sojourn in China as slaves at Guangzhou. The voluntariness and perhaps even alacrity with which these
fifteenth-century Africans embarked on their visit to China under auspices of Zheng He and his fleets are indicative of the extent to which the sordid legacy of Guangzhou captivity had already been—either through mutual consent or amnesia—laid to rest, if not altogether transcended.

Much irony also deservedly attends the timing with which this milestone was achieved. The eastward travel of these East Africans to China as free men predates by only a few decades at most the inauguration of the notorious Atlantic slave trade in 1441–44 whereby their West African brethren were ferried away aboard Portuguese ships, first north to Lisbon or to Florence and then eventually transited westward—by the countless thousands, even millions, and mainly aboard British ships—into bondage and death throughout the New World. Yet, for the specific purposes of this study, we need also to note that this entrance of free African blacks into China was followed quickly by a commensurate watershed, one that it becomes necessary for us to observe in order to ascertain that these latter-day Africans in China were indeed free. These African tribute-bearers, the magnanimous conferrers upon the Chinese emperor of the fabulous qilin, required the common courtesy of passage back to their places of origin. Although this return of the favor of escort to their respective homelands would have to wait a year or more to be launched, we may distinguish Zheng He’s fifth voyage (1417–19) in this respect from all others embarked upon because—for the first time in history—Chinese can be said with certainty to have purposefully set direct sail for Africa and in all likelihood to have set foot firmly on African soil.

We should never delude ourselves, however, with the thought that Africa was initially high on the site itinerary for the voyages that Zheng He and his legions undertook. At the beginning, the elevation of Ming dynastic prestige among known tribute partners and the safeguarding of preexisting trade routes formed the dual impetuses behind the missions. No matter how exotic or enticing, the exploration of unknown territories—a category into which the entire East African shoreline must be included—was not a priority. Moreover, the fact that Africa was conceptually “off the map,” well beyond the original interests and purview of the succession of maritime expeditions that Zheng He led, is strangely confirmed by all of the extant documentary evidence. At least a few dozen among the many thousands of individuals attached to Zheng He’s missions were carefully selected and expressly employed for their abilities as translators and interpreters. Of these numerous individuals, however, only three men produced firsthand descriptive accounts of these unparalleled oceanic voyages that have survived to the present. These works and their respective authors, in descending order of fame, if not necessarily of composition,
are *Yingyai shenglan* (Captivating Visions at the Ocean's Limits) by Ma Huan (fl. 1414–51), completed probably no later than 1433; *Xingcha shenglan* (Arresting Views from a Raft Guided by Stars) by Fei Xin (1388–1436?), completed in 1436; and *Xiyang fanguo zhi* (Record of Barbarian States of the Western Sea) by Gong Zhen (fl. 1413–34), completed in 1434. None of these men was present on every voyage, but each was present on at least one. Whereas Gong Zhen was aboard for only the seventh and last voyage of 1431–33, Ma Huan and Fei Xin each accompanied Zheng He on multiple missions: in fact, three—the fourth, sixth (1421–22), and seventh—in the case of Ma Huan, and four—the second, third, fifth, and seventh—in that of Fei Xin.

Without question, the Ming-period authors of these three books produced works that are of inestimable value in their own right as well as owing to their status as the sole surviving accounts of this historic event. Yet, for our purposes, in an examination of two of the three we are challenged to detect any burning interest on Zheng He's part in travel to Africa as a port of call. We are led to this conclusion largely through a revealing exercise in proof by omission. Ma Huan's Captivating Visions at the Ocean's Limits, even as the most famous and widely cited of the three works for the informing light it sheds on the intimate character of early fifteenth-century Chinese knowledge of the most remote reaches of Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East, offers no description or any mention of a single identifiable African territory. We do know that the first investigation of a possible route to the coast of East Africa was undertaken by a subfleet of the fourth expedition, of which Ma Huan was a part but Fei Xin was not. However, based on the fact that his book includes no African sites among its list of sites visited, we can safely conclude that Ma Huan was not part of that particular detachment of 1414 or any subsequent one that probed or journeyed to African shores. Gong Zhen's *Record of Barbarian States of the Western Sea* is by far the briefest and least descriptive of the three treatises. Moreover, among these three Ming-period treatments, *Record of Barbarian States of the Western Sea* is the most derivative, for it basically confirms by reiteration most of the information provided with greater flair and richness by Ma Huan in Captivating Visions at the Ocean's Limits. The fact that *Record of Barbarian States of the Western Sea* is essentially a record of only the last of the seven voyages must be counted among the work's self-constraining factors. Moreover, the sheer limitations of what can be seen on one excursion may also have contributed to the circumstance of Gong Zhen mentioning no properly African sites even though he was attached to the mission when that continent is known to have been visited for the last time. Thus, given these constraints and its relatively late composition—for
whereas Gong's is prefaced 1434, Ma’s work, even while its year of actual publication remains unknown, is prefaced 1416—we can confidently regard Record of Barbarian States of the Western Sea as relying often verbatim on the earlier Captivating Visions at the Ocean’s Limits. Moreover, were its African ellipses not reasons enough for its reduction in value, we find the usefulness of Record of Barbarian States of the Western Sea degraded still further by the fact that the book fails to reference fully—with either originality or in-depth descriptive detail—most of the sites that it does list.

Therefore, for all descriptions of what was actually encountered through whatever forays were made by those vessels of Zheng He that probed along the East African coast, we find ourselves dependent on the testimony of the single author among the three who is known to have journeyed there more than once—Fei Xin. Only in his work—Arresting Views from a Raft Guided by Stars—do we encounter any substantively extensive descriptions of what are identifiably African sites. Yet, before inquiring into what he saw there, we must ask precisely who this man Fei Xin was. Inasmuch as who we are ever affects what we choose to see, our unmasking of Fei Xin, to the extent that such is possible given the scant information we have about him, prepares us well for the “Africa” that he experienced and to which he exposes us.

Fei Xin hailed from Kunshan in the southeast coastal region that is to the northeast of Suzhou prefecture, in the southernmost extremity of what is now modern Jiangsu Province. With his family being included in the hereditary military register that had evolved by Ming times, the fact that Fei Xin was a soldier need not surprise us, for at age thirteen he was required to enter military service to replace his dead brother, who had been serving as an exile in the garrison at Liujia Harbor (Liujia gang) at Taicang on account of some indeterminate crime committed by a forebear. Given this evidently reliable information, Duyvendak goes so far as to designate Fei Xin as “technically a ‘criminal,’” deeming him to be hopelessly ensnared by compulsory military service in order to expiate this presumably political offense allegedly perpetrated by either his father or his grandfather.

Given this precipitating circumstance, there is a further sense in which young Fei Xin was perhaps doubly conscripted; at nineteen he was pressed into service, evidently as a secretary or clerk interpreter, on the second of Zheng He’s expeditions from 1407 to 1409. This same fate of conscription for sea duty was to befall Fei Xin three additional times, and there is little doubt that he regarded his repeated forced travel to distant lands as a hardship rather than a privilege. So much did Fei Xin detest his servitude that he, based on his own account in his preface, produced two versions of Arresting Views from
a Raft Guided by Stars—one providing a straight narrative and the other including either maps or charts or pictures (the word used is the indeterminate tu), now lost. Duyvendak contends that the latter was contrived at least in part out of Fei Xin's hope that the book would sufficiently intrigue or amuse the emperor such that he might be granted a reprieve from his perpetual military bondage. However, Fei Xin's aspirations for recognition and freedom through authorship were evidently never realized.

Although little is known about the writer in life, considerably more is known about the record left behind. The real question at hand for us is, what was the African substance or content of Fei Xin's “arresting views”? We find that, like Gong Zhen, Fei Xin must likely also have relied on the prior account written by Ma Huan. However, Fei Xin's singularity lies in the fact that he saw and recorded his impressions of sites Ma Huan never saw. Fei Xin's Arresting Views from a Raft Guided by Stars describes four territories that we can perhaps with only one exception conclusively situate as parts of the East African subcontinent. At least in their modern equivalents, they are Brawa, Juba, Mogadishu, and what is conjectured to be Zeila (Saylac), with each site most probably located in what is now modern-day Somalia.

We cannot unambiguously pinpoint exactly when Fei Xin visited each of these African “countries” because he indeed had multiple opportunities—at least two, to be exact, for the fifth and seventh missions of Zheng He, of which Fei Xin was a part, both touched on African shores. However, equally important is that we can safely conclude that Fei Xin could not have visited them any earlier than the time of the fifth expedition—his third, which reached its farthest extent in the year 1418. In describing the “country” or “kingdom” of Brawa (Bulawaguo), he writes:

Journeying south from Weligama (Bieluo) in Ceylon [Sri Lanka] (Xi-lanshan) for twenty-one days and nights, one can reach this country, which is near Mogadishu (Mugudushu). Its mountains and lands abut the sea and, as for the places where people dwell, piled stones constitute their village walls and layered stones their houses. The mountains are barren, and the lands are broad and salty. There is a salt lake but in it are trees with branches and, after some considerable time to grow, they are pulled from the lake, once their fruit have collected enough white brine.

The customs are somewhat simple. There is no agriculture of any kind, and the people eke out a living by fishing. Both men and women have hair of knotted “fists” (quanfa), and wear short shirts that they sash
with strips of cotton. On their ears the women sport gold coins and about their necks they wear fringe pendants.

Onions and garlic they have but they lack any kind of gourd. Civets, which resemble the musk deer; zebras, which are like the piebald donkey; leopards; antlerless deer; rhinoceroses; myrrh; frankincense; ambergris; elephant tusks; and camels comprise the native produce of this land. In trading with them, we use gold; silver; satins; silks; rice; beans; and porcelain. In exchange for the gifts of grace [that are conferred by our empire, their leaders] have come forward to offer tribute with their local products.56

Next, at comparable length and depth, Fei Xin describes Juba (Zhubuguo), a kingdom evidently named for the Juba River that runs through the territory even today. As was the case with Brawa, the conventions of referencing Juba mainly in terms of its proximity to Mogadishu and the abject wretchedness of its depiction lead us to anticipate the description of that forthcoming “country” as the geographical pivot around which Fei Xin’s coastal East African impressions will largely revolve. Yet, while destitute it may have been, nonetheless Juba still seems something of an advance beyond Brawa:

This place borders on the territory of Mogadishu. Its villages are desolate, with their walls comprised of piled rocks and their houses of layered stones.

There is a purity with which customs are observed. Both men and women have nappy hair. The men wrap themselves with cotton cloths; the women, when going out, wear head-cloths and they expose neither their faces nor their bodies.

The soil itself is a barren yellow. For years at a stretch it will not rain, leading to there being no vegetation. Water is drawn by cogwheel from deep wells, and the netting of fish is the way by which one makes a living. Lions; gold coinage; leopards; ostriches, which are six to seven feet tall with feet like a camel’s; frankincense; and amber are the native products. In exchange, we offer vermillion; satins; delicate silks; gold; silver; porcelain; pepper; and rice. Moved with gratitude for this imperial bounty received, the ruler made a gift of tribute [to our court] of these native products.57

Juba is also of considerable interest to our inquiry because it is one of the several African sites that Fei Xin cites for which there is corroboration of its
visitation by the fleets of Zheng He in the official *Mingshi* (Ming History). Yet, the description therein of the place is terse and, through intimation, a shade or two bleaker than that provided us by Fei Xin:

The country of Juba, for its part, abuts Mogadishu. During Yongle (1403–24), it once submitted tribute. The population of this land is sparse, and its customs are somewhat pure. Zheng He went to this place.

The land itself lacks vegetation, and rocks are piled up in making places to dwell. For many years there can be droughts; thus, Juba is entirely like Mogadishu. That which this country produces may be subsumed under such categories as lions, gold coinage, leopards, ostriches, ambergris, frankincense, amber, pepper and the like.58

The compilers of the above entry in the Ming History clearly suggest that Zheng He personally visited that Juba; that it was he who set foot on the kingdom’s shoreline and trudged across its desolate terrain, venturing deep into its interior; and that such penetration was not a chore delegated any detachment of surrogates. At least based on the official record, the truth of this case remains neither completely confirmable nor refutable, for the Ming History also records—without much depth—in relation to Brawa, for example, that “Zheng He also twice served as envoy to this country.”59 Still, what follows shows that there is much to commend the interpretation that Zheng He was very much physically in the lead of these African expeditions.

Nevertheless, for all that they reveal, in the foregoing passages detailing the visits to East African lands by Ming-period Chinese, one element to which we have grown accustomed is glaringly conspicuous in its absence. Strikingly, Fei Xin nowhere makes reference to the inhabitants of either Brawa or Juba as black. He instead repeatedly cites, among what would seem a surfeit of distinguishing physical characteristics of the Africans, only one—namely, the distinctive grade or texture or perhaps textures of their hair, the distinctive coarseness, if not the color, of which differed markedly from that of their Chinese observers. While it is obviously indebted to Fei Xin’s report, the Ming History version, being more bureaucratic than ethnographic in its perspective, dispenses with any mention of this signifying trait. The reason for this dispensation is as intriguing as it is uncertain, but at least a few provocative possibilities are suggested by Fei Xin’s omission of a descriptor that was heretofore as crucial as skin color.

First, we need to entertain the possibility that the skin color of the coastal East African peoples Fei Xin encountered was simply outside of his main
sphere of interests. So interpreted, the fact of the overtly darker complexions of the blacks he saw is reduced to something that Fei Xin either chose to look blithely beyond or regarded only insouciantly, with banal disinterest, because of his far more insistent concern with cataloging the variety and appraising the value of the exotic products native to their lands. However, his intense interest in their dwellings, their clothing, and—most of all—their hair quality belies this claim of indifference. Evidently, aside from the factor of skin color—on which earlier authors' comments are quite familiar to us—the characteristics and even the physical features of the peoples and not just the lands or produce encountered seem to have intrigued Fei Xin a great deal. Furthermore, although it is not entirely improbable, this explanation remains somewhat flimsy because it makes Fei Xin inexplicably different from all those with identical interests who had in previous centuries preceded him. For instance, Zhu Yu, who three hundred years earlier had the opportunity to encounter Africans either directly, as Fei Xin did, or secondhand through the observations of his father, Zhu Fu, was hardly silent in pointing out the inveterate blackness of the Guangzhou slaves as the most salient of their several alien characteristics. Circumstances surely evolved to differ in that the blacks whom Fei Xin encountered were now clearly the purveyors of merchandise rather than merchandise itself purveyed. Yet, objectively speaking, we cannot imagine them to have appeared any less black in Fei Xin’s time than in Zhu Yu’s, and the fact that no mention is made of this defining characteristic—especially in light of what we have thus far come to expect—results in a lacuna that is genuinely startling.

A second and hardly implausible way of accounting for the absence of any reference on Fei Xin’s part to the blackness of the Brawans and Jubans is simply to attribute it to his possible shortcomings in native ability as an author and the limitations of his powers of description. Without doubt, despite his having been much affected by Ma Huan’s earlier book, Fei Xin, whose background was military rather than scholarly, is generally regarded as less facile in exposition than his contemporary. Therefore, this explanation—especially when understood in light of certain limitations of the early fifteenth-century Chinese vocabulary for describing newly confronted concepts—may well hold some considerable merit. In this connection, the linguistic constraints at work for Fei Xin can be seen in his persistent referencing of the African peoples’ hair as quan—“knotted” or “coiled”—despite his likely exposure to a variety of forms of hair types and distinguishing tribal headdresses. However, if only because it results from a more extensively global awareness that was unavailable to him, our appreciation today for the variations within stock gradations in
hair texture of this kind arguably surpasses Fei Xin’s. Thus, from our modern-day perspectives, we are forced to conclude that even when repeatedly applying this identical descriptive adjective, Fei Xin must have at least occasionally meant somewhat different things by it—a reality that besets the very translation of *quan* with an intrinsically unavoidable measure of uncertainty.

As much as any passage, Fei Xin’s ethnographical description of the men and women of Mogadishu—the centerpiece of his particular report on that kingdom—fully illustrates the difficulty of attempting to reconstitute any truly crystalline image of the peoples upon whom Fei Xin gazed based purely on his words alone. We cannot expect the exotic images of these and other East African natives he encountered to be fully accounted for in the conventions of the language available to him. Nonetheless, language is all we now have, and we can at least confidently surmise that, to the degree he possessed command of it, Fei Xin surely must have endeavored to describe the locales and the populations with which he came into contact as accurately as he could:

Going with favorable winds from Kulam [Quilon] (Xiaogelan), this country is reachable in twenty days and nights. It borders the sea. Its walls are of heaped stones; its houses are of layered stones, four to five storeys high, with all cooking and the entertaining of guests happening at the top.

The wooly hair of the men drapes down in all four directions, and they wrap their waists in cotton cloth. The women fashion their hair into a twist atop their heads and, using yellow lacquer, they highlight their crowns. From both ears hang several strands of cloth [laced with coins], and around their necks they wear silver rings that fringe down upon their chests. When venturing out, they cloak themselves in cotton sheets, veil their faces in bluish gauze, and wear shoes or leather slippers.

At the feet of the mountains, this land becomes a desert of barren yellow soil and rocks. The fields are depleted such that little grows, and can suffer from many years of no rain. Wells are dug very deep and water drawn by cogwheel and collected in sheepskin bags.

As a people, they are by custom loud and unruly. In training to fight, they practice archery. The rich among them travel widely by boat and engage in trade. The poor people net sea fish, which they then dry for consumption—which goes to the extent of feeding it to their camels, horses, cattle, and goats. Frankincense; gold coinage; leopards; and ambergris are their native products. In trading with them, we use gold; silver; colored satins; sandalwood; rice; porcelain; and colored taffetas.
Their ruler, in conformance to protocol, has sent forth their native products [to our court] in tribute.\(^60\)

In the prosaic language of the Ming History, Mogadishu is rather sedately remarked upon as being "entirely like" Juba in terms of climate. Yet, from the colorful description above we can detect that in comparison to the other African sites visited, Mogadishu presented Fei Xin with some high contrasts from an observational perspective. If required to isolate anything as epitomizing Mogadishu's distinctiveness in comparison to its two neighboring kingdoms of Brawa and Juba, then most assuredly we must point to the characters of their peoples. In this early age Mogadishu already exhibited a restlessness and clamorousness and yet also a kind of sophistication indicative of advanced urban life anywhere—even as it existed back in China. Moreover, the Ming History implicitly confirms Mogadishu's status as the cultural and mercantile hub of East Africa: "In 1416, when Mogadishu together with the various countries including Brawa and Malindi dispatched envoys paying respect to our court by bearing tribute, Zheng He was directed to present them with repayment for their tribute offerings by escorting them [in their returns to their homelands]. In 1423, tribute-bearing envoys [from these countries] again arrived. Compared to what had been repaid, their kings and consorts made gifts of even more. In 1430, Zheng He returned bearing imperial investitures to bestow upon these countries."\(^61\)

The last highly probable African locale for which Fei Xin supplies an account is Lasa, which I am persuaded is none other than the modern-day Gulf of Aden port city Zeila (Saylac in Somali), located in the Awdal region of Somalia. In accounting for how this place came to make its initial impression on Chinese consciousness, as was the case for its neighboring city-states of that time, we learn from the Ming History that "In 1416, [Zeila] dispatched envoys to come [to our court] bearing offerings in tribute; it was ordered that Zheng He be dispatched to reciprocate."\(^62\) The Zeila entry in Arresting Views from a Raft Guided by Stars, aside from featuring some distinguishing snippets of detail concerning headdress decorum for women, social stratification, burial practice, and religious observance, returns us to the formula that Fei Xin has earlier employed, whereby he bases himself on the template already evinced for his descriptions of Brawa and Juba:

Traveling from Calicut [Kozhikode] (Guli) with favorable winds, one can reach this country [called Zeila] in twenty days and nights. People reside by the sea, and stack up stones to form walls. At the feet of the
mountains, Zeila becomes desert and there is no vegetation. Cattle, goats, camels, and horses are all fed dried sea fish. The temperature is constantly scorching, and the fields are barren except only for crops of wheat. For years on end, there can be no rain. Wells are dug and, by means of cogwheels and sheepskin bags, water collected.

The hair of both men and women is napped, and both sexes wear long tunics. The women, like those of Hormuz, cover their heads.

Piled stones and stamped earth are used to build homes of three to four storeys. Above are the cooking and sleep quarters and the rooms for entertaining guests. Below reside their servants and slaves.

Native products are ambergris, frankincense, and thousand-li camels. The customs of the people are pure and honest. There are rites attached to funerals and there are prayers performed unto the ghosts and spirits. In exchange for the gifts of sagacious grace [that are conferred by our empire, their leaders] have sent forth an envoy bearing a gold-leaf memorial to make an offer of tribute with their local products. Gold; silver; satins; delicate silks; porcelain; rice; pepper; sandalwood; and gum benzoin are the goods we employ in exchange with them.63

Despite its return mostly to the form of the foregoing Brawan and Juban entries, Fei Xin’s description of Zeila does, whether intentionally or not, effectuate a sensation of cultural “motion” in a way that departs from any of the previous entries, including even the salient example of Mogadishu. Facilitated foremost perhaps by the mere mention of Hormuz, we are compelled to shape the above-cited fragmentary and discursive details about Zeila into an aggregate, such that we are led as readers to enhanced coherence and then sense the palpable presence of the non-African—and specifically Arab—cultural influences known already to have been well established since perhaps the 900s of the Common Era. Also suggestive of at least an Arab overlay in the above is the distinctive mentioning of “servants and slaves.” The authority R. W. Beachey fixed Mogadishu as the center of supply for slaves to locations such as Aden. However, so proximate was Zeila that it should not surprise us that a market in slaves—mentioned for the first and only time in all of Fei Xin’s properly African entries—would be thriving there too.64 Yet, simultaneously, even as the Arab signifiers of the passage move us in this new interpretive direction, we nonetheless find that Fei Xin’s discourse on Zeila also retains a firmly Afro-centric core, and despite no explicit ascription to that effect, we never once sense that the people delineated are anything other than African—and thereby black.
Moreover, there is still more to this instance of Zeila, for it invites our return to the problematic blackness lacuna. Thus, the two foregoing hypotheses notwithstanding, now a third explanation starkly emerges in our attempt to account for Fei Xin's failure to comment on the overt blackness of the East African peoples he encountered. Being the simplest in the sense of the most easily articulated, this explanation seems also to be the most credible. In essence, we can probably best account for Fei Xin's failure to ascribe blackness to his African contacts by an argument of habituation—that is to say, throughout the parts of the world that he came to navigate at the far edge of the Western Sea, the attribute of blackness was so commonplace and ubiquitous among the various peoples he directly observed that it no longer served as a trait of distinctiveness. Fei Xin, through such frequent and unmediated exposure, became acclimated to observing a very different world from that of his countrymen of previous centuries. In keeping with his reception of much of the other exotica that he had already seen and would eventually see distantly beyond Chinese borders, blackness of skin, although as obvious and indelible as ever, neither elicited shock nor evidently served as cause for his comment.

Ironically, the relatively few references to blackness that Fei Xin does supply in Arresting Views from a Raft Guided by Stars seem actually to buttress this particular hypothesis of omission rather than undermine it, for they show that Fei Xin was perfectly capable of commenting quite pointedly on this trait on those occasions when he did deem it either conspicuous or surprising. For example, precisely through such a reference Fei Xin effectively settles one of the most enduring mysteries concerning the ethnic provenance of premodern China's original blacks—one of the foundational conundrums with which our deliberations herein began. Through his unintentional, if not unremarkable words we definitely encounter the feature of black skin ascribed specifically to Malaysians. Indeed, bluntly and in a way that entirely removes the whole matter from the realm of speculation, in referring specifically to the Malay inhabitants of Melaka or Malacca (Manlajia), even while accounting for interim centuries of miscegenation, Fei Xin unequivocally states: "Men and women both fashion their hair into mallet-shaped buns (zhuiji), and the flesh of their bodies is lacquer-black, though there are those among them who, being descended from Chinese stock of Tang times, are white." The contemporary authority Leonard Andaya confirms the earliness with which the term kunlun became affixed especially to Malayan peoples of this region, stating that the term "was used more generally in the seventh century to refer to the people in the islands and the inhabitants along the Straits of Melaka, with whom the Chinese had most contact in this early period." Andaya, moreover, fur-
ther affirms precisely what past and present scholars have long suspected: “At various times in the past the Chinese have used ‘kunlun’ to refer to the most prominent of Southeast Asian inhabitants, including the Malayu.”

The mystery of whether Malays were actually the primeval Chinese blacks is not the only one in Fei Xin’s Arresting Views from a Raft Guided by Stars on which he sheds considerable light. Even if he does not conclusively resolve the issue beyond all doubt, Fei Xin is more expansively effusive than any previous writer on the subject of the pristine location of the mysterious Kunlun, which he in the manner of several authors of the Song and Yuan periods properly refers to as Kunlun Mountain (Kunlunshan). On the basis of our deliberations in the previous two chapters, certainly by Fei Xin’s time, if not earlier, we must acknowledge the existence of two distinct Kunluns in Chinese thinking as homelands of blacks: the Southeast Asian Kunlunshan, which existed in relative isolation and obscurity in otherwise known surroundings; and the African Kunlun sengzhi or Kunlun cengqi, which is today thought to have included Zanzibar, Pemba, and possibly Madagascar in a world in the process of becoming known by happenstance and eventually by exploration. However, it is important to draw from Fei Xin’s account that by the early fifteenth century knowledge of the location and indeed the character of Kunlunshan had advanced solidly beyond the realm of mythogeography, even while knowledge of Kunlun sengzhi or Kunlun cengqi had expanded only sketchily and its location remained occluded and speculative. Proving that Kunlunshan was now a known and locatable entity, Fei Xin states:

This island emerges amidst the limitless expanse of the sea, facing Annam (Zhancheng), the Anamba Islands (Dongxizhu), and Tripod Peak (Dingzhi). It is elevated and square, and its area is expansive.

Seamen call its encircling waters the “Sea of Kunlun” (Kunlun yang), and all junks must await the favorable winds that will enable it to be passed through in seven days and nights. The common saying is “Fear the Paracels (Qizhou) above but fear Kunlun below.” The [compass] needle straying [at all] or the helm amiss, and neither ship nor men will survive.

The island’s products lack distinction and its people have neither dwellings nor stoves. Eating fruits, fish, and shrimp, they dwell in the island’s caves and nest in its trees, and nothing more.

Fei Xin’s description of Kunlun is assuredly straightforward and precise enough for us to accept it as the site of what is now the island of Pulau Kundor
(formerly Pulo Condore) (see Map 1 and Figure 4). However, it is of particular interest for another reason, and not just because it corroborates the vaguer and more impressionistic descriptions of earlier centuries of that same site, summoning forth anew images of Kunlun’s imagined tiger-headed, snake-grasping, black-complexioned inhabitants (see Figure 1). The foregoing passage on Kunlun clearly and unambiguously provides us with an example of Fei Xin’s indebtedness as an author to earlier writers. Fei’s Kunlun entry appropriates, to an almost slavish degree, the slightly more expansive entry describing the same locale in Wang Dayuan’s fourteenth-century work Annals of Island Barbarians, written less than a century prior to Arresting Views from a Raft Guided by Stars. Fei Xin paraphrases much and at some points even inserts verbatim whole phrases from the Yuan-period entry into his own, somewhat less detailed rendition. 69

Yet, in sum, by having bequeathed to us a record that is both insightful and penetrating, via his remarkable Arresting Views from a Raft Guided by Stars, Fei Xin has no doubt abetted our efforts at illuminating and clarifying at least two long-standing mysteries for which the best answers available were heretofore only probabilistic. Whether Malays constituted China’s first blacks and what the precise location of the elusive land of Kunlun is are questions of enormous consequence for our study, and Fei Xin’s work unquestionably advances our capabilities for furnishing firm answers. 70 However, Arresting Views from a Raft Guided by Stars is no Rosetta stone, and we unfortunately find it curiously inadequate in even suggesting tenable answers to a distinctly new set of questions that ironically arises only with our latter-day exposure to the work. Put succinctly, these questions are as follows: By the first half of the fifteenth century, just how widely dispersed were the various peoples of East African ethnicity beyond their native homelands in Africa proper? How abundantly or sparsely represented were they throughout the general region comprising what we now refer to as the Arabian Peninsula? Regardless of the extent of their dispersion beyond Africa, is there any conceivable reason for assuming their status elsewhere to be anything more than that of slaves?

In seeking answers to these questions, in the absence of any reference to such erstwhile defining cultural markers as skin color, we are forced to discern and driven to engage—as best we can—other forms of evidence. Interestingly, this circumstance leads us to resort to a more discriminating analysis of the most pronounced of the factors serving as a constant throughout Fei Xin’s several Africa-based geographical entries—namely, hair. Superficially, in the repeated instances when the subject of hair is addressed in foregoing series of commentaries, Fei Xin’s focus is ostensibly always on hair stylings and
nothing more. Yet, some comparative linguistic analysis quickly reveals that comments dating from nearly three centuries earlier on this same topic by Fei Xin's predecessors have preconditioned us for the real intent behind his early fifteenth-century remarks. In referring to those whom he deemed to be *kunlun* in the late twelfth century, Zhou Qufei, in addition to making note of their blackness of skin, had described their hair as being "like [tiny] fists,"71 employing the same terminology of *quanfu* that Fei Xin himself was to appropriate. Writing of the *kunlun* in the early thirteenth century, Zhao Rugua had also referenced their black complexion but then applied a different descriptor for their hair, claiming that they possessed "frizzled hair" or, more literally, "tadpole hair" (*doufu*).72 Nevertheless, the implications of the language used in both of these precedent-setting cases are not mysterious nor were they lost upon Fei Xin. What Fei Xin sought to signify in his substantially later and assuredly more direct observation of *kunlun* understood as Africans was a stark difference between Chinese like himself and the peoples that he saw with respect to hair texture. No less so than either Zhou Qufei or Zhao Rugua, Fei Xin clearly intended for what we today regard as the variable of dissimilarities in hair coarseness to stand as a kind of control—that is, as a standard for assigning the defining mark of difference. Nonetheless, we also find that Fei Xin distinguishes himself from these two predecessors in the exclusivity with which he relies on hair texture and the extent to which he permits it alone to form the basis for his discriminations.

However, even in our acceptance of disparity in hair quality as the admittedly crude basis for determining racial or ethnic identity that it is, we soon find that, in seeking to arrive at discriminations in hair texture that are any further refined, we are thwarted by the ubiquity of Fei Xin's resort to the default adjective of *quan*, which seems to encompass anything on the entire spectrum of coarseness, from tightly beaded follicles to the merely wavy, that deviates from any form of hair that is not straight. Thus, ultimately, the term itself is rendered unhelpful, for an examination of more than one of the Arabian-based entries in Arresting Views from a Raft Guided by Stars easily reveals Fei Xin referring to the hair of the populaces of Aden (Adan) as well as those of Djofar (Zuofaer) and Hormuz as *quan*. Arguably stemming from the limitations of his own vocabulary, not being by any estimation a scholar, Fei Xin almost assuredly intended for *quan* to extend to several different gradations of distinctive hair texture along the scale of what we call "curly" to "kinky." Nonetheless, for the purposes of extrapolating useful ethnographic categories, once we extend our inquiry in any confirmable way beyond continental Africa into its neighboring zones, we find that Fei Xin's repeated use
of the term—without any qualifications whatsoever—renders it useless. The very elasticity implied by Fei Xin's reliance on *quan* thereby becomes its principal constraint, for when compared to that of the Chinese, the signature head hair of virtually all the peoples encountered at the westernmost extreme of the Western Sea was *quan*.

Although they unquestionably qualify as exotica, the reports that Fei Xin offers in *Arresting Views from a Raft Guided by Stars* are nonetheless, in comparison to the descriptions of other lands and peoples afforded by European travel writings of roughly the same period, highly sober and realistic. In my view, this soberness and realism result from his perceptions being those of someone who really visited the sites he describes. However, in fairness, despite its considerable merits as a resource of direct witness, Fei Xin's *Arresting Views from a Raft Guided by Stars* is hardly flawless as a work, and there is at least one good reason why enthusiasm for it should be somewhat tempered. Whereas he did enjoy the distinction of having actually traveled to the locations he describes, particularly those along the east coast of Africa for which no previous Chinese explorer has left any known direct record, Fei Xin nonetheless brought his superstitions along with him. Some of these superstitions harbored are especially prejudicial and egregious, and although they appear to surface far less frequently in the entries on the African lands visited than they do elsewhere, whenever and wherever these types of views are operative, caution should be elicited regarding even those instances in which they seem not to be evident.

This occasionally superstitious side of Fei Xin's generally dispassionate disposition sometimes leads to a kind of willful and almost spitefully misconstrued cultural analysis. This order of superstition on Fei Xin's part much surpasses that which requires us to suspend our belief in accepting, for instance, that the livestock of such locales as Mogadishu and Zeila actually subsisted on diets of dried fish. Moreover, ironically, the nearer the locale to China and presumably the greater his familiarity with the population, the more active and imperious Fei Xin's superstitious impulse seems to be. We need only note the example of the zombielike “Corpse-headed” Mân (Shitou Mân) southern barbarians of Annam or modern northern Vietnam, for it serves saliently as a case in point:

> The Corpse-headed Mân tribes were originally [normal] women. But they come to differ [from other humans] by having eyes without pupils. In the depth of night, when they are sleeping with their husbands, the heads of these women take flight from their bodies and go forth to
consume human waste. Then the heads return and rejoin their bodies, permitting them to resume life as before. [But] if one recognizes one of them and either seals off the neck [of the corpse] or transports it to another place, then one can bring about [the monster's] death, for at times when there are those who are sick who need to go to the toilet, if it is the case that this malevolent spirit enters their abdomens, then death is certain.

Such women as these are rare among humans but if it is the case that one fails to report to officials the existence of one, then the result is the culpability of not only that person but his whole family. Out of their hatred for these beings, the natives play tricks on Corpse-headed Mân—whether alive or dead—by blocking up their necks [to prevent reunion between head and body].

Corroboration for Fei Xin's interest in such insidious goblins as the Corpse-headed Mân can be found in the writings of Ma Huan, his contemporary and fellow traveler on the seventh and final mission, who associates them as phenomena with Melaka rather than with Annam and, by contrast, alludes to little more than their existence, stating that the ancient central city of that country “was occupied by the Corpse-headed Mân.” In reading it as objectively as possible, we are required by our modern sensibilities to mentally resist both the blatant misogyny and the quasi-witch hunt atmosphere that permeate the lengthy foregoing passage. Nonetheless, doing so does not make it any easier to arrive at an explanation for exactly why Fei Xin would have inserted such an obviously preposterous digression into an otherwise prosaic and near-journalistic account of the country and peoples of Annam. Given its geographical and cultural proximity to China and therefore its status as one of the nearest first or last stops on any of the expeditions, Annam must have ranked high among the most familiar of sites visited by the explorers attached to the Zheng He missions.

In all fairness to him, Fei Xin prospectively could be merely passing along to us a localized myth reported to him, relating an old wives' tale in general circulation. Yet, even granting this prospect, as the only such excessively outlandish account of its type in the whole of Arresting Views from a Raft Guided by Stars, Fei Xin's fantastic description of the ghoulish nighttime activities of some of the Corpse-headed Mân womenfolk appears to be something more than frivolous or gratuitous, something much more even than a matter of familiarity breeding contempt. From an evidentiary standpoint, are we meant to take his screed as an expression of prejudices derived purely anecdotally,
or does it stem from putatively empirically "observed" experience? With intentionality as the baseline, the emphasis of the questions shifts somewhat. Does this passage represent yet another in a long line of disparaging pieces of ultra-Sinoculturalist propaganda, or is it nothing more than another unsurprising expression in the long continuum of deep-seated but culturecentric repugnance toward the other? Furthermore, equally difficult to deduce from a passage such as this one is whether Fei Xin actually believed what he wrote, which in turn compels us to question his overall veracity in a way that we have never had to previously. This is an uneasy query to which we are not likely ever to secure a firm answer.

Indeed, of far greater value to our study than his diversion into the surreal presentation of the Corpse-headed Mân barbarians could ever be is assuredly Fei Xin's real-world, real-time description of the Annamese barbarians that conjoins and immediately succeeds it. Its value lies in its effect of bringing us full-circle, back to the important themes of otherness with which we began, for—through it—we must confront the reality that even by the early fifteenth century the Chinese reception of the barbarian remained confined by an outlook that had not progressed radically far since ancient times. Clearly, this contiguous but more realistically anthropological report is not without a strain of contempt for the cultural other:

The men as well as the women [of Annam] fashion their hair into mallet-buns at the back of their crowns and, with chintz, wrap their heads. They wear short shirts and, with more chintz, sash their waists.

In their country, these people have neither writing brushes nor paper. Instead, covering a piece of sheepskin with soot and sharpening a fine sliver of bamboo, they write their characters by dipping the stylus they have carved into lime-water [for ink]. The form of their characters is as limp and crooked as wriggling earthworms. Their speech is entirely that of swallows and tailor-birds, such that the task of understanding it must be left to translators.

Still, even with its digressions and deficiencies exposed, on balance, we have little choice but to regard Fei Xin's Arresting Views from a Raft Guided by Stars, at least for its material specifically treating our present focus on Africa, as a credible and singularly revealing artifact—one in which we can with reasonable assurance invest substantial credence. Not only does it limn the premodern history of contact and interchange between the Chinese of the early Ming era and the blacks of the fifteenth-century East African coast, but
to a considerable degree Fei Xin's reportage also reclaims the life of this momentous episode and resuscitates its flavor. Its firsthand information supplied on these territories and their inhabitants along the Somalian-Kenyan coastline is remarkable in and of itself. In addition, without it, whereas a comparative surfeit of sources would still document the earlier premodern experiences of Africans inside China, we would have no documentation at all of the later premodern experiences of Chinese inside Africa—nor, for that matter, of Chinese knowledge of the very existence of Africa, for even Ming-period maps prove to be surprisingly deficient on that score (see Figure 5).

Moreover, we find that it is primarily through Fei Xin's observations as purveyed in Arresting Views from a Raft Guided by Stars that certain key questions of continual debate relating to the kunlun as peoples and Kunlun as places become resolvable. Granted, the answers it yields are not entirely unassailable, but through its informing first-person lens our speculations become undeniably more grounded. Furthermore, we must accord a final element of distinctiveness to Fei Xin's Arresting Views from a Raft Guided by Stars for the extent to which the images of black Africa and Africans apprehended and conveyed therein were to resonate well beyond the particular time of the work. It was a resonance with consequences no one could ever have predicted.

Vicarious Impressions of a Receding Shore

Whereas it might be inexplicable, Fei Xin's quizzical depiction of the Corpse-headed Mân is hardly something that we are incapable of rejecting out of hand. As an extraction from his much longer and more somber account of Annam as a country, the Corpse-headed Mân passage is as unrepresentative as it is unbelievable. However, the ease with which we are able to dismiss this passage is a direct function of its unprotected exposure as a fabrication. Perhaps what is most troubling among the implications of such a passage is that it invites the whole question of whether there are not additional, less clumsy and blatant inventions that interlace Fei Xin's reports.

The unmatched value of the information extracted from them notwithstanding, whether we can afford to deem Fei Xin's East African accounts in Arresting Views from a Raft Guided by Stars as entirely divorced from and devoid of all whimsy is a vexing question that we may elect to debate endlessly. Judging from the instance of the fabled Corpse-headed Mân, fancifulness clearly was not an antithetical component of Fei Xin's persona. Thus, what remains for us to judge is just how far his yin for invention may have
actually reached—that is, whether, for the African abstracts in question, there was ever a point at which whimsy entirely overwhelmed or blighted his clarity of vision, a time when sobriety was completely pervaded and supplanted by imagination. Needless to say, much depends on our appraisals—that is, much hangs in the balance with respect to our capacity to take any confidence in our surety about the earliest Chinese claims of the kind of direct knowledge of Africa that can come only from having set foot on its shores.

However, irrespective of what determination we ultimately make in this matter of veracity, we can little dispute the nature of the ensuing trend that emerged after Fei Xin involving the shifting balance between reality and fantasy in the Chinese apprehension of Africa. Over the course of the next two centuries, the data recording the exploits of Zheng He in general and those comprising the East African portions of Fei Xin’s log of the expeditions in particular became gradually but steadily transformed into the stuff of fiction. Although the course these data took likely differed little from the halting and circuitous routes sometimes undertaken on the voyages themselves, this watershed occurrence in literary transformation was probably inevitable and certainly influential. Thus, by comprehending even the most basic causes behind it, we greatly advance our appreciation for the significant ramifications stemming from this momentous development.

Although splendorous at their height throughout the 1410s and early 1420s, by 1433 the voyages of Zheng He had come to an unceremonious end. Several factors had precipitated their termination, but underpinning all of them was almost assuredly the unwillingness of the Ming bureaucratic establishment to suffer any further the indignity of being outdone by an Islamic eunuch commander and his semieunuch cohort of lieutenants. Over the span of three decades since the voyages had begun, the rivalry between the Ming scholar-officials and the eunuchs had sharply intensified. The former were by and large products of the theoretically independent apparatus of the civil service examination system; the latter, just as they always had, inveigled their power on the basis of their nearness to imperial authority. The prestige associated with the voyages certainly exalted these missions as accomplishments. However, the impracticality and the expense of their mobilization made them and those who conducted them progressively easier targets for attack. Eventually the enemies of the eunuchs succeeded in authoring the history of the Zheng He voyages largely by omission—that is, by expunging it from the official record. When another eunuch endeavored—eighty years after the fact—to resume the voyages, he found his efforts at every turn thwarted.

In the present, more important to our understanding than the chain of
causation behind the resultant cessation of the expeditions is our appreciation for that of the tangible aftereffects of their demise. With the discontinuation of the Ming exploratory missions that the admiral Zheng He had so ably pioneered, the reciprocal exchanges in trade that Fei Xin recorded at the conclusion of each of the African entries as having resulted from tribute protocol became increasingly sporadic and eventually discontinued. With no Chinese fleets any longer venturing forth and no African embassies continuing to visit the Chinese court regularly, the once-awakening Chinese knowledge of Africa and Africans became progressively stunted. Under these changed conditions, in ways perhaps prefigured by some of the infrequently appearing flights of phantasmagoria cited above in connection with Arresting Views from a Raft Guided by Stars, the entire saga of Zheng He's historic seven voyages became poised for transformation into fiction. Thus, perhaps inescapably, through a process that the historian of art and material culture Craig Clunas refers to as a transmutation, Zheng He's "diplomatic missions as far as East Africa" became "the stuff of fable."79

In the subsequent decades after their termination, concerted effort was directed under imperial sanction at the obliteration of the legacy of Zheng He's celestial voyages, no doubt in part with the intention of discouraging their emulation.80 However, to our good fortune, official suppression of the story of the great expeditions led by Zheng He never succeeded completely, with the event continuing to live on in the collective imagination of Ming popular consciousness. Moreover, with the full emergence of the novelistic genre in the late Ming period, numerous authors no doubt tried their hand at fictionalizing the missions and their landmark sets of events. Given the sensationalistic fame and the tremendous potential the voyages afforded as subjects for license in appealing to popular consumption, this proliferation of novelistic accounts should not surprise us.

Of all the extant fictional attempts, none surpasses that of a certain Luo Maodeng (fl. 1600) in richness or excessiveness. He was the reputed author in 1597 of Sanbao taijian xia Xiyang ji tongsu yanyi (Popular Romance of the Record of the Three-Jeweled Eunuch Descending upon the Western Sea). Of Luo himself, we know painfully little. We do know, however, that he was a native of the northern and inland province of Shaanxi, an intriguing fact because it attests to just how far from coast to interior the then-legendary story of Zheng He and his voyages had spread throughout the empire and just how entrenched a fixture it had become in commoner consciousness through generations of popularization. That this series of historic events, even while in the midst of its transformation from reality into fable, was of such profound
dramatic interest that its primary retelling would be undertaken by a scholar so geographically remote from the southeast coastal setting of its occurrence is striking. It serves as evidence supporting the conclusion that by the close of the sixteenth century the voyages were securely embedded as a transcendentally national tale.

If nothing else, Luo Maodeng was a highly imaginative writer. Through his sprawling opus of twenty books or "parts" (juan) and a hundred chapters (hui), he obviously took it as his personal mission to fill in the gaps of "deficiency" that he viewed as persisting in the three surviving firsthand accounts authored by the writers Ma Huan, Fei Xin, and Gong Zhen. The fact that these individuals had actually participated in the voyages of nearly two centuries earlier through their direct attachment and that Luo could not possibly have done so seems to have posed little deterrence. Thus, even as it is by no means a commentary, Luo Maodeng's novel nonetheless represents a voluminous compendium of embellishments on the earlier works, such as Arresting Views from a Raft Guided by Stars, of these authorial forerunners.

However, again, as has been the case throughout this study, it is exclusively Luo Maodeng's triumphalist description of Zheng He and his compatriots among the Africans with which we need be most concerned. We have no historical verification that the eunuch commander himself was ever part of any detachment of his own fleets that physically ported on the African shoreline. Nevertheless, Luo Maodeng's rendition of the servility of the chief-tains of the kingdoms of Mogadishu, Juba, and Brawa before Zheng He's fictionalized associate Wang Ye (also called Wang Shangshu)—a character based on Zheng He's real-life chief lieutenant or first mate Wang Jinhong (fl. 1405–33)—amply apprises us of how later authors envisioned onshore, on-the-ground relations to have gone. Interrupting his commander in midspeech at their African campsite, a nameless character in the novel reports aloud to Wang Ye, who is within the compound: "All together, the barbarian kings of Mogadishu, Juba, and Brawa have arrived outside the tent to offer up letters and displays of submission and to tender ritual gifts presented in tribute."81 We can bracket the implausibility of all three African leaders appearing together in homage at the encampment of the subordinate of a subordinate of the distant Chinese emperor, but even if we are able to suspend our disbelief on this issue, we encounter additional problems. Discontinuity also arises in Luo Maodeng's description of our informant as a Blue Banner guardsman (lanqi guan), a figure who can only be a product of the transition to Qing rather than early Ming times.82 Thus, even in the instance of such a brief
excerpt as this one, we find that Luo Maodeng has injected his opus with a hopeless dose of anachronism.

Luo Maodeng's subsequent insertion of his own direct narration pursuant to this scene does little to advance either the plot or our knowledge. We are told that the three African kings "required neither vanquishing in battle nor subjection to quaking with fear in order to come forth"; that they willingly "paid homage ritualistically [to Wang Ye] by performing [the ceremonial three prostrations of the body and nine head-knockings of] the kowtow (ketou)"; and that "after a while, they settled upon [communication through] some utterances and facial expressions." To be sure, Luo Maodeng imagined Africa and its Africans the only way he could—in terms of his seventeenth-century circumstances and agenda rather than those of Zheng He in the fifteenth century. For example, Luo Maodeng continually throughout his voluminous opus encourages us to believe that the Chinese were universally welcomed at every port of call, which is nothing more than another fiction contradicted by the historical record of numerous occasions of conflict, certainly elsewhere if not on Africa proper. After all, beginning with the first voyage, there was no shortage of parties encountered who instead of being lulled into passivity by the awe-inspiring grandeur of the missions were contrarily and obstreperously resistant, unwilling to offer up a show of even grudging deference to the grandiose display of Chinese superiority inherent in the approach of the treasure ships.

Thus, in the case of Luo Maodeng, we have good reason to assume that a state of considerable disjuncture existed between author and subject, between interpreted ideals and lived actualities. Still, despite our skeptical and difficultly repressed impulse to privilege divergence over convergence, on the basis of what can be surmised at this late stage in our inquiry we must nonetheless regard certain elements of continuity connecting Luo Maodeng's seventeenth-century imaginings to the fifteenth-century realities of Zheng He, Fei Xin, and company as remaining largely intact. We can assuredly assume the hegemonist cultural imperatives of Chinese universalism to have been operative in both cases—whether applied to the makers of history at sea or the manipulator of that history in the writer's studio. What might likely have differed most is only the manner in which these imperatives were asserted and the extent to which they were realized.

Moreover, although it is diminished for historical purposes by its inventiveness, Luo Maodeng's elaborate fictional construction is still far from worthless, and thus I believe it possible to utilize it selectively to illuminate a final obscure but all-important aspect of the condition of Sino-African relations at
the very end of their premodern stage of development. Judging from the fore­
going information provided from the received record of Zheng He’s interac­
tions, whether extracted from Fei Xin’s Arresting Views from a Raft Guided by Stars or from what are largely redactions of that and other records—including the texts of Zheng He’s own commemorative stele inscriptions—collected in the Ming History, we confront the Chinese enslavement of African blacks as a thing of the past. Once commonplace enough at least at Guangzhou to merit only a casual mention by the raconteur Zhu Yu, black African enslavement seems, within the span of at most three centuries, to have desisted as a practice in China. After all, as translated above, although he depicts the Africans whom Zheng He encountered as utterly slavish, nowhere in Popular Romance of the Record of the Three-Jeweled Eunuch Descending upon the Western Sea does Luo Maodeng describe Zheng He as actually enslaving either these kings or their subjects, much less transporting them back to China in such a condition of servitude. Should we interpret the free passage of the handfuls of African ambassadors Zheng He did transport, individuals fortunate enough to enjoy favor by accompanying the much-desired giraffes and other exoticas, to mean that by the late sixteenth century, Luo Maodeng’s own time, all vestiges of the former Chinese enslavement of Africans had vanished? What is more, should we assume that all the African slaves themselves had simply disappeared, that through death and depletion there were no more Africans to be enslaved in all of China?

The answer to the first of these questions—involving the discontinuation of black African slaveholding on the part of Chinese with the progression of time—appears to be yes. Interestingly, however, it is the testimony of a surpris­
ing but persuasive independent third-party observer who was neither Chinese nor African that permits us to resolve this issue confidently in the affirmative. Although assigned to and stationed as an evangelizer of the Christian faith in the Philippines, the Spanish Augustinian friar Martín de Rada (1533–78), while attached to an official delegation from that country, arrived in China in June 1575.87 Beginning with the port of Amoy (today’s Xiamen) in Fujian Province, which was reached in early July, Rada then toured a series of cities along the southeastern China coastline. Rada and his delegation returned to Manila at the end of October 1575.88

Martín de Rada thus was a participant in the first ecclesiastical mission to China ever mounted by Spanish clerics stationed in the Philippines—a venture that met with no real success.89 Therefore, for this and other reasons, Rada probably would not be remembered as even a particularly distinguished participant in the first wave of Catholic missionary investment in China if it
were not for the fact that, during his stay of three-plus months, he proved to be an especially astute and often discerning (some might contend censorious) observer of the Chinese and their customs. Rada composed a report in two short treatises preserving what he had learned, and in the second of these, under the subheading "Of Their Justices and Ways of Government," he immediately addresses the subject of slavery and offers the following: "They say that in all the kingdom of Taybin [Da Ming] there are no lords of vassalls, for everyone is subjected directly to the King. However, there are slaves of the same natives of the country, for they also say that they do not admit foreigners [as slaves]. Some of the slaves are born in servitude, some sell themselves into slavery on account of crimes which they have committed." Obviously, that portion of Rada's observation most germane to our present considerations is the second sentence. From it we may surmise that by the close of the sixteenth century neither Africans nor evidently any other of the historical categories of blacks were regularly being subjected to Chinese enslavement as they had been of old.

However, the final matter begs some manner of resolution. To what extent should we take this evolved "freedom" that, by the sixteenth century, precluded Africans from being routinely enslaved in China to mean that they necessarily were wholly absent from the Chinese landscape? After all, such a situation would hardly represent true freedom because the beneficiaries would not be there to enjoy it. A glimpse at an answer for the very end of the sixteenth century has already been supplied in Chapter 1 in the form of a citation of Jonathan Spence's salient reportage on the circumstances attending the arrival of the Jesuit monk Matteo Ricci. The missionary's initial and then discontinued reliance on black servants indicates that they were not at all absent from China but instead very definitely present. There is additional, more circumstantial evidence for a black African presence in China for the mid-sixteenth century, with much of it having been centered geographically on what was originally the Portuguese southern way station of Macau (also Macao; in Chinese, Aomen) as well as, to a lesser extent, Guangzhou. Yet, the point to be trenchantly made here is that although these individuals were immanently present, they still were not free. Their former condition of Chinese enslavement had merely become replaced by that of European enslavement, and—even if unmentioned—the fact that they were no more absent from the China of late Ming times than were their new European masters seems beyond all doubt and equivocation.

As I have endeavored to argue at least implicitly throughout this chapter, on the one hand, the visitation of African lands by Zheng He's celestial fleets
represents merely one relatively minor installment among the major milestones that the audacious venture achieved, and it is therefore fitting that we should view it proportionally within the enormous scope of the expeditionary enterprise taken as a whole. However, on the other hand, and not just because it is so pointedly our own specific focus of inquiry, we cannot deny that this same act of visitation attains a special status by virtue of the fact that these African “countries” visited fall squarely under that fascinating rubric of first encounters of a truly defining kind—being places to which, as far as we are likely ever to know assuredly, seafaring Chinese had never before gone. These African sites additionally stand crucially apart from the legions of others visited during the voyages by being the most distant and least frequent ones upon which these earliest of China’s transoceanic travelers touched. Therefore, its deficits as a work of fiction for historical purposes notwithstanding, the pivotal contribution of Luo Maodeng’s Popular Romance of the Record of the Three-Jeweled Eunuch Descending upon the Western Sea is that it, even if in an entirely different way from Fei Xin’s Arresting Views from a Raft Guided by Stars, elucidates how Chinese thinking of late premodern times either had or had not evolved in its conception and reception of these least familiar of lands and peoples.

Thus, in the end, just as much because of as despite its colorfully drawn imaginings—fantasias that we are perhaps not meant to accept as credible—the very existence of Popular Romance of the Record of the Three-Jeweled Eunuch Descending upon the Western Sea reveals to us fully the irreversible extent of Chinese conceptual reorientation with regard to the multitude of distinct peoples they had over the centuries designated as kunlun. We cannot know today with certainty whether their landing on the East African coast in the course of the fifth voyage of Zheng He in 1417–19 was a planned or unintentional undertaking. Nevertheless, following that fateful landfall, with respect to the blacks among them, Chinese at the close of the Ming era had become irrevocably robbed of their former comfort zone of ignorance. In succession, their literal and figurative collision with Africa had changed everything, as they were forcefully stripped of an ancient archetype and diverted from being able to refer either to the quasi-bestial kunlun or their once-mythogeographical habitat of Kunlun with the same safe insularity of the knowledge of past times. For this transitional generation of Chinese, from their times forward, no mention of the kunlun or their domain could occur without simultaneously and conterminously referencing those newly discovered territories and their truly black inhabitants that lay at the end of the Western Sea.
Conclusion

T. S. Eliot (1888–1965) once asserted, “Knowledge is invariably a matter of degree: you cannot put your finger upon even the simplest datum and say ‘this we know.’” Yet, whereas this observation would seem to be irrefutably true, whenever we seek to elucidate a subject as recondite as the nature of earliest contact and interaction between the people of China and the plethora of peoples they successively designated as black, we are perhaps too easily daunted by the opaqueness faced and thus are lured into overstressing those things we feel incapable of ever knowing. Defaulting to such a stance is in certain respects understandable, and in many instances we find its reasonableness underscored, for many elements of obstruction beset this particular history of contact and conspire to engender as well as reinforce our pessimism. Surely, as we found in the example of the black slaves of Guangzhou, the adoption of such a position is justified in our attempts to determine, for instance, the precise details of how it was that these unfortunates were ferried into their Chinese captivity. For answers to such a question, we are forced to resort entirely to speculation and, in the end, confront the fact that no matter how desperately we might seek answers to such a query, the data will never be forthcoming, if they ever existed in the first place.

Nevertheless, when we confront such vacuities in our understanding as the one posed by this question of what the experience of transport must have been like for the Guangzhou-bound black slaves, we should remain mindful that we can still glean some highly tenable insights through a process of analogizing. In the first place, as I have endeavored to convey it herein, we do at least possess a firm sense of what Hans K. Van Tilburg, in his Chinese Junks on the Pacific: Views from a Different Deck, has called “the living culture of Chinese vessels,” wherein we have exposed the near-predatory conditions as they existed on Chinese seagoing merchant craft of the Song period. As we learned, commonplace within this living Chinese seafaring culture were chief disciplinarians, vice disciplinarians, and other such individuals—men
in possession of vermilion seals that permitted them to flog and ill-treat their crewmen to the point of death in order to maintain discipline. We need only recall our informant Zhu Yu’s definitive remark on the subject: “In the event someone dies [from such a beating] or is lost at sea, these officers appropriate the man’s property.” Our appreciation for the harrowing significance of Zhu Yu’s observation only leads us further toward a concomitant respect for the undercurrent implications the ocean perceived as a kind of netherworld where property and persons are subject to irretrievable loss. Writing a half-century earlier, perhaps Zhu Yu’s near-contemporary Zhou Qufei put the point best when he poignantly commented, “Once one has set forth upon the forbiddingly blue-green sea, there can be no accounting for life or death, no turning back to the realm of men.” From the perspectives of these well-informed individuals, only the foolhardy could fail to regard the great oceans as the last of then-known frontiers and as potential points of no return, and never does one decide to venture upon them casually. Clearly, perhaps even more threatening in their minds than the natural predations of the seas were their human ones, for— alluring as they might be to the adventurous—these expansive waters were dreaded as zones teeming with disorder, as places where the normal codes of civility to which one was accustomed on land need not at all apply.

Granted, the foregoing grim images are such as we can derive exclusively from the incidental descriptions that we fortunately possess of life and conditions aboard Chinese merchant ships, as they obtained among Chinese crews of the early to late twelfth century C.E. We hardly need either doubt or question that these were essentially the same circumstances in which the original kunlun slaves of Malay extraction continued to subsist long after that time and, to the degree that it was possible, make their marginalized presences known, for we learn from Leonard Andaya, among other present-day scholars, that representatives of this ethnic stock frequently served the Chinese as navigational guides well into the fifteenth century and the Portuguese in the same capacity in the sixteenth century. Yet the situations of their Malay counterparts notwithstanding, the presence of slaves of African origin aboard these same ships even as cargo, not to mention as crewmen, must have been an exceedingly sporadic if not rare occurrence, despite the fact that—as we have learned—the Chinese had become exposed to the existence of this peculiarly exotic variety of kunlun several centuries earlier and had imagined its existence countless centuries well before that. Moreover, we have already established persuasively that those black slaves of Africa who were so unfortunate as to be abducted from points along the eastern shores of their homeland only to enter China as captives confined to Guangzhou were almost certainly transported there
aboard *Arab* vessels. Yet, if we suppose that emerging knowledge of the almost unspeakable horrors meted out to traffickers as well as to their human cargoes on board the ships engaged in the subsequent Atlantic slave trade serves as any analog, then we are perhaps better off not knowing what sort of tortured fate conceivably awaited these slaves in their carriage across the Indian Ocean to China. As Marcus Rediker conveys with unflinching honesty and directness in his wrenching historical exposé *The Slave Ship: A Human History*, “Violent command applied almost as much to the rough crews of the slavers as to the hundreds of captives they shipped. Discipline was often brutal, and many a sailor was lashed to fatality . . . [m]any died, some went blind, and countless others suffered lasting disability.”

On the one hand, it is doubtless true that slavers in any context were likely quite loath to inflict debilitating injury routinely on the human commodity that was at the very heart of their enterprise and constituted the very source of their wealth. However, on the other hand, if they could be brought to subject their hired underlings to such incapacitating brutality as Rediker details, then—assuming slaveholding protocols of maritime command to be vaguely similar wherever practiced—there is little reason to believe that common Arab slave hands of the twelfth century fared considerably better while at sea than did common British ones of the eighteenth century. Aboard the narrow confines of a slaving vessel on the ocean, total escape from the web of violence was simply never an option for these men, and they were fated to unstinting abuse by their superiors. Regrettably, we can surmise much the same about the fates of the slaves whom each group transported. What Rediker terms throughout as a descending *cascade* of violence enveloped all in its potential lethality. We can assume that slavery, wherever practiced, neither was nor is a civilized endeavor. It had to have lacked gentleness anywhere along its chain of relationships—for slaver and the enslaved.

In truth, however, we are forced to admit that complete surety about what past conditions of enslavement anywhere on the globe were really like will forever elude us. Nevertheless, if our knowledge is to be advanced at all, then we must resist any proclivity to shrink away when confronted with any past that is less than fully knowable. Every past becomes, at one point or another, impenetrable. Yet, this unlikelihood of ever achieving perfect gnosis should never be permitted to become the enemy of our extracting any knowledge at all. Moreover, given that what is near at hand temporally is so often more readily comprehensible than that which stands at great distance, let us at least begin to conclude our consideration of the reality of China’s premodern African-derived blacks and the circumstances surrounding them with a passing consid-
eration of matters from the standpoint of the present. Let us further suppose that we were somehow capable of quantifying and depicting graphically—the level of historical intercultural interaction between China and Africa. From all we have thus far garnered, for the centuries before initial and intermittent contact began, we would expect to see the line depicting this mode of activity to ascend only very gradually, barely deviating from the horizontal over a temporal span of great length. However, beginning in or about the eighth century of our Common Era, the continuation of this same plotted line—leading up to the contemporary engagement of China with modern-day Africa—would necessarily ascend suddenly and sharply, jutting upward stunningly in its verticality. Thus, on this basis, we might surmise any conclusion to a study of this kind that is not at least in part an epilogue to be as remiss as it is deficient.

Undeniably, especially of late, the commercial as well as the diplomatic ties being forged between the Chinese People's Republic of today and those contemporary African nation-states now comprising the erstwhile terrains of the historical blacks who greeted the mariner Zheng He grow impressively stronger rather than weaker. Moreover, this same phenomenon of trending toward interface applies to the emergent ties between their separate peoples. Although much vicissitude and controversy attend these developing connections, over the last half of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first, perhaps nowhere else in the world has the conspicuous reach of Chinese foreign investment made a more differential imprint than on the economies and infrastructures of East African states such as Tanzania and Kenya and the nations of the immediately contiguous interior, such as Sudan. Indeed, in an almost unrecognizable advance beyond the past situation herein presented, at present China enjoys formal trade and/or diplomatic relations with the majority, if not quite all, of the fifty-plus nations that make up the African continent.9

However, this modern transformation in Sino-African relations and the impulse dictating a chronicling of an epilogue notwithstanding, as an inquiry this study has consistently posited its locus in the past, with its disclosures rooted in but by no means restricted to the thousand-year temporal sweep that preponderantly encompasses the fifth through the fifteenth centuries of the Common Era. Thus, even with a nod of recognition toward the present-day situation, we should nonetheless eschew any betrayal of our established context and rightly endeavor as best we can to understand and appreciate our findings in light of their intimate connectedness with those times significantly earlier than our own. In so concluding, it is fitting that we elect to continue on
the same basis we have thus far proceeded, for by doing so, much is likely to be revealed. The most significant among those revelations is how thoroughly the theme of China's interactions with premodern blacks of its day is, on the one hand, infused by and, on the other, exhibits nothing short of a profusion of divergent subthemes. Perhaps some modest recapitulation of what has been disclosed is in order to illustrate and underscore this point fully.

The historical reality of China's relative geographical isolation has spawned many misconceptions, and not the least of these is the misinformed Western notion that Chinese of the centuries prior to the nineteenth of our Common Era were wholly unfamiliar and even unaware of most peoples considered ethnically different from themselves. However, conversely, in recent decades few long-accepted assumptions about China have become more vigorously questioned than the completeness of this supposed isolation. In this connection, we have discovered that our presumption of this premodern Chinese ignorance of other peoples—specifically those of African origin or descent but also others whom we have designated as black—could not have been more wrong. We have become enlightened in this crucial respect through our historical exploration of these interactions in three distinct geographical zones or venues. From each we accrue a different level of understanding regarding the nature of interaction between the Chinese and the blacks with whom they chanced into contact.

We have learned that, taken as an informing parameter, the zones where first contacts between the Chinese and the blacks took place were no less important than the times of their occurrence. Blackness in the Chinese context has always been to some degree dependent on the time period that serves as its particular locus. Developing this kind of temporal-contextual consciousness helps us more than we might ever have imagined, for we have determined conclusively that the original blacks of premodern China were neither African nor, in our conventionally modern interpretation of the term, black. For us today and even for several generations of our forbears, blackness evolved some centuries ago into an almost exclusively racial category. However, from all that has been revealed, we now know that such was not the case for Chinese until fairly recent times. For Chinese of the roughly thousand-year period featured in this book, blackness was a dualistically construed concept—eventually racial (as it has become for us) but primordially grounded in skin shade, such that it was also readily ascribed to their often ethnically similar neighbors. The vast variety of the sources on which we are forced to rely apprises us fully of this fact. Indeed, as Marc Abramson comments on an era that has proven as crucial to our study as the Tang, "ethnicity as such was neither the topic
of any established genre of Chinese writing nor conceived of in a coherent fashion." Thus, even while recognizing the methodological risk of seeming to homogenize—to employ Abramson’s term—extremely disparate types of historical evidence, in order that anything meaningful gets communicated at all, we have nonetheless been impelled by the extant sources available to us to forge judiciously forward.

We have furthermore learned that the term for a black individual, kunlun, was in widely accepted if poorly defined usage well before the first documented contact between Chinese and Africans and that it came to incorporate Africans only after the fact. Indeed, as Zhang Xinglang contends in his Chinese-language study “Gudai Zhongguo yu Feizhou zhi jiaotong” (Communication between Ancient China and Africa), “It was only during Tang times that the black slaves of Africa were given a name. During the Tang, China lacked a name for Africa, and thus it also lacked a name for African slaves, and therefore we witness the appearance of the term kunlun slaves. The term kunlun slaves does appear in many writings of the period, and in each work that does refer to these slaves, we find that there are phrases describing their bodies as black, in order to present them as Africans.”

Just as it was never a static concept, neither was kunlun a term that necessarily sustained its currency. The Guangzhou slaves of the eleventh and twelfth centuries were the first identifiable peoples of African heritage comprising substantial numbers to which the Chinese affixed the name. However, following their travails nearly four centuries were to elapse before there was any verifiable reengagement between China or the Chinese and the blacks of the African continent. By this time, as was exposed through the contacts resulting from the East African expeditionary missions led by Zheng He, kunlun was no longer a term applied to these peoples. The Chinese—resorting to their age-old proclivity for toponyms in referencing other peoples—elected instead to identify them by their countries of origin and, curiously, without any reference to their skin coloration. Thus, we have discovered that the early fifteenth-century voyages of Zheng He represent a collective milestone not only in China’s institutional history but also in the unveiled relations between the Chinese and one phalanx of the diverse peoples formerly subsumed under the rubric of kunlun. Only through the mercantile-driven, tribute-bearing expeditions that Zheng He and his fleets undertook have we learned, through the disclosures of Fei Xin, of a somewhat unexpected development in interstate interethnic relations—namely, the decline and discontinuation of the pejorative ascription kunlun in reference to the populations of African countries. This development does not necessarily mean that the Chinese had become any more enlightened
in their dealings with African peoples; although they were no longer enslaving them (Europeans had stepped forward to fill that void), the demeaning depictions of interaction imagined in Luo Maodeng’s Popular Romance of the Record of the Three-Jeweled Eunuch Descending upon the Western Sea fully belie that assumption. Nevertheless, the falling into disuse of the hoary term *kunlun* in application to Africans does at least suggest just how radically the world known to the Chinese had expanded by early Ming times.

As sheer navigational exploits and divorced from their other momentous implications and ramifications, the “treasure voyages” of the commander Zheng He rightly deserve our collective attention and even admiration.13 These hegemonic tours of vistas then known and unknown do, after all, represent the absolute culmination of what Jung-pang Lo aptly called nothing less than a “maritime expansion of China from the twelfth to the fifteenth century.”14 However, too often lost altogether or at least relegated to the sidelines in any discussion of Zheng He’s wondrous travels is the fact that the Chinese, for the first time, came into direct contact with coastal East African blacks. To be sure, a popular fascination with the intricate logistics of the voyages themselves has heretofore tended to overwhelm and overshadow the remarkable saga of Sino-African contact overall. Consequently, to elect to tell even this installment of that saga—that of Chinese impressions of the lands and peoples they encountered along the coast of East Africa—is in part to proffer an editorial corrective. It is to decide that the celebrity accorded to Zheng He should no longer come at the diminution or expense of the much less than fully recoverable experiences of those throngs of anonymous travelers who as slaves and consequently perforce against their collective will made and survived the harrowing journey by sea in the opposite direction.

Moreover, even with this much revealed, let it never be said that these discoveries have always come easily to us; neither the past itself nor the documentary evidence of the past has always been our ally. To be sure, as we progress forward in time, we encounter a greater abundance of sources that inform our knowledge of what Abramson calls the Chinese “consciousness of ethnic difference.”15 Even so, for significantly later times, as we witnessed during the subsequent eons of passage from the Song period through the transition to the Qing Dynasty, a period of nearly a millennium, our extraction of the story of China’s premodern blacks is achieved only by our teasing through and grappling with literature—such as this country account in an official history or that nonofficial travelogue—that is devoted almost entirely to other subjects and was conceived primarily for wholly other purposes than that to which we seek to bring its information to bear.
Furthermore, in every instance the motive impetus behind the production of this literature that informs us of contact between Chinese and blacks in the premodern age has foremost been geographical rather than ethnographical, with the sketchy descriptions of the inhabitants peopling the numerous distant realms cataloged in these sources being of secondary and sometimes seemingly incidental concern. Under such conditions, any serious effort to reconstitute the circumstances of the earliest Chinese encounters with the blacks they met borders on becoming a haphazard and discontinuous enterprise. Each act of such reclamation becomes an endeavor whereby one must labor in the shadows, figuratively reenacting the marginalized experience—in intellectual terms only and with neither the psychic anguish nor the probable physical suffering—that must have befallen the Guangzhou slaves of Song times in their captivity.

A perspective shift, from blacks observed always near or inside the Chinese mainland to their apprehension exclusively in the exceedingly remote settings of their native places, most characterizes the post-Song literature. The informing nature of this literature, of which the elaborate fictional account of Luo Maocheng is a problematic but vital part, is beyond dispute, but in the end we also discovered it to be, in a curious way, diverting. Such is the case because it lulls us into what is almost certainly the complacently mistaken impression that the age of all Chinese domestic interaction with its blacks, including its Africans, had ended. However, whereas it was always of limited parameters because of the relatively small numbers of representatives, numbers which may well have ebbed in the succeeding centuries, this interaction did not cease. Beginning with the Portuguese conquest of Melaka in 1511, subsequent developments, such as the insistent and gradually surging influx of Europeans vying to penetrate the South China coastline, all militate convincingly against the idea of a China ever completely bereft of blacks. We should not for an instant believe that these latecomer visitors to China, of whom the Portuguese, the Spanish, and the Italians were in the forefront forming the leading imperious edge, did not come with their own slaves—who were invariably black—in tow.

Moreover, now that we possess a sense of the contours of the necessary presence of blacks—albeit incidental and infrequent but nonetheless internal to China—even as late as the close of the sixteenth century, certain truth-telling responsibilities become incumbent on us. Most crucially, we should reject attributing our failure to detect them heretofore to specious reasoning. Such flawed and feeble claims as their no longer being anomalous or their no longer constituting a sufficiently noticeable critical mass should never pass as
options. We must admit to remaining incognizant of China's blacks during this transitional time from their premodern to their modern Chinese experiences for the same reason that we were unaware of their presence earlier—that is, because they continued much as before to be restricted to the peripheral nether ground of China's traditional history.

Writing at the midpoint of the twentieth century and proffering almost a defense of his own summary exploration of the dawning of Africa and Africans on Chinese awareness, J. J. L. Duyvendak wrote, "I have nothing to offer that is radically new, but there is still so much conflicting opinion and confusion on important points, and the books and articles on the subject are so scattered that it may be useful to review the material once more." Given that his premise constitutes a truism now as much as it did then, I close by confessing that I have had little choice herein but to take Duyvendak's humble objective throughout as my own. The fortunate lesson learned is that whereas we can and should always explore them afresh, we henceforth can neither discover nor exploit the blacks of premodern China wholly anew. Considered in aggregate as a collective object of study, China's succession of premodern blacks command our attention and our respect today precisely because of the immovable space they occupy in what should be our expanding world historical purview. Once revealed to have existed at all, despite their estranged alterity within the very context in which we encounter them, China's verifiable but heretofore obscure blacks become irremovable from our fullest understanding of the entity that traditional China was. Therefore, in the end, in the face of almost all conceivable odds, their position in our mental consciousness becomes inviolable, for no matter how marginalized they may have been in their own time, we become utterly incapable of trivializing, diminishing, or consigning them to ephemerality in ours.
NOTES

INTRODUCTION


5. For reasons that follow, several authors, including even the contemporary authority on the Chinese diaspora Wang Gungwu, have stressed the salience of this ostensibly obscure event. See the emphasis accorded it, for example, in Edward H. Schafer, The Golden Peaches of Samarkand: A Study of T'ang Exotics (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), 15–16. Lu Yuanrui's death is recorded in the biography of the much better known Wang Fangqing (d. 702).


7. Like many of the Chinese terms that eventually became applied as appellations for peoples of foreign origin, künlun was originally a place-name or toponym. See the discussion of this phenomenon of transference in the first chapter of this book.


9. In his study of the early modern British situation, for instance, Habib provides and classifies some 448 individual records on black presence. See Habib, Black Lives, 13–14.

10. The argument that many of the defining traits we commonly identify with this somewhat later period in Western historical development were already being evinced during the chronologically earlier Chinese "middle period" is most closely associated with
the Japanese sinologist Naitō Torajirō (or Naitō Konan) and is typically referred to as the “Naitō hypothesis.” For more on his life and influence, see Joshua A. Fogel, Politics and Sinology: The Case of Naitō Konan (1866–1934) (Cambridge, Mass.: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1984).

11. Thus the process we witness in the Chinese case, beginning in the early centuries of the Common Era and continuing essentially into modern times, is a stark inversion of what occurred in early modern Europe, where—in an almost conspiratorial manner—the neighboring nations of the Netherlands, France, and England came to stigmatize Spain as a whole, owing to its distinction of possessing a substantial Moorish population, as “biologically black.” See the illuminating discussion in Barbara Fuchs, “The Spanish Race,” in Re-reading the Black Legend: The Discourses of Religious and Racial Difference in the Renaissance Empires, ed. Margaret R. Greer, Walter D. Mignolo, and Maureen Quilligan (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 94–98.


CHAPTER ONE


2. Frank Dikötter, The Discourse of Race in Modern China (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1992), 11. See also Pelliot, Notes on Marco Polo, 600.

3. Pelliot, Notes on Marco Polo, 600. An alternative but lesser possibility, of course, is that Chinese may well have come to consider Indonesian Negritos black even while they clearly did distinguish them from “African negroes.”


5. Ibid., 10–11. Interestingly, the process whereby Chinese eventually came to think of themselves as self-referentially yellow colored was not only an extremely late but also a largely externally imposed development that was most perpetrated by Europeans. See the brief but illuminating discussion of how the Chinese became yellow in D. E. Mungello, The Great Encounter of China and the West, 1500–1800, 3d ed., Critical Issues in World and International History (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2009), 130–34.


10. King Mu, who putatively lived to the age of 105, is regarded as perhaps the pivotal
ruler of the Zhou because he ruled it at the reputed height of its expansionist power. It is recorded that he supposedly traveled personally more than fifty-six thousand miles (ninety thousand kilometers) to the west of China.

11. The Kunlun Mountains constitute a sprawling range stretching for approximately 1,000 miles (1,610 kilometers) east from the Pamir Mountains along the southern border of Xinjiang Province with Tibet and into Qinghai Province. In northeastern Tibet the range reaches a height of 25,340 feet (7,724 meters) at its highest point.

12. Scholars have not been able to establish either by whom or exactly when this text was written. However, it was discovered in the year 281 C.E. in the tomb of the monarch Xiang (r. 319–296 B.C.E.) of the state of Wei.


14. Its present phonological status as a rhyming binome further suggests an original pronunciation that is perhaps approximated by something like *krun. For more regarding the etymology of this term, see J. J. L. Duyvendak, China’s Discovery of Africa: Lectures Given at the University of London on January 22 and 23, 1947 (London: Arthur Probsthain, 1949), 23, in which it is described as originally “the round vault of the sky, in which [the] gigantic Tibetan mountains seem to lose themselves.” Interestingly, in his Huangji jingshishu (Book of Supreme World-Ordering Principles), the Song-period philosopher Shao Yong (1011–77) affords us a fleeting description of how Kunlun, as such a “vault,” was traditionally conceived: “As for our explaining how the canopy of Heaven became tilted as it is, Kunlun—partitioning according to the directions—hung down to form the Four Seas. If one tries to deduce the reason for this, then one finds that one cannot. Now how can we expect Earth, being fixed, square, and quiescent, to attain to being like Heaven in its roundness and activity?” (Shao Yong, Huangji jingshishu [Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1934], 8A.28b). For more on the representative ideas of this unusual thinker, see Don J. Wyatt, “Shao Yong’s Numerological-Cosmological System,” in Dao Companion to Neo-Confucian Philosophy, ed. John Makeham (Dordrecht, Netherlands, and New York: Springer, forthcoming 2009), chap. 2.

15. There are many instances in the traditional sources in which Kunlun as toponym is clearly intended to denote a location that is as much figurative as real. Such must be said, for example, regarding its appearance in the Han Dynasty works Huainanzi, attributed to the historical figure of the same name who putatively lived from 179 to 122 B.C.E., and the anonymous Classic of Mountains and Seas (Shanhaijing). Concerning its appearance in the former work, see John S. Major, Heaven and Earth in Early Han Thought: Chapters Three, Four, and Five of the Huainanzi (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 26, 37, 46–48, 143, 150–61. Concerning its appearance in the latter work, see Vera Dorofeeva-

16. Pelliot, Notes on Marco Polo, 600.


18. Much recent scholarship in a wide variety of fields—from history to cultural anthropology and from political science to philosophy—has focused on the inherent shortcomings and yet persistence of the significance of color-based classifications of humankind. Among the more recent and provocatively titled examples is Cedric Herring, Verna M. Keith, and Hayward Derrick Horton, eds., Skin Deep: How Race and Complexion Matter in the “Color-Blind” Era (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, Institute for Research on Race and Public Policy, University of Illinois at Chicago, 2004).

19. See Duyvendak, China’s Discovery of Africa, 23, wherein it is stated that “the Chinese . . . applied the term [kunlun] to the peoples, mostly of the Malay race, whom they found at the ends of the earth.” Dikötter, Discourse on Race, 12, remarks that as late as the mid-eighteenth century the term kunlun referred strictly to Malaysians. In my view, by that time the term was already considerably more encompassing of a broader range of peoples than Dikötter states. However, it still seems unlikely or at least uncertain that the term as yet included Africans.

20. For more on the applicability of the term kunlun to individuals introduced into China from this latter context, see Schafer, Golden Peaches of Samarkand, 45–47. See also Wilensky, “Magical Kunlun,” 8–9.


22. Tuotuo et al., Songshi (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1977), 490.14118, wherein it is stated in full: “In 977, Envoy (qianshi) Psina, Vice Commissioner (fushi) Mohemo [Muhammad], and Administrative Assistant (panguan) Puluo and others made an offering of tribute [to the court] of the goods of their locality. Their servants had deep-set eyes and black bodies. They were called kunlun slaves. By imperial decree, in return, these envoys were given suits of garments with lining, utensils, and currency; their servants were given variegated silk fabric with defects.” A partial alternate translation of this same passage is contained in Chang Hsing-lang [Zhang Xinglang], “The Importation of Negro Slaves to China under the T’ang Dynasty (A.D. 618–907),” Bulletin of the Catholic University of Peking 7 (December 1930):41. The overall significance of this latter work and the singular contributions of its author are discussed in Chapter 2 of this book.


24. Especially with regard to the last of these factors as being indicative of the relatively advanced state of Chinese economic development in comparison to that of Europe of at best a few centuries later, see Gary G. Hamilton, Commerce and Capitalism in Chinese

31. This specific section consists of two chapters, 42 and 43, amid the total of six chapters, 40 through 45, that comprise the later Mohist corpus of writings. For an illuminating discussion of the complicated history, organization, and content of the later Mohist corpus, see Chad Hansen, “Mohism: Later (Mo jia, Mo Chia),” in *Encyclopedia of Chinese Philosophy*, ed. Antonio S. Cua (New York: Routledge, 2003), 461–69. See also Graham, *Later Mohist Logic*, 22–25.

32. Owing to factors unclearly known, the original text of the later Mohist corpus became jumbled, such that, as it is now reconstituted, the canon portions exist separately and in discrete chapters from the explanations. The initial word of each explanation, which is the same one as for each canon, serves as the locator for each pairing. This matching device was not detected until the early twentieth century C.E. See Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*, 137.


35. For clarifying discussions of the contributions to logical discourse of these intermediary thinkers between the early and later Mohists, see Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*, chiefly 75–95. See also Hansen, “Mohism,” 465–69.


37. Needless to say, *heiren* is precisely the term by which Chinese today exclusively refer to all individuals of African ancestry, including African Americans.

38. While I have here opted for its most common and literal rendering, the title of the
Shanhaijing has been and continues to be subject to great variations in translation. For example, in his translation study concentrating on the many strange animal-human hybrids that animate its pages, Richard Strassberg has recently exchanged the conventional “classic” for “guideways.” See Strassberg, *A Chinese Bestiary: Strange Creatures from Guideways through Mountains and Seas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).


41. Ibid., xv–xvi, 189.

42. *Shanhaijing* (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian, 1989), 18.86. See also Birrell, tr., *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, 193.


44. Ibid.

45. Ibid.


47. By Ming times, these particular categorical subdivisions or slight variants of them had become well established among the usually twenty to thirty headings that were most typical of the encyclopedia (*leishu*) genre. See Wilkinson, *Chinese History*, 555, 560–61.

48. Wang Qi, ed., *Sancai tuhui*, vol. 6 (Taipei: Chengwen chubanshe, 1970), 2256. For those seeking it in a customary Chinese-bound edition of *Sancai tuhui*, this image is contained in the fourth of the six chapters of the division devoted to fauna, the thirty-third (Chinese recto but Western verso) page. The Southern Sea is what we customarily refer to as the South China Sea. Even if it is a genuine rather than a mythical site, the location of Mount Bigsnake-follow is not known with any precision.


51. Ibid., 102–3.

52. Wang Gungwu comments on the importance of this year in the history of the Tang Dynasty, remarking that it featured the infamous usurpation of the imperial throne by Wu Zhao, China’s only successful female aspirant to emerorship, as well as the first rebellion in the lower Yangzi River commercial triangle formed by Yangzhou, Shengzhou, and Runzhou since 622, led by the disaffected aristocrat Li or Xu Jingye. See Wang Gungwu, “The Nanhai Trade: A Study of the Early History of Chinese Trade in the South China Sea,” *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 31/2.182 (June 1958):75. See also

53. We are informed via the *Old Tang History* that "As [Empress Wu] Zetian was about to take over at court, [Wang] Fangqing was appointed governor of Guangzhou." See Liu Xu et al., *Jiu Tangshu*, 89.2897. Given the full assumption of power by the empress by the fifth month of 684, we may assume that Lu Yuanrui's tenure as Guangzhou governor was already slated for termination at least two months before his humiliating death while in office. See Rothschild, *Wu Zhao*, 85.


59. Tuotuo et al., *Songshe*, 489.14091.


63. Zhao Rugua, *Zhufan zhi* (Taipei: Guangwen shuju, 1969), 1.10b. See Friedrich Hirth and W. W. Rockhill, eds., *Chau Ju-kua: His Work on the Chinese and Arab Trade in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries, Entitled Ch'uan-ch'i* (1911; repr., New York: Paragon Book Reprint Corp., Arno Press, 1966), 50, 76, 275. Even while their translation of Zhao Rugua's indispensable work is itself invaluable, Hirth and Rockhill's study is also often laced with logistical errors and misinterpretations. In this instance, while it is true that Shepo is one of several names used over the course of history to designate the modern nation of Java, Hirth and Rockhill assume, on the basis of Zhao's rather approximate description of the travel time required, that Kunlun was very likely Pulo Condore [Pulau Kundor] Island, in present-day Malay Pulau Kohnaong, between Singapore and Vietnam in the South China Sea. See Ptak, *China, the Portuguese, and the Nanyang*, chap. 5, pp. 416, 417; chap. 6, pp. 6, 21, 22; chap. 7, pp. 107, 120; chap. 8, p. 167. This designation seems, amid the lingering uncertainty associated with determining any location for Kunlun unambiguously, possibly too precise, though it is seconded with the same certitude for the subsequent Ming period in Shih-shan Henry Tsai, *Perpetual Happiness: The Ming Emperor Yongle* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2001), 205. Moreover, even if one were to accept their determination, despite the obvious fact that the direction to be traveled from Shepo
to Kunlun is due north (see Map 1), Hirth and Rockhill somehow mistakenly claim it to be “west.”

64. Tuotuo et al., Songshi, 231.7498, 233.7672. See also Hirth and Rockhill, trs., Chau Ju-kua, 35. Zhao Rugua was an eighth-generation descendant of Emperor Taizong (r. 976–97), the second Song emperor, via Zhao Yuanfen (d. 1004), the prince of Shang, who was a younger brother of Emperor Zhenzong (r. 997–1022), the third Song emperor.

65. Chen Zhensun, Zhizhai shulu jieti (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1987), 268. See also Hirth and Rockhill, trs., Chau Ju-kua, 35.

66. This particular post, which was first established at Guangzhou in 763 and at some indeterminate point in the Song underwent a title change to maritime trade supervisor (shibo tiju), also figures prominently for similar reasons in the next chapter. See Charles O. Hucker, A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1985), 428. This work serves as the chief resource for my translation of all the titles and institutions appearing in this book. See also Hirth and Rockhill, trs., Chau Ju-kua, 9, 29.


69. Fan Chengda began service in what was then known as the Guangnan region as prefect of Jingzhou superior prefecture, in what is now the Guilin municipality of Guangxi Province, during the years 1166–67. In 1175 Fan was transferred from Guangnan to the present-day Sichuan provincial area, and while en route to his new post, he undertook the investigation and recording of what he observed along the way, resulting in his book. The work was originally in three parts, but only the first part of Description of Mountains and Forests of the Region of the Southern Sea survives today. This portion is divided into thirteen subject headings: mountains and caves; metals and stones; fragrances; wines; utensils; birds; beasts; insects and fishes; flowers; fruits; grasses and trees; miscellaneous records; and the Mân peoples. See Fan Chengda, Guihai yuheng zhi (Yangzhou: Guangling shushe, 2003), 1. Interestingly, especially for its descriptions of the peoples also referred to as the Mân as well as for those of the customs and the products of indigenous regions of the south and southwest, such as what is now modern Guizhou, Zhou Qufei’s work greatly relies on Fan Chengda’s, which is often quoted verbatim and at extensive length. See V. Velgus, “Ling-wai tai da, ro ch.,” tr. C. Milsky, in A Sung Bibliography (Bibliographie des Sung), ed. Etienne Balazs and Yves Hervouet (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1978), 158–59.

70. Chaffee, Branches of Heaven, 239. See also the comparative analysis of the merits of the three works and their authors in Ptak, China, the Portuguese, and the Nanyang, chap. 5, pp. 410–12.

71. Huilin, Yiqiejing yinyi (Taipei: Taiwan datong shuju, 1970), 81.44. See the alternative translation in Schafer, Golden Peaches of Samarkand, 46.

72. Huilin, Yiqiejing yinyi, 81.44. See the alternative translation in Schafer, Golden Peaches of Samarkand, 46. The first of Huilin’s classifications of gulun—the Sengqi—very
closely approximates phonetically what would shortly become the commonplace term for an African, specifically any of those hailing from the continent’s equatorial east coast. See Schafer, *Golden Peaches of Samarkand*, 46–47. See also Chapter 2. However, commenting on this same passage, Feng Chengjun remarks, “Although we have not yet identified what types of peoples who were intended by ‘Tumi’ and ‘Gutang,’ in both instances, the names must designate the curly-haired, black-bodied peoples of the southern seas. According to the entry on Champa that is included in chapter 197 of the Old Tang History: ‘From Champa on southward, the curly-haired and the black-bodied are comprehensively called kunlun.’” See Feng Chengjun, *Zhongguo Nanyang jiaotong shi*, 51; Liu Xu et al., *Jiu Tangshu*, 197:5270.


74. The editors Margaret R. Greer, Walter D. Mignolo, and Maureen Quilligan, writing in the introduction of their *Rereading the Black Legend: The Discourses of Religious and Racial Difference in the Renaissance Empires* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 2, contend that the kind of “color-coded racism” that perpetrated enslavement was only the consequence of the emergence of “the hugely profitable transatlantic slave trade” and that before that time, despite its truly ancient existence, at least in Europe, slavery had previously “not been associated with color.”

75. No one among the early Jesuit pioneers is more closely associated with China than Matteo Ricci, whom scholars have made the subject of numerous studies. Among the more recent is Sangkeun Kim, *Strange Names of God: The Missionary Translation of the Divine Name and the Chinese Responses to Matteo Ricci’s Shangti in Late Ming China, 1583–1644* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004). For a brief biography of and an exhaustive bibliography on Ricci, see Kim, *Strange Names*, 150–59, 275–314, respectively. See also Liam Matthew Brockey, *Journey to the East: The Jesuit Mission to China, 1579–1724* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, Harvard University Press, 2007), in which Ricci’s role, while still perhaps preeminent, is nonetheless more that of an ensemble player.


77. Dikötter, *Discourse of Race*, 17.


**CHAPTER TWO**

This chapter was originally presented as part of the panel “Black Presence in Asia, 1000 to the Present” at the first international conference on “Blacks and Asians: Encounters through Time and Space,” April 2002, Boston University. A more developed version was presented as part of the panel “The Peripheral ‘Other’: Images of the Ethnic in the Mainstream Literature” at the thirty-eighth International Congress on Medieval Studies, May 2003, Western Michigan University.

1. The only other extensive middle-period accounts of racially or ethnically black slaves residing *inside* China are fictional, and the most prominent example is the lengthy but
anonymous tale "Kunlun Slave" (Kunlun nu), which is contained in the fictional compendium Taiping guangji (Extensive Gleanings from the Reign of Great Peace), dated 978. See the discussion of this particular tale in Wilensky, "Magical Kunlun and 'Devil Slaves,'" 9–13. Interestingly, Wilensky opts to interpret the central character of this tale as kunlun only in the most circumscribed sense—that is, as foreign, to be sure, but ethnically Southeast Asian rather than conceivably of African extraction.


3. Few places can claim to have figured more prominently in the formulation of the Western historical conception of China than Guangzhou. Although its rise to prominence is extremely late in comparison to the other great traditional cities, by the eighth century Guangzhou was already China's largest seaport. See J. A. G. Roberts, A History of China, 2d ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 67.

4. We must situate Pingzhou Chats on Things Worthwhile in that plentiful category of Chinese middle-period writings called literally "brush jottings" (bijit) or casual or occasional "notes." However, we quickly learn that Pingzhou Chats on Things Worthwhile is a work distinguished by its unusually complicated and checkered provenance. According to the Siku quanshu (Complete Library of the Four Treasuries) summary (tiyao) that is appended to the book as an introduction:

Pingzhou Chats on Things Worthwhile exists in three chapters. Its author was Zhu Yu of the Song [Dynasty]. Yu was styled Wuhuo and was a native of Wucheng. According to the Wenxian tongkao (Comprehensive Evaluations of Important Writings), this book comprised three chapters. But when Zuo Gui [?–after 1274] included it in his Baichuan xuehai (Study Sea of a Hundred Streams) and Chen Jiru [1558–1639] included it in his Miji[mohai] ([Ink Ocean of] Extraordinary Books), the book consisted of only a little more than fifty sections—hardly amounting to even a single chapter. The version of the book that Tao Zongyi [fl. 1360] included in the Shuofu (Expanse of Utterances) has become increasingly scarce, such that it appears that this version has long ago become lost. Through the special effort of extracting passages from several [other] books, [Zuo] Gui and others reconstituted [much of the] deficient text. But even when using it to reconstruct the general outline of the book, Pingzhou Chats on Things Worthwhile still did not comprise a work of three chapters. Only with [the compilation of] the Yongle dadian (Great Dictionary of Yongle) was it proven which passages were likely connected [to the book] and, by collecting and editing, scholars finally became capable of restoring Pingzhou Chats on Things Worthwhile to three chapters. They carefully arranged the passages and compiled them by categories in order to return the book to its old form. Although there are still lost portions, and while the smallest fragments have certainly not survived, the book is now mostly reconstituted.

See Yong Rong et al., eds., "Pingzhou ketan tiyao," in Zhu Yu, Pingzhou ketan (Mohai jinhu ed.) (Shanghai: Bogu zhai, 1921), 1. Wucheng was in what is now modern northern Zheji-
5. Authors of the "brush jottings" genre commonly provided prefaces (xu) that, among other things, offered their rationales for composing their works. However, Zhu Yu appears to have left no such preface, or at least it has not survived.

6. Interestingly, we should be careful not to confuse our Zhu Yu with another contemporaneous individual of the same name. According to the late Qing Dynasty [Guangxu] Hunan tongzhi [Hunan Gazetteer (for the Guangxu Reign Period)], coll. Bian Baodi et al. (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1995-99), jinshi, 20.17b, there was another Zhu Yu (styled Zhongwen) who was active during the 1070s and 1080s, hailed originally from Dalang (in the northernmost extreme of modern Shanxi, near present-day Tianzhen and just within the Great Wall), and once served in Lingling (in extreme southern modern Hunan Province) in the predominantly honorific post of commandant (wei). For more on the post of commandant, see Hucker, Dictionary of Official Titles, 564.

7. We learn directly from Pingzhou Chats on Things Worthwhile, for example, that Zhu Fu was a 1073 recipient of the much-coveted doctorate of letters—the "presented scholar" (jinshi) degree—via that most rigorous channel of the civil service examinations. Zhu Yu relates: “[Among the examinees,] the emperor [wished to] place my father first. But there was one among the provisional authorities [overseeing the examinations] who quashed this plan and so my father ended up being placed second” (Zhu Yu, Pingzhou ketan, 3.9b). Zhu Fu’s biography on the official Song History corroborates the distinction attached to Zhu Fu’s achievement but states simply that he “was ranked among the top three examinees” (Tuotuo et al., Songshi, 347.11004). See also Yong Rong et al., eds., “Pingzhou ketan tiyao,” 1, for this appended Four Treasuries synopsis of Pingzhou Chats on Things Worthwhile provides the subsequent career history: “The father of [Zhu] Yu was [Zhu] Fu. During the Yuanfeng era (1078–85), he served as an auxiliary in the Dragon Diagram Chamber (zhi longtu ge), whereby he served successively as governor in several prefectures, such as Laizhou and Runzhou. During the Shaosheng era (1094–97), he once accepted the directive to serve as an emissary to [the state of] Liao. Moreover, he later served as a Guangzhou commander (shuai).” Laizhou was a large area in what now constitutes the base of the eastern promontory of the Shandong peninsula, centered administratively at what is today the district of Ye. Runzhou was in the vicinity of modern Zhenjiang in southern Jiangsu Province.

8. Li Weiguo, “Qianyan,” in Zhu Yu, Pingzhou ketan, in Houshan tancong Pingzhou ketan (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, Xinhua shudian Shanghai faxing suo faxing, 1989), 1. Zhu Lin also served for a time as an aide (cheng) in the Court of Imperial Entertainments (guanglu si). Zhu Lin was a student of the great Confucianist scholar Hu Yuan (993–1059), and the works here attributed to him—both being either commentaries or discourses on the seminal early classic Spring and Autumn Annals and purportedly comprising over two hundred sections (pian)—are now lost. Changzhou comprised what is now the district of Wujin, proximate to modern Changzhou in southeastern Jiangsu Province. Kaifeng, which is in northern Henan Province, was called Bianliang or Bianjing.
prior to 1126 and was the imperial capital of the Song Dynasty. For more on the historical commercial importance of the prefecture of Run, see Chapter 1, note 52. Su Shi was among the most illustrious of Song-period literati. For more on him in brief, see Anthony DeBlasi, “Su Shi,” in RoutledgeCurzon Encyclopedia of Confucianism, vol. 2, O–Z, ed. Xinzhong Yao (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 586.


10. While it seems likely that he should have attempted such given his pedigree, there is no firm evidence that Zhu Yu ever competed in the civil service examinations. This situation naturally raises the possibility that the family could readily afford financially for him not to have to compete, or at least that his relatives and dependents could afford for him not to be successful. See also note 31.

11. Yong Rong et al., eds., “Pingzhou ketan tiyao,” 1. On this crucial question of whether the Guangzhou experiences of Zhu Fu served in any way as sources for the narrative that Zhu Yu furnishes in Pingzhou Chats on Things Worthwhile, the Four Treasures editors are clear and unequivocal, remarking straightforwardly, “Therefore, in his book, Yu describes many of the experiences of his father. Accordingly, that which he says about the foreigners’ compound and the merchant ships is especially detailed and that which he investigates is [part of] the history of the Song.”


14. Pingzhou was a marvelous example of invented space, having originally been as much the property of a single individual as it was the village of many inhabitants. In Li Weiguo, “Qianyan,” 1, it is stated: “In his late years, [Zhu Yu] decided to reside in Huanggang in Hubei and, after purchasing a landed estate from the Ding family of Huanggang, he dubbed it ‘Pingzhou,’ began calling himself the ‘Old Planter of Pingzhou’ (Pingzhou laopu), and titled the book that he wrote Pingzhou Chats on Things Worthwhile.”

15. This is not to imply that the son and author Zhu Yu himself did not sample Guangzhou. On the contrary, at numerous junctures in Pingzhou Chats on Things Worthwhile, Zhu Yu relates firsthand experiences there that are clearly his own. However, Zhu Yu provides little information about his own occasions in Guangzhou of the kind that is either datable or achieves the same level of complexity as that framing his father. A typical example consists of his statement in Pingzhou ketan, 2.4b: “When I was in Guangzhou, I once participated in a feast for rewarding soldiers.” Hirth, Ancient History of China, 133, incidentally, presumess that Zhu Yu “himself never lived at Canton [Guangzhou].” In my view, such a claim ranges between overstating the case and being plain wrong.

16. Especially prominent are those policies instituted under the reigns of the emperors Shenzong (r. 1067–85) and Renzong (r. 1022–63).
Surely among the most salient of these bits of information is one of the earliest mentions of the employment of the Chinese-invented mariner's compass. As Zhu Yu in Pingzhou ketan, 2.2b, writes, “The commanders of the ships are knowledgeable of geography. When they sail by night, they observe the stars; when they sail by day, they observe the sun; when they sail in cloudiness or at dusk, they use the south-[pointing] needle.” The Chinese compass utilizes the south as its directional constant. See the discussion of this reference as a landmark in Hirth, Ancient History of China, 133-34.

For example, in Pingzhou ketan, 2.17, the last entry in the second chapter, Zhu Yu expounds on the discovery and killing of a two-headed snake.

The Maritime Trade Superintendency or Supervisorate (shibo tijusi or simply shibo si) was an agency first established at Guangzhou in 971 expressly to monitor and regulate all seaborne commerce. It was charged with collecting customs duties and policing the shoreline in order to prevent the smuggling of contraband. See Hucker, Dictionary of Official Titles, 428.


Zhu Yu, Pingzhou ketan, 2.3a–b. See also the alternative translations of this passage in Hirth and Rockhill, trs., Chau ju-kua, 17 and Heng, “Shipping, Customs Procedures, and the Foreign Community,” 28.

Western subjection to the Chinese obsession with control—especially after 1759 and specifically as it became manifested at Guangzhou—reached its most decisive extreme in the first major military clash between Great Britain and China that occurred during the middle of the nineteenth century. For brief background on the motives for controlling the movements and activities of foreigners in the late eighteenth century, see Roberts, History of China, 162–64. See also a half-amusing thumbnail description of the sheer spatial constraints imposed on the British in Guangzhou in Harry G. Gelber, Opium, Soldiers, and Evangelicals: England's 1840–42 War with China and Its Aftermath (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 3.

In a manner that was consistent with the separation maintained between the Guangzhou foreign and native communities, foreigners were responsible for the conduction of their own judicial affairs. See Heng, “Shipping, Customs Procedures and the Foreign Community,” 33.

31. One of the entrenched ironies of the supposed Chinese bureaucratic meritocracy is that a certain level of graft was the normative prerogative of those who had achieved government office. Such was not merely an assumption but an expectation that was to be tolerated. All that was ever in question was whether the level of graft was commensurate with and thereby appropriate to the level of the office. For an example of the same case differently made, see Leon E. Stover, The Cultural Ecology of Chinese Civilization: Peasants and Elites in the Last of the Agrarian States (New York: Mentor, 1974), 215, in which he points out astutely that whereas historically in the West, “wealth is the origin of power,” in China, “power is the origin of wealth.”

32. Zhu Yu, Pingzhou ketan, 2.3b. See the partial alternative translation of this passage in Heng, “Shipping, Customs Procedures, and the Foreign Community,” 29.

33. Ibid., 2.2a–b. For a variant translation of just the first paragraph of this rather lengthy passage, see Shiba Yoshinobu, Commerce and Society in Sung China, tr. Mark Elvin (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 1970), 15. For a variant translation of just the last paragraph, see Hirth and Rockhill, trs., Chau Ju-kua, 31–32. See also Ma Huan, Ying-yai sheng-lan: The Overall Survey of the Ocean’s Shores [1433], ed. J. V. G. Mills (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 304, wherein Mills refers to the practice of seafaring merchants drawing lots to sleep atop their merchandise as indicative of the fact that the great Chinese junks that emerged during the twelfth century were without the numerous cabins (ranging from fifty to a hundred) that they would eventually have. The technological state of Song oceanic navigation was indeed to advance greatly over merely the short course of the twelfth century. Such advancement, however, does not mean that Chinese seamanship of the time was yet on a par with that of the Arabs. For evidence, we need only note the marveling near-contemporary observations of Zhao Rugua at the beginning of the thirteenth century, who writes in Zhufan zhi, 1.30, of the “big warships” (jujian) of the kingdom the Chinese called Mulanpi—that is, Murabit, the Berber empire of northwestern Africa and the southern Iberian peninsula, initially encountered by the Chinese under its Almoravid dynasty (1040–1147). Zhao remarks on these battleships as carrying “several thousand men, with stores on board of wine and provisions, in addition to weaving looms.” See also the translation in Hirth and Rockhill, trs., Chau Ju-kua, 142. Similarly, writing even earlier at the end of the twelfth century, the author Zhou Qufei affirms the superiority of the immense vessels of Murabit when he declares in his Lingwai daida (Notes on Lands beyond the Mountains) (Zhibuzu zhai congshu ed., 1872), 3.4, that “when one speaks of the enormousness of ships, none surpasses that of those of Murabit” and subsequently, in Lingwai daida, 6.7b–8, he further exclaims: “The ships that ply the Southern Sea and to the south of it are like houses. With sails unfurled, they are like great clouds in the sky, and their rudders are several tens of feet in length. One ship can carry hundreds of men and bear a year’s-worth of grain. Pigs feed and wine is fermented on board.” Zhou Qufei’s description or, far more likely, misperception of the ostensibly Islamic crewmen of Murabit as engaged in the husbandry of pigs is of course quite intriguing. Zhao Rugua makes no such assertion. Both authors, however, state that the foreigners manning these
huge vessels were producers and implied imbibers of wine. For a variant translation of the latter passages by Zhou Qufei, see either Louise Levathes, When China Ruled the Seas: The Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne, 1405–1433 (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 44 or Michael Pearson, The Indian Ocean (London, New York: Routledge, 2003), 69. Problematically, either translation implies that the ships in question were Chinese instead of Arab.

36. Zhu Yu, Pingzhou ketan, 2.4. Alternative translations for this same passage in its entirety are contained in Hirth and Rockhill, trs., Chau Ju-kua, 31–32; Chang Hsing-lang, “Importation of Negro Slaves to China,” 41; and Duyvendak, China’s Discovery of Africa, 23–24. A partial alternative translation is contained in Dikötter, Discourse of Race, 9. In Song times, as in the past, a catty (sixteen Chinese ounces) was equivalent to approximately one and one-third English pounds. The term quan, translated here as “curly,” is represented by a different Chinese character and hence is a different word from the term quan discussed extensively in Chapter 3.

38. See Jung-pang Lo, “The Emergence of China as a Sea Power during the Late Sung and Early Yuan Periods,” Far Eastern Quarterly 14.4 (August 1955):500. See also Dikötter, Discourse of Race, 16.

39. This absence of any mention of localized slave markets, of places where slaves were bought and sold just as other commodities were, is conspicuous. For comparative perspective and contrast, we can note enigmatically the extraordinary estimates offered by André Wink for the Arab extraction of slaves from Africa and importation of them into the general Asian region. For the period from 850 to 1000 he estimates that Arab slavers exported “across the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean to Islamic Asia and to India” almost ten thousand black slaves per year. See André Wink, Al-Hind: The Making of the Indo-Islamic World, vol. 1, Early Medieval India and the Expansion of Islam, 7th–11th Centuries, 2d rev. ed. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), 14.
42. Ibid., 29–30.
43. Snow, Star Raft, 18.
44. Chaffee, “Diasporic Identities,” 399. The importance of Quanzhou as a trade center has made the city the focal point of much recent scholarship. See Guy, Oriental Trade Ceramics, 13–25, 32, 35, 46, 71. See also the studies in Angela Schottenhammer, ed., The Emporium of the World: Maritime Quanzhou, 1000–1400 (Leiden: Brill, 2001).
45. Interestingly, this same model of spatial constriction in Guangzhou was evidently continued and famously imposed in the mid-eighteenth century in the form of the Canton system (1757–1842), a restrictive residential arrangement and interactive protocol to which the entire European (apart from the Russian) merchant community in China was subjected.
by the Manchu-led Chinese authorities of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912). For a detailed study of the system in the early decades of its inception, see James L. Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar: Qing Guest Ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995). For an illuminating exposition of the system through a personalized portrait of a Chinese who, as governor-general, oversaw it in its final functional decades, see Betty Peh-T'i Wei, *Ruan Yuan, 1764–1849: The Life and Work of a Major Scholar-Official in Nineteenth-Century China before the Opium War* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2006), 135–63. The system was eventually terminated by Great Britain's defeat of China in the first Opium War of 1839–42.


47. Heng's hypothesis of discreteness between the Chinese and foreign communities of Guangzhou is directly challenged by Chaffee's view, which asserts that there was considerable dynamism and a tendency toward integration between the two groups. See Chaffee, "Diasporic Identities," 406–7.


49. Interestingly, this idea of bowel conversion prefigures certain notions of dietary ablation that obtain even today among Muslim communities in Central Asia and northwest and southwest China in relation to the thresholds that must be crossed by a nonbeliever (especially any female) who marries a believer in Islam. See Jianping Wang, *Concord and Conflict: The Hui Communities of Yunnan* (Stockholm: Lund, 1996), 88–94.


55. One of the more interesting aspects of the Sino-universalism paradigm is the degree to which it is so thoroughly a product of the relative racial insularity of ancient Chinese society. As Dawson, *Confucius*, 70, remarks, with "no striking racial distinctions in physical appearance" separating them from the surrounding peoples, the Chinese saw the difference between themselves and barbarians "as cultural rather than racial."


57. Duyvendak, *China's Discovery of Africa*, 24. The specific terms employed are female (pin) and male (mu).


59. Ibid., 63.

60. Ibid.

61. He Yan, comp., *Lunyu (Sibu congkan ed.*) (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian, 1989),

62. He Yan, *Lunyu*, 8.15.2b–3. Zizhang was the style name for Confucius’s little-known disciple Zhuansun Shi. The Mai, according to James Legge, The Chinese Classics, vol. 1, *Confucian Analects, the Great Learning, and the Doctrine of the Mean* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960), 295–96, were the same as the Di, the uncultured tribes of the north.

63. He Yan, *Lunyu*, 2.3.2. The rendering of the Xia as “the Chinese states” derives from the known self-identification of preimperial Chinese with the legendary dynasty of that name, which is traditionally dated from 2205 to 1766 B.C.E.

66. Interestingly, the notion suggested herein that transplanted foreign slaves, for the purpose of encouraging their vitality, might necessarily require a period during which they undergo acclimatization to their new environment may well have transcultural as well as transtemporal implications within the overall discourse on slavery. See, for example, Stephanie E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 2007), 193–94, wherein, in proffering her principal thesis that late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century West African slaves endured commodification by their captors, the author also briefly discusses the important but infrequently investigated component that became known as “seasoning.” For a more expansive discussion of the “seasoning” to which African slaves of this period were subjected in the New World context of Jamaica, see Alexander X. Byrd, *Captives and Voyagers: Black Migrants across the Eighteenth-Century British Atlantic World* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008), 57–85.

67. The locus classicus for the term *shengshu* is the thirteenth chapter of the Daoist philosophical work *Zhuangzi*, wherein a critical interlocutor of the primordial figure Laozi chastises, “The raw and cooked [foodstuffs] lying right before you are limitless, and yet your hoarding is without bounds!” See Chen Shouchang, ed., *Nanhua zhenjing zhengyi* (Beijing: Laixun ge, 1936), 2.13.42b; *Zhuangzi* (Taipei: Taiwan Zhonghua shuju, 1973), 5.13.17; or Qian Mu, *Zhuangzi zuanjian* (Taipei: Dongda tushu gongsi, Zongjingxiao Sanmin shuju, 1985), 109. For a provocative discussion of the transmogrification of this term into a stan-


70. Andaya, *Leaves of the Same Tree*, 51.

71. Liu Xu et al., *Jiu Tangshu*, 197,5270. Interestingly, the natives of Champa were known to be quite active in the maritime trade, and their inclusion at least at the margins of Chinese ideas of blackness may well point to the place of origin of Lu Yuanrui’s murderer as well as suggest—in approximate terms—the destination to which he escaped.

72. The notion of the usefulness of race as a cultural category has, of course, become increasingly questioned by scientists and as a science has effectively become defunct. Indeed, numerous physical anthropologists now recognize as much physical variation among members of what conventionally comprises a race as there is between members of what are conventionally regarded as distinct races. Evolutionary biologists, beginning with the late Stephen Jay Gould in his influential *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), are increasingly concluding that physical differences are by no means accurately indicative of genetic difference and that, contrary to popular perception, there is only one race. Hence, advances in modern science have undermined the whole concept of race as both unscientific and arbitrary. Still, as a concept, race has proven especially resilient and resistant to the kinds of arguments of currency that have transformed, for instance, gender from an essentialist into a socially constructed concept. Perhaps precisely because of its basis in the genetics of inheritance, race continues to exist as a category that the great majority of humanity persists in accepting as very real. We may well have simply spent too many eons subscribing to the principles of racial distinctiveness, accepting them as self-evident and permitting our conditioning by them as intrinsic reality, to discard them easily, despite the frequently disastrous forms of prejudice and discrimination to which they have led us. We cannot justifiably assume that the Chinese ancients were any more constrained by their subscription to a concept of race than we are. However, neither can we expect them to have been any more liberated from it than we are. For sometimes stirring examples of the efforts of social theorists as well as evolutionary biologists to convert what many view as the

73. See Waley-Cohen, *Sextants of Beijing*, 25. This association of nudity on the part of foreigners with immodesty and, consequently, with immorality is age-old in China and has strongly influenced Chinese aesthetic sensibilities. As Michael Sullivan, “The Heritage of Chinese Art,” in *The Legacy of China*, ed. Raymond Dawson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), 221, observed, “the Chinese painter, unless closely following an imported model, never achieve[d] a convincing rendering of the human figure. This reflects a deeply rooted prejudice against the nude in Chinese art, where, as in that of Flanders and North Germany, almost the only nudes are pitiful figures of the damned undergoing punishment in hell. In Buddhist art China was prepared to accept much that was wholly foreign to her way of self-expression; but in this respect her rejection was complete.”

74. As is discussed in Chapter 1, our understanding of Kunlun as a toponym is complicated by the fact that the term has throughout history denoted imaginary places. Equally perplexing is the fact that Kunlun has simultaneously signified multiple real sites. For a further discussion of the complexities involved, see Wilensky, “Magical Kunlun and ‘Devil Slaves,’” 32–36, 42.

75. The Jin was one of the signature dynasties that signaled China’s plunge into a centuries-long age of political division and fragmentation known as the period of “Three Kingdoms and Six Dynasties.”

76. Fang Xuanling et al., *Xinjiao ben jinshu bing fubian liuzhong* (Taipei: Dingwen shuju, 1990), 32.981.

77. See Snow, *Star Raft*, 17, 18, 19, 108.

78. Zhang Xinglang attributes his own impressive progress in this undertaking to the earlier interest and speculation demonstrated toward the matter by significant predecessors, in particular the important scholars Gu Yanwu (1613–82) and Xu Jiyu (1795–1873). Among their various other talents, both men were highly accomplished nonprofessional geographers. See Chang Hsing-lang, “Importation of Negro Slaves to China,” 39.


Qufei, *Linguai daida*, 3.6, it is stated: “Moreover, these sea islands are much populated by savages. Their bodies are like black lacquer; their hair like [tiny] fists. They are lured by food and captured. Then, by the thousands and ten thousands, they are moved to be sold [abroad] as foreign slaves.” See also the alternative translations in R. W. Beachey, *The Slave Trade of Eastern Africa: A Collection of Documents* (London: Rex Collings, 1976), 2; and Almut Netolitsky, *Das Ling-uai tai-ta von Chou Chü-fei: Eine Landeskunde Süddchinas aus dem 12. Jahrhundert* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1977), 49. Writing only about a half-century after Zhou Qufei, during the first quarter of the thirteenth century, and referencing the compound place-name Kunlun cengqi, Zhao Rugua, in *Zhufan zhi*, 1.32b–33, essentially repeats the foregoing statement from the earlier work. Zhao does, however, offer three additional details of a geographical as well as ethnographical nature that are not supplied by Zhou. First, immediately after remarking on the lacquerlike blackness of the savages, Zhao refers to their hair as “frizzled hair” (*doufu*)—literally, “tadpole hair.” Second, he specifically names the place where the savages are allegedly ferried off to be enslaved as the “Arab” (Dashí) countries, stating that once they arrive there, they “fetch a high price.” Third and finally, Zhao, as does Zhou, discloses that these slaves are primarily used as gatekeepers, and he concludes with the strikingly reverse orientalist claim that they are said “not to long for their kinsfolk.” See Hirth and Rockhill, trs., *Chau ju-kua*, 149–50. Regarding Zanggi, see Duyvendak, *China’s Discovery of Africa*, 23.

81. Hailing from Alexandria, Egypt, Cosmas, who was also called Indicopleustes (a Latin variant name meaning the “Indian Navigator”), flourished during the sixth century of the Common Era. He was multitalented as a merchant, traveler, theologian, and geographer, and his treatise *Topographia Christiana* (*Christian Topography*) is noteworthy for containing one of the earliest and most famous of world maps. In this treatise Cosmas also tried to prove the literal accuracy of the ancient biblical picture of the universe, asserting in particular that the earth is flat and attempting to discredit the concept of a spherical universe espoused by Ptolemy (ca. 85–ca. 161). Probably a Nestorian Christian, Cosmas plied the shores of the Indian Ocean and was for some time engaged in trade in East Africa (specifically Ethiopia) and Asia. In late life he became a monk and wrote several geographical treatises, but only the *Topographia* and fragments of his commentaries on the biblical Psalms and Gospels have survived. For more on Cosmas and his *Christian Topography*, see J. W. McCrindle, *The Christian Topography of Cosmas, an Egyptian Monk* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1887); E. O. Winstedt, *The Christian Topography of Cosmas Indicopleustes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1909); and Wanda Wolska, *La Topographie Chretienne de Cosmas Indicopleustes* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1962). For more on his travels throughout Asia, see Hirth and Rockhill, trs., *Chau Ju-kuia*, 2–5.

82. The Juba—at a thousand miles in length—extends from southern Ethiopia southward and empties into the Indian Ocean. Cape Delgado is a coastal promontory on the border of Tanzania and Mozambique that forms the latter’s northernmost point.

83. Chang Hsing-lang, “Importation of Negro Slaves to China,” 42. Zhao Rugua specifically discusses Cengba or Zanzibar in such expansive terms. In discussing the inhabitants of the territory, which he does only briefly, Zhao states that they “are of Arab (Dashi) stock and subscribe to the Arab religion [Islam]; they don bluish foreign cotton
and wear red leather shoes; and they subsist on daily rations of meal, griddled cakes, and mutton.” See Zhao Rugua, Zhufan zhi, 1.25a–b. See also Hirth and Rockhill, trs., Chau Ju-kua, 126–27.

84. Hirth and Rockhill, trs., Chau Ju-kua, 149–50. Being a less familiar location than the large and familiar island of Madagascar, Pemba, which is also included in the conceptual topography of Hirth and Rockhill, is located approximately thirty miles north of the island of Zanzibar.

85. Chang Hsing-lang, “Importation of Negro Slaves to China,” 42–43. Snow, like Netolitsky and Dikötter, without even mentioning the possibility of Zanzibar, restricts what he transliterates as “Kunlun Zengji” expressly to Madagascar and/or the proximate Comoro Islands, which he interprets as the original home of the kunlun slaves without ever taking into account a conceivable Malay antecedent. Nevertheless, these alternative African locations, even if not properly parts of the continent, represent the same general regional location (see Map 2). See Snow, Star Raft, 18; Netolitsky, Das Ling-wai tai-ta von Chou Ch’ü-fei, 49; Dikötter, Discourse of Race, 12, 15.


95. Lien-sheng Yang, “Economic Aspects of Public Works in Imperial China,” in Ex-


97. In fairness, while records of the purchase and sale of slaves were common in Chinese tradition, by Song times detailed records of private manumission were evidently rare even in the cases of the liberation of Chinese slaves. Most commonly, manumission took no more elaborate form than the destruction of the contract by which the slave was originally bound to his or her master. See Valerie Hansen, Negotiating Daily Life in Traditional China: How Ordinary People Used Contracts, 600–1400 (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995), 41–42, 50–52, 90–91.


CHAPTER THREE

1. Although it qualifies as truly tragic, the hostility with which the works of Gavin Menzies have been greeted by professional historians has largely been invited by the author, such that the attacks on the outlandish claims made in his scholarship have developed into something of a cottage industry. For a representative review article in reaction to his 1421, see Robert Findlay, “How Not to (Re)Write World History: Gavin Menzies and the Chinese Discovery of America,” Journal of World History: Official Journal of the World History Association 15.2 (June 2004):229–42. Nearly as unfortunate as Menzies’s own disinformation is the baseless theorizing it has inspired on the part of certain of his self-styled disciples. See, for example, Paul Chiasson, The Island of Seven Cities: Where the Chinese Settled When They Discovered America (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2006).


4. Despite the little extant evidence that is available on him as a personality, Duan Chengshi, in addition to his writings, has recently become the subject of much scholarly scrutiny. See, for example, Carrie E. Reed, A Tang Miscellany: An Introduction to Youyang zazu (New York: Peter Lang, 2003). Youyang Mountain (Youyang shan), after which Duan’s book is titled, is located in today’s northwestern Hunan Province. It is also called Xiaoyou shan.

5. Duyvendak, China’s Discovery of Africa, 12.

6. Duan Chengshi, Youyang zazu (Taipei: Taiwan xuesheng shuju, 1975), 4.3b. A slightly redacted version of this same passage appears in Ouyang Xiu et al., Xin Tangshu, 221B.6262. The latter version, which Ouyang Xiu incorporated in 1060, differs mainly only in its beginning: “Amidst the ocean, there is a kind of place called Bobali. There is no
other territory to which it is attached.” The name Bosi is a Chinese transliteration of the term *Parsa*, an ancient name for Persia. See Wang Gungwu, “Nanhai Trade,” 59 and Wang Gungwu, *Nanhai Trade*, 52. Bosi further denoted non-Muslim Persians, as distinguished from the Dashi, who were collectively Muslim Arabs and Persians. See Wang Gungwu, “Nanhai Trade,” 79 and Wang Gungwu, *Nanhai Trade*, 75.

7. Duyvendak attributes Duan Chengshi’s knowledge of Berbera to exchanges between the Chinese author and certain priests from what he refers to as the “Far West” or the “Roman Orient” (Daqin), a location that for subsequent Song-period authors denoted Baghdad. See Duyvendak, *China’s Discovery of Africa*, 12–13. See also Hirth and Rockhill, *Chau Ju-kua*, 102–10, 263.


12. Ibid., 12.


16. Ibid., 1.29. Although it appears to be a foreign rather than any Chinese site and is possibly situated in either the South China Sea or the Indian Ocean, the precise location of Wulun is unknown.

17. Ibid., 1.31b. In this instance and all others involving the Somalian territories, the mountains referred to are most likely those of the Karkaar ranges, which extend from the northwestern border with Ethiopia eastward to the tip of the Horn of Africa, where they abruptly end as precipitous cliffs. At their crest these mountains average approximately 5,940 feet (1,800 meters) to 6,930 feet (2,100 meters) above sea level. Shimber Berris, Somalia’s highest peak, currently rises to an elevation of 7,943 feet (2,407 meters).


19. Although he has only relatively recently become the subject of intense Western interest, the commander Zheng He has emerged as the defining face of Chinese maritime exploration in the fifteenth century. His transformation into a symbol of Chinese national pride began in earnest in the aftermath of the 1949 communist victory, within the postliberation context and fervor of the 1950s. See, for example, Hsiang Ta, “A Great Chinese Navigator,” *China Reconstructs* 5.7 (July 1956):11–14. Since that time, Zheng He and his story have become increasingly popularized well beyond China, such that—although his remains
something less than a universally recognized name—he has assuredly now entered into the mainstream of Western popular consciousness. As evidence, see, for example, Frank Viviano, “China's Great Armada,” *National Geographic* 208.1 (July 2005): 28–53. Zheng He's title “Grand Eunuch of the Three Jewels” was bestowed upon him in the year 1431. See Ma Huan, *Ying-yai sheng-lan*, 7. See also Tsai, *Perpetual Happiness*, 202. Tsai prefers the translation “Grand Eunuch of the Three Gems.” Sometimes suggested is the possibility that Zheng He's “three jewels” or “three gems” title derives from Buddhism and that it signifies the Buddha (awakened one), the Dharma (law), and the Sangha (family of monks). Zheng He is also said to have actually become a late-life convert to Buddhism, and he is indeed known to have accepted the Buddhist sobriquet Fushan. However, equally compelling is the argument that Zheng He's willingness to patronize Buddhism was mainly driven by political expediency, that it represented a ploy to curry favor and maximize prestige in those lands where the religion was prominently practiced.

22. For an informative but occasionally quite speculative discussion of this and other motives for the commencement of the missions, see Dreyer, *Zheng He*, 60–62.
27. For more on Jian Yi, see Ray Huang, “Chien I,” in *Dictionary of Ming Biography*, vol. 1, ed. Goodrich and Fang, 234–36.
28. Worth noting is the fact that whereas his missions were to become the most prominent, Zheng He's expeditions were not the only ones undertaken during the transitional era from Yuan to Ming rule; nor were they really even the first. See Tsai, *Perpetual Happiness*, 201.
30. Ibid., 202–3.
33. Ibid. Interestingly, the Chinese were not alone in their regard for the giraffe as a creature of extreme exoticism. Such was similarly the case for Europeans upon their first encounters with the animal in the late fifteenth and early nineteenth centuries (1486 and 1827, respectively). For more on the European as well as the Chinese reception of their first giraffes, see Erik Ringmar, “Audience for a Giraffe: European Expansionism and the Quest for the Exotic,” *Journal of World History: Official Journal of the World History Association* 17.4 (December 2006): 375–97.
34. This initial giraffe was formally presented to Yongle on the twentieth day of the
ninth lunar month of 1414 (Western calibration: 3 October 1414), which we learn from the inscription on the extant and exceedingly well-known painting of the occasion by the court calligrapher Shen Du (fl. 1410–20), who was imperially commissioned to render a commemorative portrait of the previously unknown creature. Official sources confirm that a second giraffe was received the following year. See Zhang Tingyu et al., *Mingshi* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 326.8451, wherein it is stated, “From China, Malindi is distant to the utmost. In 1415, envoys [from there] were dispatched [to our court] bearing a *qilin* as tribute.”

36. Ibid., 143–46. See also Tsai, *Perpetual Happiness*, 125–27.
38. Curiously, perhaps desiring to equate it with a real animal, Shih-shan Henry Tsai mistakenly identifies the *qilin* with the okapi. See Tsai, *Perpetual Happiness*, 206.
40. See Roberts, *Mark of the Beast*, 63, wherein he states, “In fact, the first slaves snatched from the Atlantic coast of Africa were brought to Portugal as a gift to King Henry the Navigator.” The dates of King or Prince Henry the Navigator or the Seafarer are 1394 to 1460. For more on this specific development, see Sergio Tognetti, “The Trade in Black African Slaves in Fifteenth-Century Florence,” in *Black Africans in Renaissance Europe*, ed. T. F. Earle and K. J. P. Lowe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 215–16.
41. Interestingly, although its itinerary is known, there is no extant record of the numbers of ships or crewmen participating in the fifth expedition. See Ma Huan, *Ying-yai sheng-lan*, 13. See also Tsai, *Perpetual Happiness*, 206.
42. Dreyer, *Zheng He*, 182, has noted how the peculiar obsession of modern scholars since Duyvendak with identifying each location and determining the present-day correspondent for each site that Zheng He visited can foster the misimpression that the main purpose of the voyages was exploration.
44. See Ma Huan, *Ying-yai sheng-lan*, 21.
45. Ibid., 55.
46. Ibid., 54, 55, 57.
47. See Gong Zhen, *Xiyang fanguo zhi*, in *Shuofang beisheng*, vol. 3, ed. He Qiutao (*Xuxiu Siku quanshu* ed.) (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1999), 1.3b–4.
50. Taicang, which is just northeast of Kunshan, is a scant twenty miles from the mouth of the Yangzi River, where it flows into the Yellow Sea (Huanghai).

54. Duyvendak, China’s Discovery of Africa, 31.

55. The only site for which its location is a genuine question is Lasa. I have throughout opted, largely on the basis of its clustering in all extant textual evidence with other unambiguously Somali locales, for its African provenance, with it being the same site as the contemporary Zeila or Saylac. This clustering in the sources strongly suggests a collection of sites in close if not contiguous proximity to one another or, at the very least, on the same continent. However, Lasa’s location somewhere on the Arabian Peninsula does remain a distinct possibility. For an interesting deliberation and counterconjecture on this question, see Dreyer, Zheng He, 84–85. Dreyer follows the earlier assertions of J. V. G. Mills in making his claim for Lasa’s Arabian provenance. See Ma Huan, Ying-yai sheng-lan, 63, 202, 251. See also Mills’s appendix devoted entirely to this question of the precise location of Lasa (denoted as La’sa) in Ma Huan, Ying-yai sheng-lan, 347–48. The matter is further but less than persuasively discussed by Mills in Fei Hsin, Hsing-ch’a sheng-lan, 72n201.

56. Fei Xin, Xingcha shenglan, in Shuofang bei sheng, vol. 3, ed. He Qiutao 4.4a–b. See Rockhill’s pioneering translation of this same passage in Rockhill, “Notes on the Relations and Trade of China,” 614–15. See also Mills’s translation in Fei Hsin, Hsing-ch’a sheng-lan, 103–4. Throughout, my own translations of the pivotal term quanfo diverge markedly from those of both Rockhill and Mills. Rockhill—I think—has erroneously translated it in every case verbally, offering consistently some variation of the rendering they “roll (up) their hair.” Mills similarly errs with his persistent use of the equally verbal but perhaps less committal “dress the hair in rolls.” Such a misreading as this one certainly elicits the possibility that the peoples encountered by Fei Xin along the northeast African coastline were of some different ethnic extraction than African and thus perhaps not black but instead Semitic, for Arab influence, if not settlement, is known to have been pronounced in this region for centuries before Ming times. However, in my view, beyond the descriptor of hair texture, Fei Xin’s descriptions still contain simply too much countervailing evidence undermining these translations as well as their implications. In other words, with the possible exception of the example of Zeila, such elements as their wearing “short shirts that they sash with strips of cotton” all combine to make it abundantly clear that the various peoples encountered were not only African natives engaged in their customary cultural activities but also African blacks.

57. Fei Xin, Xingcha shenglan, 4.4b–5. See Rockhill, “Notes on the Relations and Trade of China,” 615–16. See also the translation in Duyvendak, China’s Discovery of Africa, 30; and Mills’s translation in Fei Hsin, Hsing-ch’a sheng-lan, 100–101.


59. Ibid., 326.8449.

60. Fei Xin, Xingcha shenglan, 4.5–6. See Rockhill, “Notes on the Relations and Trade of China,” 617–18. Kulam, today’s Quilon, is located on the southwestern tip of the Indian peninsula. See also Mills’s translation in Fei Hsin, Hsing-ch’a sheng-lan, 101–2, wherein, with reference to the hair description in this instance, he adopts the clause “knot up the hair in four hanging plaits.”

62. Ibid., 326.8451.

63. Fei Xin, *Xingcha shenglan*, 4.6b–7. See Rockhill, “Notes on the Relations and Trade of China,” 616–17. See also Mills’s translation in Fei Hsin, *Hsing-ch’a sheng-lan*, 72, wherein, in this instance, for the standard descriptor *quan*, he resorts to the wholly unwarranted contortion “twist up their hair.”

64. See Beachey, *Slave Trade of Eastern Africa*, 6, wherein he further remarks on the superficiality of the Arab presence in East Africa before the nineteenth century, stating, “This trading activity and veneer of Arab civilization was confined to the East African coast and the offshore islands. There is no evidence of Arab penetration inland.”


67. Ibid., 247n3.


69. See Wang Dayuan, *Daoyi zhilue*, 1.16b, wherein it is recorded:

The ancient Kunlunshan is also called Juntunshan. This island is elevated and expansive, with a winding coastline of over a hundred *li*. It vaults upward in the midst of the sea, opposite Annam, the Anamba Islands, and Tripod Peak (Dingzhi). Below it is the Sea of Kunlun, from which it gets its name. Junkers trading in the Western Sea must skirt the island, and with a favorable wind it is passable [from Annam] in seven days and nights. There is a saying that “There are the Paracels above and there is Kunlun below.” Thus, the traders mind their steering for fear of losing their ships. Nothing exceptional is produced off the land. The inhabitants have no houses but reside in the higher reaches of the hills. There are scores of strangely shaped, outlandishly appearing males who live in the caves and fastnesses and wear no clothing. By day, they consume mountain fruits, fish, and prawns; by night, they recline in the forks of the trees, as did the Biaoji in the age of the wild deer. How can [all] this be known? Well, whenever the junkers forced ashore by contrary winds anchor there, crowds of men and women gather and amuse themselves, clapping their hands and jesting—before scurrying off, such that we might call them the tribe of the ruler Lord Getian.

See also the alternative translation in Rockhill, “Notes on the Relations and Trade of China,” 112–13. The source of the Biaoji allusion is indeterminate but, according to Rockhill, may well refer to the inhabitants of the realm in those ancient times when the sage-emperor Shun is said to have resided among wild deer. Lord Getian was a legendary ruler who purportedly succeeded Chao Fu, the scholar-hermit who preferred life perched in a tree to the throne offered him by the sage-emperor Yao, but preceded Fuxi, who is credited

70. Specifically with regard to the matter of Kunlun's location, we may see Fei Xin as perhaps also having rendered some valuable service to his fellow Ming-period contemporaries. For example, although the extent of his awareness of or obliviousness to Fei Xin's earlier report cannot be known, in describing what he calls the island of Kunlun, the writer Huang Zhong (1474–1553), in his early sixteenth-century geographical opus *Haiyu* (Conversations on the Seas), relates the following:

The island is located to the south of Cape Varella (Dafoling), and its seven islets and seven coves are generally referred to as its seven gates. Its nearby islets are all arranged around it like encircling wings, and thus for those from the various countries who travel there this is the sign of arrival. Its mountains are abundant in male and female rhinoceroses, wild horses, large roe deer, strange snakes, and immense trees. Moreover, there are placid streams aplenty, and there is fertile soil amounting to several hundred qing. Coconut trees ring the island; their fallen fruit is full in its holowness. The wax gourds spread about, with their vines of green rattan being an inch thick in diameter. The fruit grows to three to four feet, greatly exceeding in circumference a circle made with one's arms; when old and decaying, it is the consistency of mud. Whenever it is the case that the ships desire the gathering of firewood and brush, if it is not a matter of being able to dispatch a hundred men to the task, then they dare not go forth. Long ago, in recognition of the dangers, we may suppose that a cliff-wall was once engraved, in order to alert visitors that they should beware.

See Huang Zhong, *Haiyu* (Yangzhou: Guangling shushe, 2003), 3.1. Dafoling is alternatively known as Lingshan. A qing, or Chinese hectare, is equivalent to just over fifteen English acres. Huang Zhong's account is of supreme interest because it is so enigmatic. Although he initially proffers a far more lush, verdant, and inviting description than does Fei Xin, Huang Zhong nevertheless concludes even more ominously than Fei Xin does. If nothing else, Huang's rendition is certainly indicative of the fact that the notions of savagery associated with Kunlun and the emotions of trepidation evoked by Chinese musings about the place as well as the primeval kunlun as a people have become little assuaged over the intervening eight centuries since the early Tang Dynasty and the brutal murder of Lu Yuanrui.

72. Zhao Rugua, *Zhufon zhi*, 1.32b. See also Chapter 2, note 80.
73. Such popular and widely translated works of purported travel as that by the late fourteenth-century compiler Jehan de Mandeville (John Mandeville) (fl. 1357–71) come to mind. A remarkably insightful and now classic study of the world beyond Europe as Mandeville ostensibly envisioned it is John Block Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in


75. Ma Huan, *Yingyai shenglan*, in *Shuofong beisheng*, vol. 3, ed. He Qiutao, 1.12b. Interestingly, in a manner strikingly similar to that of Fei Xin in his entry, Ma Huan additionally underscores the swarthiness of the predominantly Malay natives of Melaka in the following way: “The men turban their heads and the women pinch their hair together (cuoji) at the backs of their heads. They are diminutive of frame and black.” See Ma Huan, *Yingyai shenglan*, in *Shuofong beisheng*, vol. 3, ed. He Qiutao, 1.12. See also the alternative translation in Rockhill, “Notes on the Relations and Trade of China,” 116.


77. See Duyvendak, *China’s Discovery of Africa*, 27. See also Mirsky, *Great Chinese Travelers*, 248.


80. A eunuch admirer of Zheng He purportedly sought to take the lead in reviving the maritime expeditions in about the year 1480, only to be thwarted at every turn. See Duyvendak, *China’s Discovery of Africa*, 27. See also Mirsky, *Great Chinese Travelers*, 248.


82. Ibid.

83. The delicate and sometimes discordant balancing act of harmonizing the judicious utilization of fictional literature with sound historical practice is well recognized and seemingly commented upon by each new generation of scholars. Given its interpretive excesses, I will confess to having struggled mightily with the utility of proffering the perspectives immanent in Luo Maodeng’s Popular Romance of the Record of the Three-Jeweled Eunuch Descending upon the Western Sea in any form. Ultimately, however, I have concluded that, for the sake of the fullest integrity of the important subject at hand, we are only disadvantaged by not availing ourselves of every scrap of primary-source evidence at our disposal, even when it is the projection of invention. Moreover, in fairness, the very title of the work—Romance of the Record—possibly indicates some self-awareness on the author’s part of his indulgence in what amounts in its extremes to a whimsical and outlandish undertaking—that is, a massive embellishment engaged in principally for the sake of peddling his tale.

84. Luo Maodeng, *Sanbao taijian xia Xiyang ji tongsu yanyi*, vol. 2, 13.77.6b.

85. See, for example, Dreyer, *Zheng He*, 55–59.

86. On this theme of disjuncture, Dreyer, in discussing the context for Luo Maodeng’s novel, does point out that China was immersed in its wars with Japan in Korea during the 1590s, such that Popular Romance of the Record of the Three-Jeweled Eunuch Descending
upon the Western Sea may well have been informed, if not inspired, by patriotic imperatives of a kind that differed radically from those prevailing in the early fifteenth-century context in which the voyages actually took place. See ibid., 177–78.


89. Ibid., 750.

90. Rada is distinguished by his sometimes having been highly critical of China and the Chinese, a trait exhibited by the Spanish in general in contrast to the Portuguese. See Boxer, China in the Sixteenth Century, lxi, xc. See also Lach, China in the Eyes of Europe, 750. For more on the intrinsic but heretofore largely neglected value of the Portuguese sources, see Brockey, Journey to the East, 17–18.

91. See Boxer, China in the Sixteenth Century, lxviii–lxx. The two constituent parts of Rada’s report on China are titled “Narrative of His Mission to Fujian” and “Relation of the Things of China, Which Is Properly Called Taybin.” See Boxer, China in the Sixteenth Century, 241.

92. Boxer, China in the Sixteenth Century, 297. Taybin, as Boxer explains, is Amoy dialect vernacular for Da Ming or “Great Ming,” China’s ruling dynasty at the time (ibid., 260). The name is also self-referential, for it was used by extension to mean “men or people of the Great Ming.” See Lach, China in the Eyes of Europe, 752.

93. Also contributing to this situation were the policies of exclusion that the founding Ming emperors, especially Hongwu, had imposed. These proscriptions in the Ming legal code made it seditious and punishable by death by decapitation for any Han Chinese to travel abroad. Both before and after the noteworthy exception of Zheng He’s voyages, regulations of this kind (the construction of seagoing vessels, for example, was completely banned in 1436) were largely effective in preventing subjects from exiting China. See Lach, China in the Eyes of Europe, 732. A complementary set of provisions was intended to keep foreigners out of the empire, specifically by forbidding foreign residency in China. These policies of foreign exclusion were somewhat less effective than those of Chinese containment. Nevertheless, even as late as the 1570s these proscriptions against foreigner entry and settlement were still sufficiently enforced to provoke Rada to lament, “They do not admit foreigners into the country.” See Boxer, China in the Sixteenth Century, 303. See also Ptak, China, the Portuguese, and the Nanyang, chap. 2, pp. 19–37.

94. See Spence, Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci, 209.

95. See Brockey, Journey to the East, 130, 235, 409, wherein the author writes, among other things, of the ministries provided by the China-based Jesuit fathers to “the communities of African and Indian slaves who had escaped from their Portuguese masters at Macau to Canton.” For a brief synopsis of the confrontative attitudes exhibited by the Portuguese traders and the Ming Chinese state that made the prospect of Macau’s establishment as the first (and last) European colony in China so unlikely, see Pearson, Indian Ocean, 131–32.
CONCLUSION

3. Zhu Yu, Pingzhou ketan, 2.2.
4. Zhou Qufei, Lingwai daida, 6.8. See also the translations in Levathes, When China Ruled the Seas, 44 and Pearson, Indian Ocean, 69.
5. Andaya, Leaves of the Same Tree, 51.

6. On the one hand, given the absence of the same firmness of documentation that later becomes available for the progression of West African slaves in their transport to destinations in the New World, no matter how confident we may be about the question of the means of delivery question, this assertion of its Arab domination remains an extrapolation. Nevertheless, based on what we do know with certainty—through Chinese, Arabic, and Portuguese sources—of the Arab transport of East African slaves to such locations in the easterly direction as Arabia, the Persian Gulf, and India, it is an exceedingly safe extrapolation. For corroboration, see, for example, Esmond Bradley Martin and Chryssee Perry Martin, Cargoes of the East: The Ports, Trade and Culture of the Arabian Seas and Western Indian Ocean (London: Elm Tree Books, 1978), 23–25.


8. We know that for eighteenth-century West African slaves being shipped across the Atlantic on board British slavers, even daily routines intended for their own sustenance could suddenly become drenched with violence. For example, somewhat counterintuitively, the simple rejection of foreign food, which was common for slaves in the earliest stages of their captivity at sea, could result in dismemberment and death. See Byrd, Captives and Voyagers, 36–37.


10. Marc S. Abramson, Ethnic Identity in Tang China (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 179. Near the beginning of his important study, Abramson makes this same crucial point, stating that “the concepts of ethnicity and identity themselves do not readily correspond to any of the established genres or topics of the Sinic sources” (ibid., x).


12. Zhang Xinglang, “Gudai Zhongguo yu Feizhou zhi jiaotong,” 48–49. Interestingly, even at this late date Zhang Xinglang’s thesis of the eventual appearance of kunlun slaves of African origin remains widely unknown or unaddressed on the part of numerous Sinological scholars with committed research interests in the field. For example, in referring incidentally to the kunlun slaves on at least a few occasions, Abramson describes them in terms of only one-half of the bifurcated paradigm—that is, foremost if not exclusively in
terms of the conventional understanding of their having hailed only "from Southeast Asia." See Abramson, *Ethnic Identity in Tang China*, x, 9, 11.

13. The ingenious technological and logistical innovation behind Zheng He's achievement has long attracted the interest of later Western scholars. For an extremely informative discussion of what is currently known about this intriguing dimension of the voyages, see Dreyer, *Zheng He*, 99–134.


fan 蕃
Fan Chengda 范成大
Fangyu shenglan 方舆勝览
Fei Xin 費信
Feng Chengjun 馮承鈞
Fujian 福建
Fulin 拂林
Fushan 福善
fushi 副使
Fuxi 伏羲
Gemie 閻著
Getian 葛天
Gong Zhen 鞏珍
Gongsun Long 公孫龍
Gu Yanwu 顧炎武
“Gudai Zhongguo yu Feizhou zhi jiaotong” 古代中國與非洲之交通
Guli 古里
gulun 骨論
Gutang 骨堂
guanglu si 光祿寺
Guangnan 廣南
Guangxi 廣西
Guangzhong furen 廣中富人
Guangzhou 廣州
Guihai yubeng zhi 桂海虞衡志
Guilin 桂林
guiniu 鬼奴
Guizhou 桂州
Hainan dao 海南島
“Haineijing” 海內經
Haiyu 海語
Han 漢
Hangzhou 杭州
Heling 訶陵
Henan 河南
hei 黑
heiren 黑人
heisen 黑身
Hongwu 洪武
Hu 胡
Hu Sanxing 胡三省
Hu Yuan 胡瑗
Hubei 湖北
Hunan 湖南
huabu 花布
Huainanzi 淮南子
huanchang 換腸
Huang Zhong 黃衷
Huanggang 黃岡
Huanghai 黃海
Huangji jingshishu 皇極經世書
Huangzhou 黃州
Hui 回
hui 回
Hui Shi 惠施
Huilin 慧琳
Ji 箕
Jizi 箕子
Jian Yi 塞義
jiān'ài 兼愛
Jianwen 建文
Jiangsu 江蘇
Jiangxi 江西
Jiaozhi 交趾
jìn 斤
jìnshì 進士
Jinshu 晉書
jīng 經
Jingshuo 經說
Jingzhou 靜州
Jiu Tangshu 舊唐書
Jiu Yi 九夷
jué 舉
juan 卷
Juntunshan 軍屯山
junzi 君子
Kaifeng 開封
ke 可
keren 客人
ketan 可談
ketou 磕頭
Kongzi 孔子
kùnlún 嵩崙
Kunlun cengqi 嵩崙層期
Kunlun nu 嵩崙奴
Kunlun sengzhi 嵩崙僧祇
Kunlun yang 嵩崙洋
kunlun yu 嵩崙語
Kunlorunguo 嵩崙國
Kunlunshan 嵩崙山
Kunshan 嵩山
Kuntun 嵩山屯
Lasa 刺撤
Lai 萊
Laizhou 萊州
lanqi guan 藍旗官
Laozi 老子
leishu 類書
Li 李
li 里
Li Weiguo 李偉國
Liqiet 聂伽塔
Liangzhe 两瀾
Liao 遼
liezhuan 列傳
Linyi 林邑
Lingling 零陵
Lingshan 靈山
Lingwai daida 嶺外代答
Liujianggang 劉家港
Lu Yuanruo 路元叡
Lunyu 論語
Luo Maodeng 羅懋登
luocha 羅剎
Luoposi 羅婆斯
Ma Hazhi 马哈只
Ma He 马和
Ma Huan 马欢
Majana 麻加那
Malai bandao 马来半岛
Mai 马百
Mán 蠻
Manlajia 滿剌加
Miji[mohai] 秘笈墨海
Ming 明
Mingshi 明史
Mingzhou 明州
Mo Di 墨翟
Mohemo 摩诃末
Molin 磨邻
mosuo 摩娑
Mozi 墨子
mu 牡
Mu Tianzi zhuăn 穆天子傳
Mu Wang 穆王
Mugudushu 木骨都束
Mulanpi 木蘭皮
Naitō Konan 内藤虎湖南
Naitō Torajirō 内藤虎次郎
Nanchang 南昌
Nanhai 南海
Nanjing 南京
Nanpi 南毗
eige 内閣
eiguankan jian taijian 内官監太監
niaoshou 鳥獸
Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修
panguan 判官
pian 篇
pin 牠
Pingzhou ketan 萍洲可談
Pingzhou laopu 萍洲老圃
Poluomen 婆羅門
Poluo zhōu 婆羅洲
Pulo 蒲囉
Pusina 蒲思那
qilin 麒麟
Qizhou 七洲
qianshi 遣使
qianyan 前言
Qing 清
Qinghai 青海
quan 髭
quan 拳
quanfa 拳髮
Quanzhou 泉州
renshi 人事
Renzong 仁宗
Rong 戎
Run 潤
Runzhou 潤州
| Sanbao taijian | Shun 舜 |
| Sanbao taijian xia Xiyang ji tongsu | Shuo 說 |
| yanyi 三寶太監下西洋記通俗演義 | Shuofu 說郛 |
| Sancai tubui 三才圖會 | Sichuan 四川 |
| Sengqi 僧祇 | Sijialie 斯加里野 |
| Sengzhi 僧祇 | Siku quanshu 四庫全書 |
| Shaanxi 陝西 | Sima Guang 司馬光 |
| shan 山 | siyi 四夷 |
| Shandong 山東 | Song 宋 |
| Shanhaijing 山海經 | Songshi 宋史 |
| Shanxi 山西 | Su Shi 蘇軾 |
| Shang 商 | Suzhou 蘇州 |
| Shao仰jian, duo (suo) guai 少所見, 多所怪 | Taicang 太倉 |
| Shao Yong 邵雍 | Taiping guangji 太平廣記 |
| Shaosheng 紹聖 | Taizong 太宗 |
| Shepo 鬆婆 | Tang 唐 |
| Shepoguo 鬆婆國 | Tao Zongyi 陶宗儀 |
| Shen Du 沈度 | tiyao 提要 |
| Shenzong 神宗 | Tianzhen 天鎮 |
| shengshu 生熟 | tu 圖 |
| Shengzhou 昇州 | Tumi 突彌 |
| shibo shi 市舶使 | waige 外閣 |
| shibo si 市舶司 | waiguo 外國 |
| shibo tiju 市舶提舉 | wanji 挽髻 |
| shibo tijusi 市舶提舉司 | Wang Dayuan 汪大淵 |
| Shitou Mán 尸頭蠻 | Wang Fangqing 王方慶 |
| shuai 帥 | Wang Gungwu (Wang Gengwu) 王慶武 |
| | Wang Jinghong 王景弘 |
Wang Qi 王圻
Wang Shangshu 王尚書
Wang Ye 王爺
Wei 魏
wei 尉
Wenxian tongkao 文獻通考
Wu Hou 武后
Wu Zhao 武曌
Wucheng 鳥程
Wuhan 武漢
Wuhuo 物或
Wujin 武進
Wulun 巫崙
Wusili 勿斯里
wwuwu (mouwu) 戊午
Xilan 細蘭
Xilanshan 錫蘭山
Xiwangmu 西王母
Xiyang 西洋
Xiyang fanguo zhi 西洋番國誌
Xia 夏
Xiamen 下門; 廈門
Xianluoguo 遊羅國
Xiang 襄
Xiao Wu 孝武
“Xiao Wu Wen Li Taihou” 孝武文李太后
Xiaogelan 小葛蘭
Xiaoyou shan 小酉山

Xin Tangshu 新唐書
Xinjiang 新疆
Xingcha shenglan 星槎勝覽
Xingzhong 行中
xu 序
Xu Jiyu 徐繼疇
Xu Jingye 徐敬業
Yan Wang 燕王
Yang Min 楊敏
Yangzhou 揚州
Yangzi 揚子
Yao 尙
Ye 揚
yeren 野人
Yi 夷
Yiqiejing yinyi 一切經音義
yiren 夷人
Yingyai shenglan 瀛涯勝覽
Yongle 永樂
Yongle dadian 永樂大典
Youyang shan 西陽山
Youyang zazu 西陽雜俎
Yuan 元
Yuanfeng 元豐
Yunnan 雲南
Zetian 則天
Zhancheng 占城
Zhanga Fu 張輔
Zhang Xinglang (Chang Hsing-lang) 張星烺
Zhao Rugua 趙汝適
Zhao Yuanfen 趙元份
Zhejiang 浙江
Zhenjiang 鎮江
Zhenzong 真宗
Zheng He 鄭和
zhiglongtu ge 直龍圖閣
Zhizhai 伽lt伊;eti 宜齋書錄解題
Zhizhe 時至正
Zhongguo Nanyangjiaotong shi 中國南洋交通史
Zhongli 中理
Zhongwen 仲文
Zhongyuan 中原
Zhou 周
Zhou Qufei 周去非
Zhu Di 朱棣
Zhu Fu 朱服
Zhu he 珠河
Zhu Lin 朱臨
Zhu Mu 祝穆
Zhu Yu 朱彧
Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋
Zhubuguo 竹步國
Zhufan zhi 諸蕃志
Zhuawa 爪哇
Zhuansun Shi 頡孫師
Zhuangzi 莊子
zhuiji 椎醫
Zizhang 子張
Zizhi tongjian 資治通鑑
Zuo Gui 左圭
Zuo zhuo 左傳
Zuofaer 佐法兒
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The present book has truly modest and unanticipated beginnings, so much so that I am compelled to tender the unusual confession straightaway that it is a work I originally had no intention of ever writing. This initial dearth of intentionality on my part should in no way be attributed to any absence of interest. On the contrary, since first becoming privy to it decades ago as a graduate student, I have found this topic—the story of initial encounter between East Asians, represented here in archetypal terms by the Chinese, and the various peoples of Africa who are so distantly alien to them—to be profoundly intriguing. However, whereas my interest has been keen from the first, my corresponding motivation for expounding on the subject at any length or depth has all along remained considerably more modest; given the present result in the form of this book, one might rightfully be inclined to ask why that is.

The presence in traditional China of peoples of a skin shade that we tend commonly to refer to as black is a fact not likely ever to gain either wide acknowledgment or ready acceptance among the general Western or Chinese public. Even so, it has hardly escaped all prior scholarly attention and treatment. Indeed, sinological scholars of disciplines as conventional as traditional history and literature have long recognized a Chinese-black connection—albeit remote and imperfectly understood. At least part of my own hesitancy in seizing less aggressively upon this opportunity than I otherwise might have stemmed directly from my own knowledge in advance that whatever I produced would by no means be the first inquiry of its kind. Several early and still indispensable studies on the premodern historical experiences of only a minuscule number of blacks—most broadly construed—in their cross-cultural relations with the minions in imperial China already exist. My own recognition of this fact continues even now to have a humbling effect, one that has led me to limit my labors here predominantly to proffering an integrative essay in the strictest and most original sense of the term—that is, a written “attempt,”
an expository effort designed to offer something new but by no means one in which I presume to present anything that is categorically so.

Ironically, this same recognition of the significant but sparse scholarship to date that preceded my own also served as a profound catalyst. The forerunning secondary scholarship that does exist is preponderantly locatable only in specialized professional journals and of article length. Many of these works are nearly as dispersed and discursive as the fragile primary sources on which they are based, and some exist only in Chinese, having never been subjected to translation. In short, in an odd and most counterintuitive way, from a set of conditions that had initially seemed daunting, I increasingly drew motivation and thereby developed an abiding conviction that the best way to do proper justice and pay due homage to these valuable materials would be to draw their diversely contributing insights together. I would frame and present the observations of the one on, say, Chinese-African continental geographical awareness and those of the other on traditional Chinese slaveholding practices into a cohesive and informing whole.

Yet, even with my initial hesitations allayed, if not altogether surmounted, and with my tentative scrutiny of the representative secondary scholarship currently available at least under way, this opportunity to retrieve and retell in an integrated fashion the story of first contacts between the Chinese and their various blacks became unexpectedly transformative for me. I must profess to having experienced nothing less than an intellectual epiphany. What basically began for me as a mundane and somewhat pedestrian effort to collect together all the known data in order, at best, to rearticulate a little-known but certifiable fact gradually transmogrified into an alluring enterprise that was enticingly laden with fresh findings. With every step deeper into the research, with every one of the multitudinous layers of dense overgrowth I was able to penetrate and pare away, China's premodern blacks became ever more revealed and detectable—even if exclusively through the channels of their Chinese observers—across the several-century expanse of their largely submerged history. Progress along these lines was by turns bounding and incremental. However, it not only deepened my interest but also quickened it, in much the same way that the pace of one's pulse and step inevitably accelerates with the heightening excitement of possibly chancing upon any truly new, meaningful, and hunch-affirming discovery.

Needless to say, the resultant study has become something quite different from what I had initially envisioned, and even while not being the first published treatment by any estimation, this book is nonetheless, to my knowledge, the first to deal exclusively with this provocative topic and nothing
else. Moreover, it is the first to integrate previous findings comprehensively and to present them along with new ones in a manner as concise as could be managed for a combined audience of Western generalist readers and East Asian—specifically Chinese-language—specialist readers. To the extent that it is successful, this strategy for presentation is actually more risky than anything that has come before it, for whereas past efforts have certainly informed the professional enclave of specialists, none has heretofore also attempted to target the far more populous community of interested generalists for reception of the ideas herein.

However, even inasmuch as it represents a departure, let there be no mistake that this work is also intended as a contribution to a preexisting scholarly continuum. To the extent that I have been able to realize these ambitious "firsts" of my own, I duly express my indebtedness to the pioneering scholarship in this area produced by the numerous trailblazers who have preceded me, and hardly the least among my motives has been that of seeking to expose new readers to their early but crucial discernments. Surely to be included among these individuals deserving acknowledgment are several Asianist and comparativist giants now deceased: William Woodville Rockhill, Friedrich Hirth, Paul Pelliot, Chang Hsing-lang (Zhang Xinglang), Jan Julius Lodewijk Duyvendak, Edward Hetzel Schafer, Jung-pang Lo, Charles O. Hucker, Angus C. Graham, C. Martin Wilbur, William Armand Lessa, Charles Ralph Boxer, Donald F. Lach, Clifford Geertz, and Edward L. Dreyer.

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