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The Magical *Kunlun* and "Devil Slaves": Chinese Perceptions of Dark-skinned People and Africa before 1500

by
Julie Wilensky

Victor H. Mair, Editor
Sino-Platonic Papers
Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations
University of Pennsylvania
Philadelphia, PA 19104-6305 USA
vmair@sas.upenn.edu
www.sino-platonic.org

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Julie Wilensky
Yale University

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Introduction

Historians have not yet established the precise date of the first contacts between the Chinese and African peoples. Moreover, the available sources make it impossible to calculate exactly how many Chinese people traveled to Africa or how many Africans went to China in premodern times. What Chinese sources do reveal, however, is how Chinese people viewed those with dark skin and how these perceptions changed over time, reflecting first what Chinese people imagined, and later, what they knew about African countries and their inhabitants. Perceptions changed as knowledge and exploration of the countries and peoples of Southeast Asia, the Indian subcontinent, and East Africa increased. This essay examines a combination of nonfiction accounts, fictional literature, geographical sources, and travel diaries from the Tang (618-907) to the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) to analyze the shifts in Chinese perceptions of people with dark skin and Chinese knowledge of Africa and Africans.*

Beginning in the Tang dynasty, Arab traders brought a number of East African slaves to China. Although historians have studied the African slave trade extensively, particularly the export of West African slaves to the Americas after 1500, a much smaller body of research focuses on the premodern East African slave trade, and fewer sources still mention black slaves in China. From the eighth to the fourteenth centuries, the Arabs controlled this vast slave trade, which stretched not only along the entire coast of East Africa and throughout the Arab world but as far east as China. Black slaves were just one of many commodities in the Arabs' large-scale maritime trade with China, which peaked during the Tang and Song dynasty (960-1275). The *Jiu Tang shu* 舊唐書 (Former Tang history) mentions that the Arabs sent delegates to the Chinese court in 651, marking the first recorded official contact between the Chinese government and the Arab caliphate.[1] By the ninth century, a sizable community of Arabs lived in Guangzhou, and the local residents could have seen African slaves on trading ships and in Arab homes.

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[1] *Jiu Tang shu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju), 198: 5315. Reference provided by Raphael Israeli, *Muslims in China: A Study in Cultural Confrontation* (London: Curzon Press, 1980), 80.

Some wealthy Chinese people even owned African slaves, whom they used as doorkeepers.

The first chapter of this paper seeks to explain how Chinese people perceived these black slaves by analyzing representations of people with dark skin in fictional and nonfiction sources from the fifth century through the Song dynasty, tracing the evolution of the meanings and connotations of the term *kunlun* 崑崙. This mysterious and poorly understood word first applied to dark-skinned Chinese and then expanded over time to encompass multiple meanings, all connoting dark skin. This chapter examines the meaning of the term *kunlun* in nonfiction before and during the Tang; fictional tales about magical, superhuman *kunlun* slaves from the Tang fiction compendium *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記 (Extensive Gleanings of the Reign of Great Tranquility); and finally, representations of the *kunlun* from a nonfiction writer from the Song, Zhu Yu 朱彧.

Although fictional portrayals do not necessarily provide information about what actual African slaves experienced in China, fiction is a valuable source because its popularity reveals widespread cultural perceptions of people with dark skin. Histories and other nonfiction accounts, on the other hand, indicate how some Chinese viewed these people with dark skin, but it can be difficult to determine the readership and popularity of these sources because the information they contain does not seem to have reached a wider audience.

Were these Tang and Song images of the *kunlun* based on direct contact between Chinese and African peoples? When did the Chinese make a conceptual link between the *kunlun* slaves in China and the countries and peoples of East Africa? The second chapter addresses these questions by examining Chinese histories and geographies from the Tang and Song that describe African countries and their inhabitants. The answer to the first question is straightforward: a few Chinese may have visited Africa during this time, but most, if not all, Chinese knowledge about Africa and Africans came from the Arabs, who brought specific geographic knowledge of the countries along the maritime trade route between East Africa and China. Most of the Chinese descriptions of Africa were compiled by authors who never left China and gleaned their information about foreign countries and peoples from Arab traders living in China. Regardless of whether these accounts indicate direct contact between Chinese and African people in the Tang and

Song, however, they reveal Chinese historians and geographers' increasing knowledge of Africa and Africans. This new knowledge allowed the Chinese to make a connection between the *kunlun* slaves in China and the East African slave trade.

Once the Chinese made this connection between the *kunlun* and the African slave trade, did the meaning of the word *kunlun* shift again? And how did China's maritime exploration of the East African coast in the early fifteenth century affect Chinese perceptions of African countries and their inhabitants? The third chapter will examine two travel accounts from the Yuan and Ming dynasties that describe the authors' travels to Africa. We do not know how many Chinese read Song and Yuan accounts of Africa and Africans, but educated Chinese people most likely knew of China's maritime exploration in the early fifteenth century. The voyages of the Muslim admiral Zheng He and his fleet provide the first documented evidence of large groups of Chinese traveling to Africa. Firsthand accounts of these trips were reprinted several times in the fifteenth century, suggesting that they were widely read.[2] Examining these accounts – and one play written in the late sixteenth century – will reveal whether Chinese perceptions of Africa and Africans changed significantly once the Chinese began large-scale maritime exploration of the East African coast.

Chinese knowledge of African countries and their inhabitants was not always consistent throughout a given time period, however. Information about foreign countries and their inhabitants did not always reach the same audiences at the same time, and Chinese knowledge of Africa did not just increase consistently over time. Contemporary sources sometimes report conflicting information, revealing a complex picture of Chinese perceptions of people with dark skin and Africa before 1500.

[2] J.V.G. Mills, "Different Editions of the Hsing-Ch'a Sheng-Lan," in Fei Xin, *Hsing-ch'a-sheng-lan: the Overall Survey of the Star Raft*, trans. J.V.G. Mills, revised by Roderich Ptak (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1996), 9.

Chapter 1
Images of the *Kunlun* from the Fifth Century to the Song

The *Jin shu* 晉書 (History of the Jin) describes Empress Li, a concubine of Emperor Xiao Wuwen (373-397): "...She was tall and her coloring was black. All the people in the palace used to call her *kunlun*."[3] Was the term *kunlun* synonymous with dark skin? This anecdote comes from a history of the Jin dynasty (265-420), before African slaves had been imported into China and before the Chinese had made significant contacts with Southeast Asian countries.[4] So when and why did the term *kunlun* take on this meaning?

The origins of the word *kunlun* are unclear, and like many terms, its meanings have shifted over time.[5] As early as the Han dynasty, Chinese sources describe the Kunlun Mountains in northwest China as the home of the mythical Xi Wang Mu 西王母 (Queen Mother of the West).[6] The meanings of the word *kunlun* gradually broadened over time, and various sources simultaneously used the term in different ways. These uses of *kunlun* are unrelated to the name of the Kunlun Mountains.[7] Instead, they reveal Chinese perceptions of those with dark skin, since the term retained this connotation.

This section will first examine images and meanings of the term *kunlun* in various nonfiction sources from its earliest uses through the Tang, tracing the word's expanding meanings, which are linked to China's increasing international maritime trade.[8] Next, it

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[3] *Jin shu* (Shanghai: Shangwu edition, 1934), Vol. 7, 32: 6b. Also translated in Chang Hsing-lang, "The Importation of Negro Slaves into China under the T'ang Dynasty (AD 618-907)," *Bulletin of the Catholic University of Peking* 7 (1930), 44 and J.J.L. Duyvendak, "China's Discovery of Africa," Lectures given at the University of London on January 22 and 23, 1947 (London: A. Probsthain, 1949), 23.

[4] Although this is "negative evidence," there are no references of "*kunlun* slaves" prior to the fifth century in a computer search generated by Academica Sinica, in which I searched the twenty-five histories for "*kunlun nu*." On Chinese contacts with the Arabs, see George Hourani, revised and expanded by John Carswell, *Arab Seafaring in the Indian Ocean in Ancient and Early Medieval Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

[5] For a detailed analysis on the origins of the word *kunlun*, see Gabriel Ferrand, *Le K'ouen-Louen et les Anciennes Navigations Interocéaniques dans les Mers du Sud.* Reprinted from *Le Journal Asiatique* (1919) (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1919).

[6] L. de Saussure, "L'etymologie du nom des monts K'ouen-louen," *T'oung Pao* 20 (1921), 370-1.

[7] Chang Hsing-lang writes that the Kunlun mountain "region has been familiar to the Chinese from the earliest times, and no Chinese work has ever described its inhabitants as being black-skinned." Chang Hsing-lang, "The Importation of Negro Slaves," 40-41.

[8] Trade between the Persian Gulf and China declined slightly with the fall of the Tang dynasty and the Abbasid empire in the early tenth century but revived considerably by the twelfth century. From Hourani, 70 and Friedrich Hirth and W.W. Rockhill, trans. and ed., *Chao Ju-Kua: His Work on the Chinese*

will examine fictional tales about magical, superhuman *kunlun* slaves from the *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記 (Extensive Gleanings of the Reign of Great Tranquility), a massive Song period collection of Tang and earlier tales.[9] Although we do not know who read the histories and other nonfiction accounts, these fictional tales were widely read at the time of their publication, revealing common images of the *kunlun* that reflect popular perceptions of people with dark skin.[10] Finally, this section will examine representations of the *kunlun* and foreign "devil slaves" in Zhu Yu's 1119 萍洲可談 *Pingzhou ketan* (Notes on Pingzhou), a nonfiction source from the Song.

Nonfiction from the Fifth Century through the Tang

Sources from the fourth and fifth centuries use the term *kunlun* to describe people with dark skin. An anecdote from a history of the Liu Song dynasty (420-479), for example, describes an emperor who had a *kunlun* slave, marking the earliest mention of a *kunlun* person rather than the term's use as an adjective for a dark-skinned Chinese person.[11] This *kunlun* slave, Bai Zhu, was "often at [the emperor's] side. He was ordered to beat the ministers and officials with a stick," and even the highest-ranking ministers "feared his venom."[12] Among fictional and nonfiction portrayals of the *kunlun*, this instance is the only depiction of a *kunlun* person surnamed *Bai*, which means "white."[13] Perhaps this slave's name of "white" reveals the author's attempt at humor, since the term *kunlun* had a connotation of dark skin. The name *Bai* was also a common surname for non-Chinese people from a region of present-day Xinjiang, however, so perhaps it merely reflects that the slave was not Chinese.[14] This early depiction of a *kunlun* indicates the slave's imposing power, with his proximity to the emperor and ability to

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and Arab Trade in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries, entitled Chu-fan-chï (St. Petersburg: Printing Office of the Imperial Academy of Sciences, 1911), 18.

[9] The translation of this title and the assertion that these tales were widely read is from William Nienhauser, "T'ai-p'ing kuang-chi," in Nienhauser, ed., *Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature*, vol. 1 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 744..

[10] Nienhauser, "T'ai-p'ing kuang-chi," 744.

[11] Based on a computer search of the 25 histories for the word "kunlun," as well as secondary sources.

[12] *Nan shi* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 16: 466.

[13] Among the numerous portrayals I have seen, using secondary sources and a computer search of the 25 histories, this is the only one.

[14] Bai being a common surname for people from a region in present-day Xinjiang is courtesy of Valerie Hansen.

punish even the highest officials. The description of Bai's physical power may presage later tales about the superhuman strength of the *kunlun*.

These histories of the fourth and fifth centuries, however, were not actually recorded until the Tang dynasty, when the term *kunlun* was better known due to the popularity of fictional tales about the *kunlun*.[15] The Tang historians might well have inserted the word *kunlun* into accounts of emperors who lived hundreds of years earlier. One has to wonder whether people even knew the word *kunlun* before the Tang, since the lack of contemporary sources using the word as a descriptive epithet for persons makes it difficult to pinpoint exactly when the term came into use.

The meanings of the word *kunlun* expanded during the Tang to include the races, countries, and languages of Southeast Asia. The *Former Tang History* describes the homeland of the *kunlun* people: "The people living to the south of Linyi 林邑 [present-day Vietnam] have curly hair and black bodies and are commonly called *kunlun*."[16] The description of the country of Zhenla 真臘 (present-day Cambodia) also includes information on the *kunlun*: "The country of Zhenla is northwest of Linyi. It was originally a dependent of Funan. It is of the *kunlun* type."[17] This appears to be the earliest Chinese indication of the *kunlun* as a racial group with a specific homeland.[18]

Other sources also describe the *kunlun* people and their homeland in Southeast Asia. Yijing, a Buddhist who traveled to India and back in the seventh century, described the *kunlun* in his *Record of Buddhist Practices*, including a description of the "Kunlun Island" in his list of island countries.[19] Although Yijing distinguishes the "Kunlun Island" from the large islands of Sumutra, Bali, and Java, he writes that all of these islands "were generally known by the general name of the 'Country of Kunlun' since the *gulun* 骨論

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[15] Fang Xuanling (578-648) edited the *Jin shu*, and Li Yanshou (612-678) edited the *Nan shi*.

[16] *Jiu Tang shu* (Zhonghua shuju) 197: 5270.

[17] *Jiu Tang shu* (Zhonghua shuju) 197: 5271.

[18] Paul Pelliot cites *juan* 4 of the *Jiu Tang shu* as mentioning an incident involving the "*kunlun* of Guangzhou" in AD 684, but does not state when or how such people came to China or describe their appearance. This appears to be the first mention of a community of *kunlun* living in China, rather than a single slave who served the Emperor. Pelliot writes that this passage demonstrates that "les Kouen-louen aient d'ailleurs été bien connus en Chine dans la seconde moitié du VIIème siècle.... " Paul Pelliot, "Quelques Artistes des Six Dynasties et des T'ang," *T'oung Pao* 22 (1923), 272.

[19] Yijing, trans. J. Takakusu, *A Record of Buddhist Practices* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1896): 10.

first visited Cochin and Guangdong."[20] The word *gulun* appears in several sources about the *kunlun* and appears to be an alternative pronunciation of *kunlun*.[21] Although Yijing might have listed a specific "Kunlun Island," his contemporaries applied the term *kunlun* to anyone from Southeast Asia, since the term included a group of islands. Yijing also mentioned that he met with the owner of a Persian trading ship in Guangdong in 671, implying that he knew about China's trade with the Near East but did not link it to the term *kunlun*.[22]

Tang sources do not categorize all people with dark skin as *kunlun*, however. The *Former Tang History* reports that the residents of the Southeast Asian country of Dandan 丹丹 "have black coloring," yet the inhabitants are not called *kunlun,* unlike other descriptions of people from Southeast Asian countries in the same chapter.[23] Another word used to describe people with black or dark skin during the Tang is *sengchi* 僧祇 or *zengqi* 曾期, transliterations of *zanj,* the Arabic word for "dark."[24] Arabs brought these *sengchi* slaves from East Africa as part of the large-scale maritime trade between the Persian Gulf and China during the Tang, although contemporary Arab sources describing trade with China do not mention slavery.[25]

The Arabs were key participants in the East African slave trade, which existed long before their rise to power. Western, Persian, and Arabic sources used the word *zanj*

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[20] Yijing, 11. The word *"gulun"* and *"kunlun"* are similar, and scholars believe they are different pronunciations of the same term (Chang 38, Schafer 46). Takakusu writes that this sentence is confusing: "Because, indeed, the K'u-lun first came to Chiao-kwang (Kochin and Kwang-tung) all were afterwards called the 'Country of Kun-lun'"(11).

[21] Huilin also uses the word *gulun*, see discussion below.

[22] Yijing, xxviii. The Arabs defeated the Persians in 642 AD. Valerie Hansen proposes that perhaps this ship owner continued to do business because he fled beyond the Arab territory, or maybe he was allowed to continue trading under Arab rule (personal communication).

[23] *Jiu Tang shu* (Zhonghua shuju) 197: 5271.

[24] Chang and Duyvendak assert that *zangi* (or *sengchi*) is a Chinese rendering of the area in East Africa known in European, Arabic, and Persian forms of Zinj, Zenj, Zanzi, or Zanghi, and described by Marco Polo as "Zanghibar." Chang, "The Importation of Negro Slaves," 42; Duyvendak, "China's Discovery of Africa," 23. Edward Schafer also remarks that the term "Zangi" was used universally in the Malay Archipelago to describe blacks in *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), 46.

[25] Ibn-Khurdadhbih's c. 848 *Kitab al-Masalik w-al-Mamalik* (Book of Routes and Countries) mentions only trade routes. Also, neither the anonymous 851 *Akhbar al-Sin w-al-Hind* (Notices of China and India) nor Abu-Zayd a-Sirafi's 916 *Silsilat al-Tawarikh* (Chain of Chronicles) mentions the Arab slave trade. The first two are translated in Gabriel Ferrand, *Relations des Voyages et Textes Géographiques Arabes, Persans et Turks, Relatifs à l'Extrême-Orient du VIIIeme Siècles*, vol. 1, reprint of 1913 edition (Frankfurt: Institut fur Geschichte der Arabisch-Islamischen Wissenschaften an der Johann Wolfgang Goethe Universitat, 1986). Abu-Zayd a-Sirafi is translated in Reinaud, *Relation des Voyages.*

and similar terms to denote black Africans as early as the second century AD.[26] The words *sengchi* and *zengqi*, however, appear far less frequently than *kunlun* in Tang sources, indicating that although the meanings of these terms might overlap, they were not equivalent. The scarcity of references to *sengchi* and *zengqi* in nonfiction sources suggests that the Chinese did not necessarily link the word *kunlun* to the Arabs' *sengchi* slaves during the Tang.

Perhaps because of the increasing number of foreign traders and slaves entering China in the eight and ninth centuries, however, one Tang account does expand the meaning of the word *kunlun* to include not only races of people from Southeast Asia but also these East African *zanj (sengchi)*.[27] The Buddhist lexicographer Huilin includes an entry on "The language of *kunlun*" in his dictionary *Yiqie jing yinyi* 一切經音義 (The Sounds and Meanings of All the Scriptures), compiled between 783 and 820.[28] Huilin uses the term *kunlun* as a category to describe dark-skinned people from the islands of the South Pacific:

> *Kunlun* can also be written as *gulun*. They are the non-Chinese peoples from the east, those from the island states of the Southern Seas. Their bodies are black.... There are many types of them, including the *zanj*, the *turmi*, the *kurdang*, and the *khmer*. They are all base peoples. These countries lack ritual and propriety. They steal in order to live, and love to feed on humans for food, as if they were some sort of *rakshas* or a kind of evil ghost. The words they speak do not have any correct meaning at all.... They do extremely well when they enter the water, since they can stay there for a day without dying.[29]

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[26] Ptolemy described the cape of *Zinggis* c. AD 150. From "Claudius Ptolemy's Geography: The Knowledge of Fourth-Century Byzantium," in G.S.P. Freeman-Greenville, *The East African Coast: Select Documents from the First to the Earlier Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), 3. An Alexandrian text, *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, written c. AD 100, mentions the slave trade in East Africa, describing a country in Africa that produces "the better sort of slaves, which are brought to Egypt in increasing numbers," quoted in G.S.P. Freeman-Greenville, 1.

[27] About the increasing numbers: Abu-Zayd writes that in 878 AD, the Chinese rebel Huang Chao and his forces massacred 120,000 Muslims, Christians, Jews, and other foreigners (in addition to countless Chinese). In Reinauld, *Relation des Voyages*, 64-65. Evidence of the scale of the Arab trade is the giant *zanj* revolt at Basra in 869, in which East African slaves captured and destroyed the city, killing its inhabitants and attacking the area for more than ten years. Historians estimate the number killed in the wars following this revolt at more than half a million. From R.W. Beachey, *The Slave Trade in Eastern Africa* (London: Rex Collings, 1972), 4. This incident is also cited as a "*zanj* revolt" in Hourani, "Arab Seafaring," 79.

[28] William H. Nienhauser, Jr., ed. and compiler, *The Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature*, vol. 2 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 168-9.

[29] Huilin, *Yi qie jing yin yi* 81, in T 54.835c12. This is my own translation, but I have adopted Edward Schafer's translations of foreign terms from *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand*, 46.

This description of the *kunlun* is the earliest account to attribute mostly undesirable qualities to dark-skinned people and to suggest that they are less than human.[30] In dismissing their languages as words with no "correct" meaning, Huilin imposes a value judgment on non-Chinese languages. His use of the term *kunlun* extends to include a variety of races, including the Cambodian Khmers and the East African *zanj*.[31] The term seems to refer, then, not only to blacks but also to any people that had darker skin than the Han Chinese, although we do not really know how dark the Han Chinese themselves were during the Tang.[32] Huilin's mention of the *kunluns*' unusual skill and endurance in the water, however, is a characteristic image that will often appear when later authors mention the *kunlun*.

Although the meaning of the word *kunlun* expanded during the Tang to include the African *sengchi* as well as Southeast Asians, it is unclear when the term came to link Arabs' *sengchi* slaves with the different *kunlun* peoples. The *Xin Tang shu* (New Tang History) records that the country of Heling 訶陵 [Java] brought *sengchi* slaves to the Chinese court during the Tang: "In the 8th year of the Yuan He (AD 813), Heling offered four *sengchi* 僧祇 slaves."[33] This account does not specify whether these slaves were dark-skinned local Southeast Asian slaves or *sengchi* slaves imported from East Africa by Arab traders. Even if the slaves were originally from East Africa, the Chinese may not have known where they came from and labeled them *sengchi* simply because they had dark skin.

Tang Fiction: Tales from the *Taiping guangji*

Numerous myths about the magical, superhuman powers of the *kunlun* appear in the 978 fiction compendium *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記 (Extensive Gleanings of the Reign

[30] I claim that this is the earliest account to depict negative qualities to dark-skinned people based on my research using the computer database of the Twenty-Five Histories and use of secondary sources – Pelliot, Duyvendak, Philip Snow, Schafer, and Chang do not cite any earlier passages that depict the *kunlun* or *sengchi* negatively.

[31] Schafer claims that Huilin's definition of *kunlun* is limited to "the Indonesians who had not received the benefits of Indian acculturation, that is, to the non-Hinduized aborigines of the Isles," Schafer, *Golden Peaches of Samarkand*, 46. I think the list of races underneath the general category "*kunlun*," however, suggests that the term applies to all races the Chinese considered to have dark skin.

[32] I use "Han Chinese" to refer to the majority ethnic group in China, although of course there are great regional and physical differences among Han Chinese.

[33] *Xin Tang shu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 222b: 6302. All of the secondary sources agree that Heling refers to Java (Hirth and Rockhill, Chang, Schafer). The date is from Chang, 41.

of Great Tranquility).[34] Although this work was published early in the Song dynasty (960-1275), the anthology is compiled from tales written during the Tang, thus reflecting Tang attitudes and customs.[35] The *Taiping guangji* presents a curious mixture of *kunlun* characters, incorporating familiar images of black skin and the ability to dive deep into the sea. Although these fantastic tales do not describe what actual black slaves did in China, these stories were widely read in the Tang. These recurring images of the *kunlun* are significant because they reflect popular perceptions of people with dark skin rather than the views of a few historians or geographers.

Of the thirteen passages in the *Taiping guangji* that mention the word *kunlun*, twelve passages depict *kunlun* characters, some of whom have "black" skin, some who "have the appearance of a *kunlun*," and others whose skin color is not mentioned.[36] About half of the *kunlun* characters are slaves.[37] A sole tale refers to the *kunlun* as a group of non-Chinese people and locates their homeland outside China, noting that they live in Annam (present-day Vietnam).[38] Only one mention of *kunlun* in the *Taiping guangji* does not refer to people: a chapter on plants mentions that Emperor Yang (605-616) of the Sui dynasty (589-618) changed the name of the eggplant to "*kunlun* purple melon."[39] This section will discuss five representative stories that depict the *kunlun*, revealing the range of characteristics and connotations Tang authors attached to people with dark skin.

A common motif in the *Taiping guangji* is the *kunlun's* exotic appearance, illustrated in the story of the character Mo Junhe, a *kunlun* with black skin.[40] The tale opens with a poor women's dream, in which a "foreign monk from the northwest"

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[34] *Taiping guangji*, Li Fang, ed. (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1959). The translation of this title is from the *Indiana Companion*, vol. 1, 744.

[35] William H. Nienhauser, Jr., "T'ai-p'ing kuang-chi," *Indiana Companion*, vol. 1, 744. Each story was taken from an earlier named source and many of the stories are set in the eighth or ninth centuries.

[36] According to Chang, who cites 13 passages in the *Taiping guangji* that mention the word *kunlun*. I was unable to do a computer search in the *Taiping guangji* to find additional passages. All other works I've read cite the same passages as Chang. Examples of the categories I indicate are: *kunlun* with black skin: *juan* 192, *juan* 340; individuals who "look like *kunlun*," 341, 334; *kunlun* whose skin color is not mentioned: *juan* 256, 413, 408, 464, 194, 420, 16.

[37] Of the ten tales with developed *kunlun* characters, five are slaves.

[38] *Juan* 408 mentions the *kunlun* folk in Annam who burn seeds of a certain plant to lure elephants.

[39] *Taiping guangji*, "Kunlun zigua," 411: 3345-3346. Also translated in Chang, "The Importation of Negro Slaves," 41.

[40] *Taiping guangji*, "Mo Junhe," 192: 1442-3. Also translated in Chang, "The Importation of Negro Slaves," 44-5.

presents her with an infant with a shiny, black face and tells her that the child will be her son, who will "someday achieve much and have great power." The woman gives birth to a son with skin "like iron." The boy later meets the Emperor, who was "delighted," and said, "Where did we possibly get this *kunlun* boy?" The Emperor was excited that the boy's surname, Mo (墨), which means "ink," "corresponded with his appearance" and dubbed him "Mo Kunlun." The Emperor also gave young Mo black clothes as a gift.

The Emperor's automatic association of the word *kunlun* with the boy's black skin assumes an audience familiar with the term. The non-Chinese monk and strangely "shiny" child evoke a sense of the supernatural. People with dark skin must have been exotic, based on the Emperor's jovial and surprised reaction to the boy. His gift of a black suit of clothes to match Mo's black skin also suggests a sense of humor on the part of the Emperor.[41]

The tale's conclusion offers a puzzling twist. Because Mo Kunlun proved a valiant fighter for the Emperor and remained in the Emperor's favor throughout his forty-year reign, he became a legend in his village:

> At that time in the villages, if someone bore a son whose appearance was black and ill-formed, many people would say, "He's not ugly. How do we know that one day he may not be as good as Mo Kunlun!"[42]

The narrator passes no judgment on Mo's appearance or skin color until the final line. If Mo's success can console mothers with "ugly" children, perhaps Mo, too, can be considered ugly.

The *kunlun's* characteristic black skin also had magic powers, revealed in a Buddhist miracle tale in the *Taiping guangji*. A young slave girl, Xiao Jin, dreams of an old man mounted on a huge lion with reins held by two *kunlun* slaves.[43] The old man, a Buddhist savior, tells Xiao Jin that he heard that demons were bothering her and traveled "ten thousand miles" to save her life. Xiao Jin asks the old man to relieve her terrible back and waist pain. The old man "ordered a *kunlun* to come forward and open his hand. He [the old man] rubbed his fingers on the palm of the *kunlun's* hand..." and they

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[41] *Taiping guangji*, "Mo Junhe," 192: 1442-3. Also translated in Chang, "The Importation of Negro Slaves," 44-5.

[42] *Taiping guangji*, "Mo Junhe," 192: 1443.

[43] *Taiping guangji*, "Lu Xu," 340: 2695-2699. Also translated in Chang, "The Importation of Negro Slaves," 57-58. All of the quotations in this paragraph are from this passage.

became dyed "like black lacquer." The old man then put his lacquered fingers on two moxibustion points on Xiao Jin's back. When Xiao Jin awoke from her dream, her pain had ceased, and she began making Buddha statues and banners, evidence that this Buddhist story was written to encourage the general public to do good works. Although the old man is the Buddhist savior, it is the *kunlun* slave who has the supernatural power.

Some stories in the *Taiping guangji* attribute negative qualities to the *kunlun*, depicting them as monsters. A general, while living in a village in reduced circumstances, awakens in the middle of the night to hear a voice repeating "Elder Brother, get rid of your mother!"[44] When the general looks around, he sees "a form whose appearance was extremely fearsome and kept circling his bed without ceasing." When his servants rush in to help him and shine a light on the "form," they discover that "the form resembled a *kunlun*; his teeth were large and white and he was five feet tall." When the general's brother strikes it, it feels like "iron or stone." The monster vanishes instantly, but his prediction about the general's mother dying comes true. This story calls the monster a *kunlun* in order to make it seem more ferocious, ugly, and inhuman.

Employing the recurring motif of the *kunlun's* ability to dive deep into the sea, several tales in the *Taiping guangji* depict wealthy Chinese men who compel their *kunlun* slaves to retrieve treasures from the bottom of the sea.[45] One lengthy tale set in the early eighth century describes the amusements of the scholar Tao Xian and the amazing feats of his *kunlun* slave Mo He.[46] Tao Xian acquires the slave after visiting a wealthy relative in Nanhai (present-day Guangzhou) who gives him a million coins.[47] He uses the money

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[44] *Taiping guangji*, "Bei Xiuzhen," 361: 2868. Translated somewhat differently in Chang, "The Importation of Negro Slaves," 45. In this paragraph, I have paraphrased the story, except where I use quotes.

[45] Similar stories in the *Taiping guangji* include *juan* 464, in which an official asked a *kunlun* slave to dive into crocodile-infested water to get his treasures (the *kunlun* refused!), and *juan* 422, in which a non-Chinese slave dealer owned a slave who could stay in the water a long time. The slave in *juan* 422 is not called *kunlun* but is described in a very similar manner to the *kunlun* slave Mo He. Reference provided by Chang, "The Importation of Negro Slaves," 38. *Taiping guangji.* 464:3480, and "Zhou Han," 422: 3435-3436.

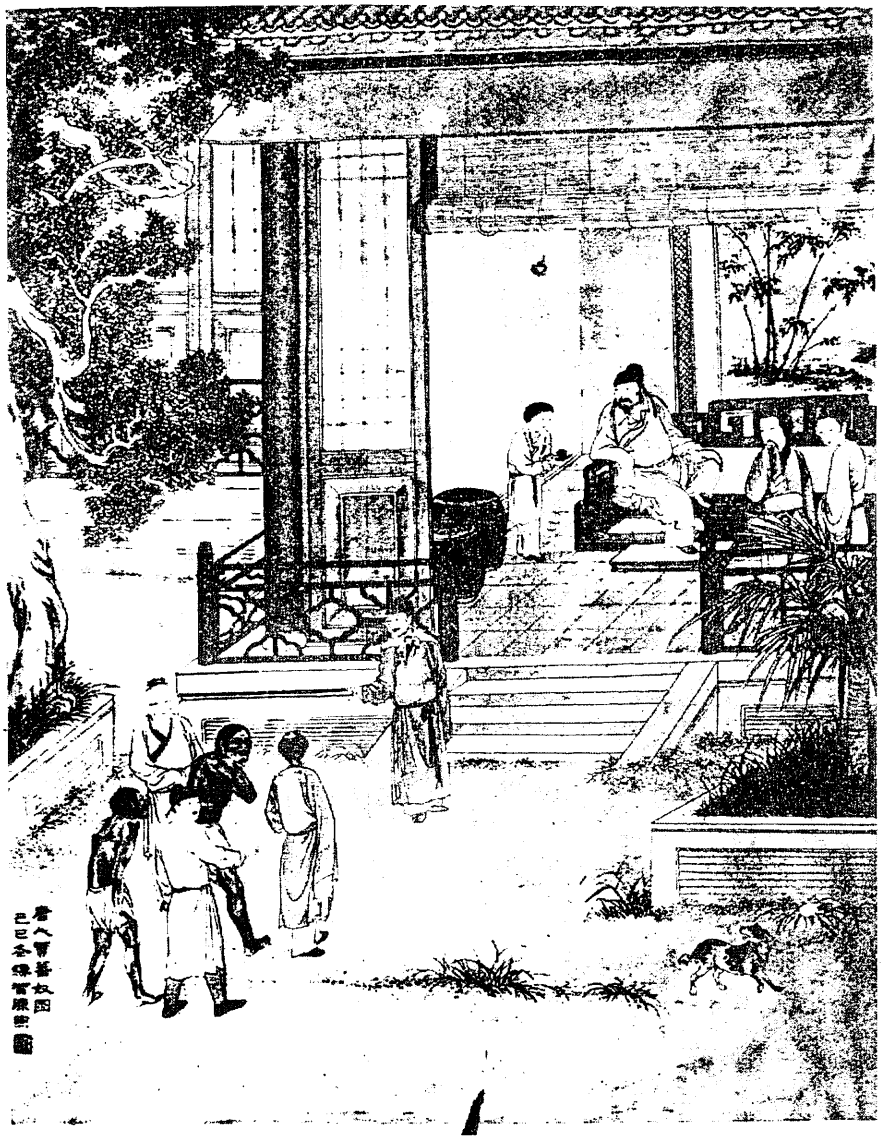
[46] *Taiping guangji*, "Tao Xian," 420: 3421-3422. The date of this tale is from Chang, "The Importation of Negro Slaves," 49. "Mo He" could be a transliteration of *mahā*, which means "big" in Sanskrit (courtesy of Valerie Hansen). Chang claims that "Mo He" is a transliteration of the name *Mohammed*, implying that Mo He came from an Arab trading ship in "The Importation of Negro Slaves," 53.

[47] That Nanhai refers to the present-day Guangzhou is from Chang, "The Importation of Negro Slaves," 49. Guangzhou was also a center of the maritime trade between China and the Arab nations during the Tang. Hourani, *Arab Seafaring*, 40.

to purchase from an ocean-going vessel an antique sword, a jade bracelet, and the *kunlun* slave Mo He. Mo He is "not only skilled at swimming but also daring and virtuous." Tao Xian includes Mo He among his valuable possessions, saying "These treasures will be passed on by my family."[48]

Although the text states that Mo He is a *kunlun* without indicating his skin color, an ink sketch that accompanies the text depicts the "foreign slave 蕃奴" as dark-skinned, revealing the connotations Chinese editors and readers have traditionally attached to the word *kunlun*. See sketch on the following page:

[48] *Taiping guangji*, 420: 3421-2.



"Tao Xian purchasing Mo He." Ink sketch by Chen Xu.[49]

The image of another dark-skinned slave not mentioned in the text suggests that Mo He's arrival is not the first time the household had seen or owned a *kunlun* slave.

[49] Chen Xu. "Tao Xian purchasing Mo He." Department of Fine Arts, Catholic University of Peking. Reprinted in Chang, "The importation of Negro Slaves," 51. Chang does not indicate the date of the ink sketch, so it is unclear what edition of the *Taiping guangji* this sketch accompanied. I cannot read the caption on the print clearly, but it appears to say "foreign slave 蕃奴," although the story indicates that Mo He is a *kunlun.*

While taking the boat back from Nanhai with his new possessions, Tao Xian tosses the sword and jade bracelet overboard and commands Mo He to retrieve them. Because he finds this so entertaining, Tao Xian continues doing this for many years until one day, a poisonous snake bites Mo He as he retrieves the sword and bracelet as usual. This troubles Tao Xian, but on another occasion, he compels Mo He to dive again into the black and stagnant water. Chillingly, he comments that the water must harbor a monster. After a long interval, Mo He emerges, breathing so hard that he seems on the brink of death. He tells his master that he could not retrieve the treasures because a giant dragon beneath the surface had angrily glared at him. Furious, Tao Xian tells the slave, "You, the sword, and the bracelet are my three treasures. Two of them are lost. How will I use you in the future?" Mo He has no choice but to dive again, "his hair streaming, with loud cries, tears of blood running from his eyes." He does not return. Later, Tao Xian sees Mo He's severed limbs "dirtying" the surface of the water, and he weeps and orders his ship to turn back. Clearly, Tao Xian does not consider Mo He to be an actual person, treating him instead as a live toy whose sole purpose is to entertain him.[50]

The story's lesson is not that Tao Xian killed another person for his own amusement. Instead, this story reads like a parable on the evil of greed. Tao Xian does not appear to be willingly evil, merely oblivious to the fact that his orders prove lethal for Mo He. The author depicts Tao Xian as a stubborn and silly loafer, with nothing better to do than watch Mo He dive for his objects. Although Tao Xian seems to value the two treasures and Mo He equally, the author clearly portrays Tao Xian as cruel and seems to be sympathetic to Mo He's ill treatment, revealing a source of narrative tension within the work.

A more positive depiction of a *kunlun* slave as a chivalrous and valiant hero rather than a victim is in the particularly well-known Tang tale *Kunlun nu* 崑崙奴 (The *Kunlun* Slave).[51] This lengthy Tang tale depicts the adventures of the valiant and powerful *kunlun* slave Mo Le, who helps his irresolute young master Cui successfully pursue a love interest. When the old slave observes Cui's distraught expression and offers his help,

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[50] *Taiping guangji*, 420: 3421-2.

[51] *Taiping guangji*, "*Kunlun* nu," 194: 1452-4. Also translated in Chang, "The Importation of Negro Slaves," 46-59. About this tale being well-known, it appeared in many anthologies, according to Chang and the *The Indiana Companion*. It is also listed in the *Hanyu da cidian*.

Cui replies, "How could someone like you know my private feelings?" Undaunted, Mo says, "Tell me anyway, and I will certainly be able to fix your past or present problems." Astonished that the slave might be able to help him, Cui tells Mo about a singing concubine and her mysterious hand signals. Mo Le exclaims, "How could this be difficult to understand?" and proceeds to help his master interpret the signals, which makes Cui "so happy he was unable to control himself." Mo Le immediately takes charge and devises a plan for Cui to enter the girl's chambers.

Throughout the story, Mo Le acts with cunning and strength, successfully solving everyone's problems, while Cui passively watches. Mo Le must physically carry Cui over the high wall to the girl's courtyard. The girl begs Cui to save her from captivity as a singing concubine, "Since you have a servant with great claws and great teeth who has divine powers, why don't you help me escape from this prison?" While Cui stands there silently, "looking anxious," Mo Le plans the escape, scoops up Cui and the girl, and carries them both back over the high wall to freedom, where they live in Cui's compound. Mo Le's speed and skill have no limits, for when the official eventually discovers Mo Le's role in the concubine's escape and sends fifty heavily armed soldiers, the old slave successfully eludes his would-be captors. The narrative concludes when one of Cui's servants encounters Mo Le ten years later, selling medicinal drugs on the streets of Luoyang. The old slave's appearance "had not changed a bit."[52]

The portrayal of Mo Le as the tale's hero places the *kunlun* slave in a positive light: his cunning, bravery, and sensitivity to the concubine far surpass that of his cowardly master. As he flies over walls with two grown people on his back and escapes from fifty soldiers, Mo Le's physical prowess reaches mythical proportions. The author describes him as "like a winged bird, with speed like an eagle."[53] Unlike Huilin's characterization of the *kunlun* people who speak incoherent and incorrect languages, Mo Le speaks articulately and even offers a touch of wit with his lighthearted teasing of Cui's indecision.

The frequency of images in the *Taiping guangji* of the *kunlun* as supernatural and magical suggest that most people in the Tang must have been unfamiliar with people with

[52] *Taiping guangji*, 194: 1453-4.
[53] *Taiping guangji*, 194: 1453-4.

dark skin. Certain images, such as the *kunlun's* superhuman strength, ability to excel in the water, and demonstration of magic powers recur. The *kunlun* in the *Taiping guangji* are always male and usually appear alone; there is no mention of a community of *kunlun* in China. In the most well-known story, "The Kunlun Slave," the valiant Mo Le surpasses his master in intellect and physical prowess but always acts in accordance with his master's wishes, apparently of his own good will. Unlike the histories and nonfiction Buddhist accounts from the Tang, the *Taiping guangji* does not depict the *kunlun* as threatening or mention anything uncivilized about the *kunlun*'s languages and behavior. Perhaps the difference between the fictional and nonfiction depictions is because the stories of the *Taiping guangji* were written by people with less knowledge of foreign countries and peoples than were the histories and Buddhist accounts. On the other hand, the contrasting images of people with dark skin might only suggest a difference between genres.

Nonfiction from the Song: Zhu Yu's *Pingzhou ketan*

Chinese sources from the Song dynasty create a more definite link than Tang sources between the *kunlun* slaves and the Arabs, who continued to dominate the East African slave trade. An account of foreign trade in Guangzhou, Zhu Yu's 1119 *Pingzhou ketan* 萍洲可談 (Notes on Pingzhou), repeats some of the earlier images of the *kunlun,* but like earlier nonfiction sources, lacks the supernatural element of the Tang stories.[54] Zhu Yu depicts the black-skinned "devil slaves 鬼奴" or "wild people 野人" as nothing more than beasts. Just as fictional and nonfiction sources from the Tang differ in their portrayals of people with dark skin, we would expect Zhu Yu's account to differ from images of the *kunlun* in popular Song fiction. Unfortunately, however, I have found no fictional sources from the Song about the *kunlun* or others with dark skin that allow a similar comparison across genres.[55]

Zhu Yu provides a lengthy description of slaves who are superhuman in strength but subhuman in intellect and habit:

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[54] Zhu Yu, *Pingzhou ketan*, in Chen Shidao, ed., *Houshan tan cong* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1989), 2:28, paragraph 72. Also translated in Chang, "The Importation of Negro Slaves," 41, and Frank Dikotter, *Discourse of Race in Modern China* (London: C. Hurst and Co., 1992), 9.

[55] I was unable to do a computer search of fiction; this assertion is based on secondary sources, none of which cite Song fictional sources.

> Many of the wealthy households in Guangzhou raise devil slaves.[56] They definitely have strength and can carry several hundred catties of weight. Their languages and preferences are not the same as ours, [but] their temperament is honest and they do not attempt to run away.
>
> They are also called wild people. Their coloring is black like ink, their lips are red and their teeth white, their hair is curly and yellowish (*huang* 黃).[57] There are both females and males. They were born in the mountains beyond the sea. They eat uncooked food. When they are captured, they are fed cooked food, which gives them diarrhea. This is called "changing their bowels." This causes some of them to become sick and die. Those who do not die can be domesticated (*xu* 畜).[58] Those who have been domesticated for a long time can understand human language, although they cannot speak it themselves. A type of wild man who comes from a place near the sea and who can enter the water without closing his eyes is called a *kunlun* slave.[59]

In his description of these "devil slaves," Zhu Yu uses vocabulary to describe animals. He writes that many of the wealthy households "raise" them, and he uses the gender terms one would use for animals rather than the human "male" and "female."[60] He also writes that these slaves are "reared on" rather than "fed" cooked food once captured, implying that these slaves are viewed as domesticated animals. Their nonsensical languages cannot be human languages. After all, only a few of these slaves can understand – but never speak – human languages, and only after a long period of "being domesticated." Perhaps "honest" because they do not know any better, the "devil slaves" do not resist their captors and endure the painful process of "changing their bowels" in order to become "domesticated" into their roles as slaves in a civilized society.

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[56] The name of the city here is "Guangzhong," which Chang and Dikotter say refers to Guangzhou.

[57] Chang translates 黃 as "tawny," in "The Importation of Negro Slaves," 41. I translated this as "yellowish." Schafer comments on Chang's translation, arguing that Chang's claim that all instances of the word *kunlun* applied to black Africans from its earliest uses is not necessarily true, since the Chinese used the word to apply to all people darker than themselves. From Schafer, *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand*, 290, note 48.

[58] I use my own translation except where underlined, which is from Chang, "The Importation of Negro Slaves," 41. Although the character 蓄 means "grow" or "store," Chang translates it as "become domesticated." This character is different from 畜, used earlier in the passage, which means "to raise or rear [animals]," but it makes more sense in the context of the passage.

[59] Zhu Yu, *Pingzhou ketan*, 2:28, paragraph 72. Also translated in Chang, "The Importation of Negro Slaves," 41, and Dikotter, *Discourse of Race in Modern China*, 9.

[60] Zhu Yu, *Pingzhou ketan*, 2:28. Zhu uses the term 畜 "to raise/rear," used for animals, and the gender terms for animals, 牝 and 牡, rather than the human terms 男 and 女. He also uses the word 飼 "to feed" for animals rather than humans.

Zhu Yu's comment about the inability of the "devil slaves" to digest cooked food also reveals a Chinese prejudice against the non-Chinese practice of eating raw food. Food and dietary practices signified social status in premodern China; the Chinese traditionally divided non-Chinese into two categories, *shengfan* 生番 and *shufan* 熟番, meaning "raw" and "cooked" foreigners.[61] The Chinese considered the "raw" foreigners as "savage and resisting," whereas the "cooked" foreigners were "tame and submissive."[62] Zhu Yu emphasizes this distinction, writing that many of the "devil slaves" actually died from eating cooked food, suggesting the slaves' inability to participate in even the most basic social interactions of Chinese civilization.

This passage repeats elements of Huilin's description of the *kunlun* during the Tang but embellishes the negative qualities Huilin attributed to them. Going even further than Huilin, Zhu Yu claims that the languages of the "devil slaves" are not even human. Like Huilin, Zhu Yu distinguishes the *kunlun* from other races of people with black skin. Not all of the "devil slaves" he describes are *kunlun*. That category is reserved for only those who live near the sea and can open their eyes in the water, echoing the recurring image from the Tang of the *kunlun's* skill in the water.

Zhu Yu also reinforces this image by describing the ability of the "devil slaves" to repair leaks of trading ships under water:

> If the boat suddenly develops a leak that cannot be reached from the inside to fix, they order "devil slaves" to take knives and cotton wadding and go overboard to fix it themselves, since the "devil slaves" are good swimmers and enter the water without closing their eyes.[63]

This passage occurs in the context of Zhu's discussion of foreign traders in Guangzhou, suggesting that these slaves were on foreign ships and that the "devil slaves" he discusses earlier also came from foreign traders. The description of the *kunlun* fixing leaks on foreign trade ships may explain the origins of both fictional and nonfiction images from Tang and Song of the *kunlun* as strong swimmers.

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[61] Dikotter, *Discourse of Race in Modern China*, 9. Dikotter uses the word "barbarian" instead of "foreigner."

[62] Dikotter, *Discourse of Race in Modern China*, 9. He writes, "The consumption of raw food was regarded as an infallible sign of savagery that affected the physiological state of the barbarian."

[63] Zhu Yu, *Pingzhou ketan*, 2:26, paragraph 68. Also translated in Hirth and Rockhill, *Chao Ju-kua*, 31-32.

Zhu Yu does not identity the owners of the devil slaves, but other Chinese sources in the Song indicate a connection between the Arabs and the *kunlun*. The *Song shi* 宋史 (History of the Song) reports that *kunlun* slaves accompanied Arab envoys to the Chinese court in 977: "The Arabs (*da shi)* sent the ambassador Pusina, the vice-ambassador Mohemuo, and the judge Puluo, to present as tribute items from their country. Their servants had deep-set eyes and black bodies and were called *kunlun* slaves." [64] The Arabs did not present their slaves as exotic objects of curiosity, suggesting that such slaves routinely accompanied Arab officials. The historical context suggests that the *kunlun* "devil slaves" Zhu Yu describes were probably the Arabs' East African slaves and not the *kunlun* Southeast Asians of the Tang, although Zhu Yu did not seem to make this connection in 1119. It was not until the late twelfth century that certain Chinese geographers did so, as the next chapter explains.

[64] *Song shi* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1977), 490: 14118.

Chapter 2
Chinese Knowledge and Perceptions of Africa and Africans through the Song

Were these images of the *kunlun* from the fifth century to the Song based on direct contact between Chinese and African peoples? Chinese people may have seen East African slaves in China, but it is doubtful that more than a few, if any, Chinese traveled all the way to Africa through the Song dynasty. Instead, Chinese knowledge of Africa and Africans came from Arab traders, who possessed specific geographic knowledge of the countries along the maritime trade route between East Africa and China.

This chapter will explore the origins of the images of the *kunlun* by briefly examining pre-Tang Chinese knowledge of foreign countries and then focusing on Chinese descriptions of Africa and Africans in Tang and Song sources. Most of these Chinese sources were written by authors who never left China and compiled their information on the basis of the tales of Arab traders. While they may not show direct contact, their accounts document the increasing knowledge of Africa and Africans among Chinese historians and geographers. This knowledge would ultimately allow them to make a connection between the *kunlun* slaves in China and the East African slave trade.

Chinese sources report trade with India and the Near East beginning as early as the Han dynasty, although it is difficult to determine how far west Chinese merchants traveled with their goods, since the trade was indirect.[65] In the fifth century, the Chinese traveler Faxian wrote that he noticed Chinese products and observed "many *sabo* 薩薄 merchants" in present-day Sri Lanka. It once was thought that *sabo* referred to the Sabeans, who ruled the Near East before the Persians defeated them in 550.[66] More recent research indicates that the term is ultimately derived from the Sanskrit *sārthavāha* ("leader of a group of merchants") and that most of the *sabo* in China were Persians and

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[65] *Juan* 97 of the *Song shu* (History of the [Liu] Song) cites trade with the Near East as early as the Han: "As for Daqin and India, far out on the Western Ocean, the envoys of the two Han dynasties have experienced the special difficulties of this route, but there has still been trade." *Song shu, Ershiwu shi,* vol. 10 (Taibei: Xinwenfeng chubanshe, 1975), 97: 1157. Reference provided by Hirth and Rockhill, trans. and ed., *Chao Ju-Kua: His Work on the Chinese and Arab Trade in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries, entitled* Chu-fan-chï (St. Petersburg: Printing Office of the Imperial Academy of Sciences, 1911), 7.

[66] Faxian. *"Shizi guo ji you,"* in *Faxian zhuan jiao zhu* (Record of Faxian) (Shanghai: Shanghai gujie chubanshe, 1985), 154. H.A. Giles writes that *sabo* refers to the Sabeans in his translation, *The Travels of Fa-hsien* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1923), 94.

other Iranian peoples such as the Sogdians.[67] During the late sixth and early seventh centuries, Chinese trade with the Near East continued primarily with the Persians, whom Chinese sources called Bosi 波斯. Chinese merchants sailed as far as Sri Lanka, the hub of trade between China and the Near East, and Persian merchants shipped Chinese silks and other goods to Persia.[68] It is possible that Chinese traders harnessed the powers of the monsoons before the Tang, thus permitting ocean crossings and long-distance sea travel, but the evidence of such naval technology is slim.[69] According to George Hourani, however, it is likely that some Persian ships sailed all the way to China before the Tang.[70] When the Arabs defeated the Persians in 642, they continued the trade between the Persian Gulf and China, and this trade grew in volume during the Tang and Song.[71]

Although the Persians and Arabs sailed to China, it is unlikely that the Chinese sailed all the way to the Persian Gulf or Africa in the Tang and Song.[72] A few Arab sources mention "the ships of China" coming to the coast of Persia, but Hourani and Hirth and Rockhill argue that these references indicate ships made in China, not those "owned or navigated by Chinese."[73]

The Chinese did know about the Arabs' maritime trade routes, however. The Tang official and geographer Jia Dan, provides the earliest Chinese account of the trade route between China and the Persian Gulf and perhaps even Africa, compiled between 785 and 805 and quoted in *The New Tang History*.[74] He describes a roundabout route to the Persian Gulf, which Hirth and Rockhill claim is "probably secondhand," from Arab sailors.[75] Philip Snow proposes that "a point in Africa could fit the description" of the end of the route Jia described, demonstrating that at least some Chinese had very specific

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[67] Antonino Forte, "Iranians in China: Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, and Bureaus of Commerce," *Cahiers d'Extrême Asie*, 11 (1999-2000), 277-290. Reference courtesy of Victor Mair.

[68] Hourani, *Arab Seafaring*, 40-41.

[69] E-mail of April 9, 2002 from Prof. Charles Wheeler, History Department, UC Irvine. See also Joseph Needham with the collaboration of Wang Ling, *Science and Civilisation in China*, vol. 4, *Physics and Physical Technology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), Part III.

[70] Hourani, *Arab Seafaring*, 40-41.

[71] Hourani, *Arab Seafaring*, 40-41.

[72] Historians agree that it is "highly improbable" that Chinese ships sailed to the Persian Gulf during the Tang and Song, let alone the east coast of Africa. From Hirth and Rockhill, *Chao Ju-kua*, 15, note 3, also quoted in Hourani, *Arab Seafaring*, 76.

[73] Hirth and Rockhill, *Chao Ju-kua*, 15, also quoted in Hourani, *Arab Seafaring*, 76.

[74] Cited in Hirth and Rockhill, *Chao Ju-kua*, 9-10, as the "*Tang shu* 43b," although I was unable to find this reference in the primary sources.

[75] Hirth and Rockhill, *Chao Ju-kua*, 10.

geographic knowledge of the maritime route between China and East Africa during the Tang.[76]

Accounts of Africa and Africans in Tang Histories and Geographies

One of the earliest Chinese sources describing an African country and its inhabitants is Du Huan's *Jing xing ji* 經行記 (Record of My Travels), which describes the author's journeys in the territory of the Abbasid caliphate after being captured by the Arab forces at the Battle of Talas near Samarkand in 751.[77] Du Huan returned to China in 762 and then wrote his memoir, parts of which appeared in the *Tong Dian* 通典 (Comprehensive Documents), compiled by his relative Du You in 812.[78] Historians debate whether Du Huan actually went to Africa, or whether he just heard tales about Africa from the Arabs who imprisoned him.[79] Du's *Record of My Travels* describes the author's alleged visit to the country of Molin 摩鄰, referring to Malindi, in present-day Kenya.[80]

Du Huan describes Molin's geographic features as well as its people and their customs:

> The people are black, and their customs uncouth. There is little rice or wheat, and no grass or trees; the horses eat dried fish and the people eat *gumang* [Persian dates]. Epidemics and plagues are particularly severe in this kingdom. Traveling by land, the mountain Hu

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[76] Philip Snow, *Star Raft over China: China's Encounter with Africa* (New York: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1988), 9.

[77] Paul Wheatley, "Analecta Sino-Africana Recensa," in H. Neville Chittick and Robert I. Rotberg, eds., *East Africa and the Orient* (New York: Africana Publishing Company, 1975), 79-81 and Snow, *Star Raft over China*, 3.

[78] Du Huan's record no longer exists as a separate work. See Wheatley, "Analecta," 80. The translation of the title is from *Indiana Companion*, vol. 1, 528.

[79] Shen Fuwei argues that Du Huan's narrative is true and that he actually went to the places he describes in "Tang dai Du Huan de Molin zhi Xing" (Du Huan's Journey to Molin During the Tang Period), *Shijie Lishi* 6 (1980), 46. Snow also cites Shen's article to claim that, of the various descriptions of encounters between Chinese and Africans from this period, Du's account is a record of "one that did [occur]" in *Star Raft over China*, 3.

[80] Du Huan's *Record of my Travels* appears in fragments throughout Du You's *Tong Dian* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1984), 193: 1041. Reference provided by a colleague of Valerie Hansen at Beijing University, who did a search on the *Siku quanshu* database. Historians continue to disagree about the location of "Molin." Wheatley cites arguments of various historians claiming that Molin refers to the Egyptian coast of the Red Sea, the African country of Malindi, and Morocco in "Analecta," 81. Another interpretation is that Molin was a transliteration of *Meroe*, a kingdom and city located in present-day Sudan (V. Velgus, cited in Wheatley, "Analecta," 81). Snow argues that Molin refers to the coast of the kingdom of Axum, in the present-day Eritrea, based on the mix of religions Du described, in *Star Raft over China*, 4.

> (胡) [non-Chinese from the north and west] whom one encounters are of only one type. But they have different kinds of law: they have Dashi [Arab] law, Daqin law, and Xunxun (尋尋) law. These Xunxun exceed all the Yi (夷) and Di (狄) [non-Chinese people from the east and north] in their sexual depravity. They do not talk during meals. Those who follow the Dashi law rely on their relatives to dispense justice, and even if the fault is slight others are not involved.
>
> They do not eat the meat of pigs, dogs, donkeys, horses, and the like. They do not revere their country's king or respect their fathers and mothers. They are great believers in ghosts and spirits and make offerings only to heaven. As for their customs, every seventh day is a day of rest; they do not do business or collect loans, they only drink wine and rejoice all day. Those of Daqin excel in the treatment of eye illnesses and dysentery. Some can even detect illness before the patient falls ill and some open the brain to remove bugs. [81]

Du Huan's immediate use of the word "uncouth" (*guang* 獷) to describe Molin's customs reveals much about the biases of the author, since he focuses on the extent to which the inhabitants differed from the Chinese in their values and customs. The people of Molin who did not hold others responsible for the crimes of their relatives marks a departure from traditional Chinese law, in which it was common practice to punish whole households and sometimes even entire communities for one person's transgressions.[82] Confucian values inform Du's comment that the people of Molin do not honor their country's king or parents.

Although critical, Du describes skilled doctors capable of curing disease. He also offers a keen description of Muslim religious rituals in Molin, including their aversion to pork and other types of meat, and a weekly day of rest and rejoicing, suggesting a religious holiday, namely, the Sabbath. He does not condemn the practice of drinking wine all day on the day of rest. Du's assessment of the customs of the people of Molin does not seem as critical as his initial wording suggests. Instead, the reader gains the

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[81] This passage is difficult and is not translated in other sources. Many thanks to Valerie Hansen for helping me translate it in an earlier version of this essay, and thank you to Victor Mair for his revisions. That "*gumang*" refers to Persian dates is courtesy of Victor Mair, who notes that the Persian word for dates is *khurmā* (personal communication). "Daqin" refers sometimes to Rome and sometimes to a mythical country. From F. Hirth, *China and the Roman Orient: researches into their ancient and medieval relations as represented in old Chinese records*, (Shanghai and Hongkong: Kelly and Walsh, 1885), 105.

[82] E.G. Pulleyblank, "The Origins and Nature of Chattel Slavery in China," *Journal of Economic and Social History of the Orient* 1 (1958), 193.

sense that Du was more surprised than repelled by the differences between Chinese customs and those of the inhabitants of Molin.

The *New Tang History* reworks Du Huan's description of Molin:

> If one goes 2000 *li* southwest of Fulin, there is one country called Molin (磨鄰) and another called Laobosa (老勃薩). Their people are black and of a ferocious nature. The region suffers from epidemics, and there is no grass, rice, or five grains. [They] feed their horses dried fish and the people eat *gumang* [Persian dates].
>
> They have no shame in committing incest (with people of upper and lower generations); among the Yi (夷) and Di (狄) [non-Chinese peoples from the east and north], they are the most extreme, and are called by the name of Xun (尋). Their officials rest every seventh day and do not go out to collect debts or do business, and drink and exhaust themselves all night.[83]

Because this passage repeats many details from Du Huan's account, such as the prevalence of epidemics and feeding horses dried fish, it appears as if Ouyang Xiu, the editor of the *New Tang History,* merely summarized Du Huan's account.

A more balanced account of African countries from the ninth century is Duan Chengshi's (c. 800-863) *Youyang zazu* 酉陽雜俎 (Assorted Notes from Youyang).[84] Unlike Du Huan, who claimed to have traveled throughout the Arab empire, Duan Chengshi was a bureaucrat who worked in the Royal Library, famous for collecting information on unusual topics and for socializing with a wide group of people including beggars, women, and non-Chinese.[85] His *Assorted Notes from Youyang* includes tales of foreign lands, most likely heard from Arab traders.[86] Although Duan reportedly tried to check the accuracy of his sources with eyewitnesses, the *Assorted Notes from Youyang* includes a "detailed description of the jeweled surface of the moon, transmitted by a

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[83] *Xin Tang shu* 221b: 6261. Du Huan uses the character "摩" and the *New Tang History* uses "磨" – they are pronounced the same. Duyvendak translates this passage in *China's Discovery of Africa*, 15. The words for incest here are "烝報," meaning "incest with people above one's generation" and "incest with people below one's generation," according to the entry on "烝報" in *Hanyu Da Cidian* vol. 7, 79.

[84] Translation of the title is from Nienhauser, *Indiana Companion*, Vol. 1, 940.

[85] Edward Schafer, "Tuan Ch'eng-shih," in William Nienhauser, ed., *Indiana Companion* vol. 1, 940. Other information about Duan is from Wheatley, "Analecta," 82.

[86] Wheatley, "Analecta," 83.

mysterious visitor to the earth," casting some doubt on the accuracy of his descriptions of foreign lands.[87]

Duan Chengshi's account reveals what educated Chinese in the port cities knew or imagined about Africa in the ninth century. He describes the country of Bobali 撥拔力, (Berbera, on the Somali coast of East Africa):[88]

> The country of Bobali... [they] do not eat the five grains, they eat only meat. They often prick a needle into the veins of the cattle they raise and extract the blood, which they mix with milk and consume [eat] raw. [They] do not wear clothes, except below the waist they use a sheepskin to cover themselves. Their women are pure and proper.[89]

Like Du Huan's description of Molin, this account reveals Duan's ambivalence towards the Africans' customs. Bobali's inhabitants wear few clothes and drink a mixture of raw milk and blood – a practice that would repel a Chinese reader but sounds just like the Masai to a modern American reader – yet Duan describes their women as "pure and proper," suggesting that he did not have a negative view towards every aspect of Molin's customs.

Duan continues his description of Bobali, saying that "the inhabitants themselves capture them [the women] and sell them to foreign merchants for several times their price...."[90] Since he describes both a domestic and international slave trade in Bobali, we know that at least some Chinese were aware of the East African slave trade in the ninth century. Given that the women brought a higher price if sold to foreign traders, some must also have been sold to domestic merchants. One imagines that Duan heard about the East African slave trade from Arab merchants in China.

Duan's account continues, describing Bobali's trade and relations with the Persians and Arabs:

> The land only has ivory and ambergris, and when Persian merchants want to enter this country, they surround themselves with several thousand [people], and give them (a piece of silk) cloth. Everyone

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[87] Schafer, "Tuan Ch'eng-shih," *Indiana Companion*, 940-941.

[88] Berbera is based on the claim that the name is a transliteration of *barbarig*, the Persian name for this country. Wheatley, "Analecta," 79.

[89] Duan Chenghsi, *Youyang zazu* (Beijijng: Zhonghua shuju, 1981): 4:46, paragraph 186. Also translated in Duyvendak, "China's Discovery of Africa,"12.

[90] Duan Chengshi, *Youyang zazu*, 4:46, paragraph 186. Also translated in Duyvendak, "China's Discovery of Africa," 12.

> from the old to the young pricks their blood to make an oath, and then they can market their products.
>
> From ancient times, this country has never been subordinated to a foreign country. In war [they] use elephant's tusks and ribs and wild bull's horns as swords, and [they] wear armor and have bows and arrows for their weapons. They have more than two hundred thousand foot soldiers, and the Arabs frequently attack in the hope of defeating them.[91]

Bobali's trade in ivory and ambergris matches the content of Arab trading ships in Guangzhou.[92] The elaborate, large-scale ritual for Bobali's trading with Persian merchants suggests that such trade was highly regulated and that the inhabitants of Bobali had a large degree of control over the process. Duan's assertion that the country had never been subordinated by foreign powers implies a rather romantic view of Bobali's military power. The overall impression is that the inhabitants of Bobali are fierce fighters, warding off Arab invaders, and scrupulous in their regulation of trade with foreigners.

The Tang descriptions of Molin and Bobali demonstrate a range of Chinese perceptions of Africa and Africans during the Tang dynasty. Du Huan and Duan Chengshi describe a variety of peoples and customs, but they concur on one point: the Africans ate their food raw. Nowhere in the passages do the authors draw a link between dark skin and social customs; the description of Bobali does not even mention the skin color of the inhabitants. This reveals a contrast and perhaps conceptual gap between Tang depictions of the black *kunlun* slaves in China and descriptions of African peoples from the same time period.

Accounts of Africa and Africans in Song Geographies: Zhou Qufei and Zhao Rugua

The educated Chinese public gained further knowledge of Africa and Africans in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries through the publication of geographies that described maritime trade and foreign countries on the trade route between China and East Africa. Zhou Qufei's 1178 *Lingwai daida* 嶺外代答 (Notes from the Land beyond the Passes) and Zhao Rugua's 1226 *Zhufan zhi* 諸蕃志 (Record of Foreign Nations) provide detailed

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[91] Duan Chengshi, *Youyang zazu*, 46. The translation of "ambergris" is from Hirth and Rockhill, who write that "a-mo perfume" is from the Arabic "anbar," meaning ambergris (Hirth and Rockhill, *Chao Ju-kua*, 128).

[92] Schafer, *Golden Peaches of Samarkand*, cited in several places.

descriptions of the countries and peoples of Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean, the Persian Gulf, and Africa. When he published *Notes on the Land beyond the Passes*, Zhou Qufei worked as an official in Guilin in Guangxi.[93] Zhao Rugua, who wrote forty years after Zhou Qufei, based much of his *Records of Foreign Nations* on Zhou's *Notes from the Land beyond the Passes*, quoting many chapters verbatim without acknowledgement.

Zhou Qufei and Zhao Rugua mention the slave trade in many countries at various points along the trade route. For example, Zhou's account of Zhancheng 占城 (in the south central part of present-day Vietnam) states, "the people buy male and female slaves, and the ships have people as cargo."[94] Zhao comments that the people of Zhancheng "buy people to make them slaves" and lists the price of a male slave at "three taels of gold, or the equivalent in incense."[95] Neither author states whether the slaves are local or imported.

Zhou and Zhao's descriptions of African countries echo many of the recurring images from earlier accounts. One country listed in both books but not in Tang sources is Kunlun Cengqi 崑崙層期. Zhou Qufei offers a vague geographic setting in the "Southwest Seas" and "beside a large island" (Madagascar).[96] This island has large *peng* [giant mythical] birds, and its chief products are elephant tusks and rhinoceros horns.[97] Zhou's description of the island's inhabitants evokes earlier images of the *kunlun* slaves:

> ...[T]here are many "wild people," with bodies as black as lacquer and tightly-curled (*quan* 拳) hair. They are lured with food and then captured; thousands are taken away and sold as "foreign slaves."[98]

The name of this country is the earliest indication of a link between the term *kunlun* and *zanj*, or its Chinese approximation *cengqi*, thus connecting the *kunlun* slaves of the Tang stories with the African countries Arab traders described. Whereas *kunlun*

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[93] A native of Zhejiang, Zhou probably compiled his notes for this work while in Guangzhou, on the way to his post in Guilin. From Hirth and Rockhill, *Chao Ju-kua*, 22, note 2.

[94] Zhou Qufei, *Lingwai daida* (Shanghai: Shanghai yundong chubanshe, 1996), "Zhancheng guo," 38. Also translated in Hirth and Rockhill, *Chao Ju-kua*, 50. The location of Zhancheng is courtesy of Victor Mair.

[95] Zhao Rugua, *Zhufan zhi* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1996), "Zhancheng guo," 9. Also translated in Hirth and Rockhill, *Chao Ju-kua*, 48.

[96] Zhou Qufei, *Lingwai daida*, "Kunlun Cengi," 63. The identification of this island with Madagascar is from Hirth and Rockhill, *Chao Ju-kua*, 149, and Duyvendak, "China's Discovery of Africa," 22.

[97] Zhou Qufei, *Lingwai daida*, 63.

[98] Zhou Qufei, *Lingwai daida*, 63.

referred only to dark-skinned Chinese in the fourth century, and later to the dark-skinned inhabitants of Southeast Asian countries, the name of the country Kunlun Cengqi shows that Chinese geographers made a connection between the foreign slave trade and the *kunlun* slaves in the late twelfth century, marking a major shift in the use of the word *kunlun.*

The description of Kunlun Cengqi in Zhao's *Records of Foreign Nations* quotes Zhou's text almost verbatim but adds several key sentences that further emphasize how Zhao's description of this country builds on earlier depictions of the *kunlun:*

> ...[T]hey are lured with food and then captured, then sold to the Arab countries as slaves, where they obtain a great profit. They are entrusted with guarding the keys, since it is said that they do not have relatives to whom they have emotional ties.[99]

Zhao's mention of Arabs demonstrates that by the early thirteenth century, the Chinese knew that the Arabs dealt in black slaves from Africa. Zhao's description of the physical appearance of the lacquer-black *kunlun* differs from Zhou's in one word only, describing the *kunluns'* hair as "*qiu* 虯," literally, "curled up like a dragon." This departs slightly from the usual "*juan* 卷" (curly) from other Tang and Song sources and Zhou's "*quan* 拳" (tightly curled).[100] These different sources tend to describe the Africans' skin as black as either ink (*mo* 墨) or lacquer (*qi* 漆), but the authors struggled to find the right word to describe the unfamiliar hair of the Africans.

Zhao Rugua's description of the African country of Zhongli 中理 also evokes the Tang fictional portrayals of the *kunlun* as having magical powers.[101] Among the inhabitants of Zhongli are:

> many sorcerers, who are able to change their bodies into the appearance of birds, beasts, or aquatic animals, and they scare and confuse the foolish and common people. When people in foreign ships come to peddle goods, and when there is a dispute, they put a spell on them. One cannot predict

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[99] Zhao Rugua, *Zhufan zhi,* "Kunlun cengqi," 127.

[100] Zhao Rugua, *Zhufan zhi,* "Kunlun cengqi," 127.

[101] The name Zhongli, thought to be a variation of *zanj* referring to the Somali coast, does not appear in Zhou's *Notes from the Lands beyond the Passes* or in any subsequent works after Zhao Rugua's *Record of Foreign Nations.* Zhao writes that this country is "among the countries of the Arabs" and borders the country of "Bipaluo 弼琶囉," which seems to be a later version of Du Huan's "Bopali." Zhao Rugua, *Zhufan zhi,* "Zhongli,"105.

> whether the ship will move forward or backward, until the dispute is settled and they release the ship. Their government strictly forbids this.[102]

The magical power of this country's inhabitants evokes the mystical powers of the *kunlun* slaves in the Tang tales of the *Taiping guangji*, such as the slave who assisted in healing the servant girl's back, except that these people seem even more powerful, able to change their bodies into various forms. The image of aquatic animals also evokes earlier images of the *kunlun* as expert swimmers and divers, revealing a new version of an old stereotype.

An Arab account of East Africa from the twelfth century, al-Idrisi's (1110-1166) *Nuzhat al-Mushtaq fi Ikhtiraq al-Afaq* (The Book of the Travels of One Who Cannot Travel Himself) also credits the Africans with magical powers. Al-Idrisi describes Malindi, a "town of the *Zanj*," which Chinese sources refer to as "Molin":

> [The people] pretend to know how to bewitch the most poisonous snakes so as to make them harmless to everyone except those for whom they wish evil or on whom they wish to take vengeance. They also pretend that by means of these enchantments the tigers and lions cannot hurt them....[103]

A difference between this account and Zhao's description of the magical Africans is that al-Idrisi indicates that they merely control animals, whereas Zhao says they are able to change themselves into animals. Although this account seems similar to Zhao's *Record of Foreign Nations*, we do not know whether Zhao read al-Idrisi's work.

Zhao departs from earlier descriptions of East Africa and its inhabitants when he reports that the Africans ate cooked food. In the description of the country of Cengba 層拔 (Zanzibar), Zhao writes that "[the inhabitants'] daily food consists of grain, baked cakes (*shaobing* 燒餅), and lamb."[104] The people of Cengba may have eaten lamb because they followed the "Arab [Muslim] religion."[105] Zhao's description of Bipaluo also mentions cooked food: "The land has many camels and sheep, and the people often

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[102] Zhao Rugua, *Zhufan zhi*, "Zhongli,"105. Also translated in Hirth and Rockhill, *Chao Ju-kua*, 130.

[103] al-Idrisi, in Freeman-Greenville, 20.

[104] Zhao Rugua, *Zhufan zhi*, "Cengba,"100. Also translated in Hirth and Rockhill, 126. That this refers to Zanzibar is from Hirth and Rockhill, 126.

[105] Zhao Rugua, *Zhufan zhi*, "Cengba," 100.

eat the meat and milk of camels and baked cakes."[106] In contrast to the Tang accounts of the Africans in Molin and Bobali and Zhu Yu's 1119 description of the "devil slaves" who died when they ate cooked food, Zhao does not mention that the Africans ate raw food. Perhaps as the Chinese learned more about African countries and their inhabitants, they realized that the Africans ate cooked food.

Compared to earlier depictions of Africa and Africans, the accounts in *Notes from the Land beyond the Passes* and *Record of Foreign Nations* do not appear to criticize the peoples of the African countries. Zhou and Zhao's books suggest that a change took place during the Song in the way Chinese people perceived of Africa and Africans, with earlier negative views giving way to Zhou and Zhao's more informed descriptions, as the Chinese learned more about foreign countries and their inhabitants. This change parallels a major shift in the meaning of the term *kunlun* – Zhou's description of the African country Kunlun Cengqi links earlier Chinese images of the *kunlun* with the increasing knowledge the Chinese gained about Africa and Africans from the Arabs. The readership of these geographies may have been small, however. Ideally, fictional sources from the Song would permit a comparison with fictional depictions of people with dark skin from the Tang, but I have been unable to locate any.

[106] Zhao Rugua, *Zhufan zhi*, "Bipaluo," 102. Also translated in Hirth and Rockhill, 128.

Chapter 3
Chinese Knowledge and Perceptions of Africa and Africans during the Yuan (1279-1368) and Ming (1368-1644)

Did Chinese perceptions of Africa and Africans change once numerous Chinese people actually traveled to East Africa? This chapter will examine two travel accounts from the Yuan and Ming dynasties that describe the authors' travels to Africa, Wang Dayuan's 1349 *Daoyi zhilue* 島夷誌略 (A Shortened Account of the Non-Chinese Island Peoples) and Fei Xin's 1436 *Xingcha shenglan* 星槎勝覽 (Overall Survey of the Star Raft). We do not know how many people read earlier descriptions of Africa and Africans, but educated Chinese people most likely knew of China's maritime exploration in the early fifteenth century. The seven voyages of the Muslim admiral Zheng He and his "treasure ships" fleet provide the first documented evidence of large groups of Chinese traveling to Africa, and accounts of these trips were widely read.[107] Examining these Yuan and Ming accounts will reveal whether Chinese perceptions of Africa and Africans changed significantly once the Chinese began large-scale maritime exploration of the East African coast.

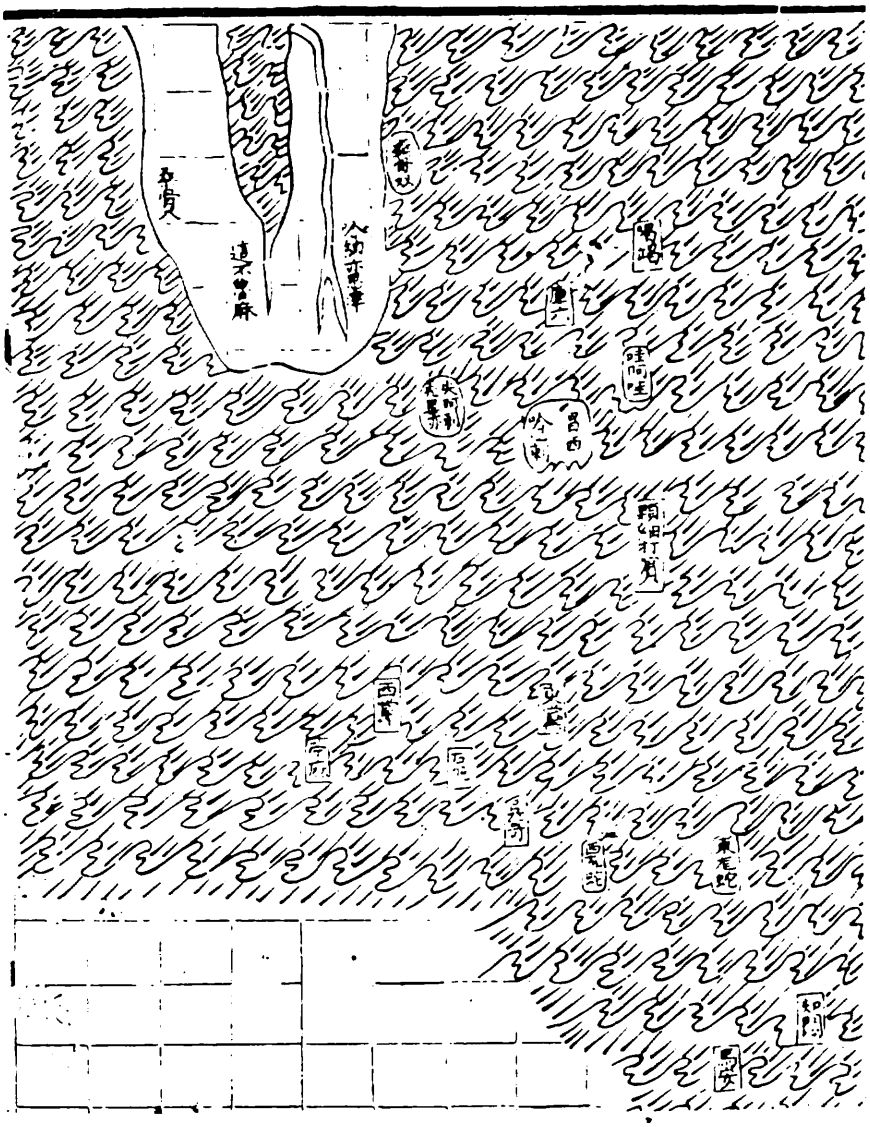
The question remains of what happened to the meaning of *kunlun* after Zhou Qufei and Zhao Rugua linked the *kunlun* slaves in China to the East African slave trade during the Song. This chapter will also examine the use of the term *kunlun* in Wang Dayuan and Fei Xin's accounts as well as images of the *kunlun* slave in a play from the late sixteenth century, Mei Dingzuo's *Kunlun nu jianxia chengxian* 崑崙奴劍俠成仙 (How the *Kunlun* Slave Became an Immortal), based on the Tang story "*Kunlun* nu" 崑崙奴 (The *Kunlun* Slave).

Accounts of Africa and Africans during the Yuan: Wang Dayuan's *Daoyi zhilue*

Historians are familiar with the well-known Song geographical accounts and Zheng He's large-scale maritime voyages in the early Ming, but few scholars have studied Chinese accounts of Africa and Africans during the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368), when China was under Mongol rule. Like their Chinese predecessors, the Mongols took

[107] J.V.G. Mills, "Different Editions of the Hsing-Ch'a Sheng-Lan,"in Fei Xin, *Hsing-ch'a-sheng-lan: the Overall Survey of the Star Raft*, trans. J.V.G. Mills, rev., annot., and ed. by Roderich Ptak (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1996), 9.

an interest in the people as well as the products of foreign countries. A Chinese map drawn by Zhu Siben between 1311 and 1320 demonstrates clear knowledge of Africa's shape:



Zhu Siben's map of Africa, c.1311-1320[108]

The island off the east coast appears to be labeled "*sangce* 桑冊 slaves." Perhaps *sangce* is another transcription of *zanj*.

[108] Reprinted in Snow, *Star Raft over China*, 10.

The island's location seems to match Zhao Rugua's description of the location of "Kunlun Cengqi" as present-day Madagascar. The accuracy of this map suggests that the Chinese (or at least a few cartographers) had fairly accurate geographical knowledge of Africa during the Yuan.

Wang Dayuan's 1349 *Daoyi zhilue* 島夷誌略 (A Shortened Account of the Non-Chinese Island Peoples), a source similar in form and content to the Song geographies, provides the earliest reliable account I have found written by a Chinese who actually visited the countries along the Indian Ocean, the Persian Gulf, and East Africa.[109] Unlike Zhou Qufei and Zhao Rugua of the Song, Wang claimed to have visited the countries he described on two lengthy maritime voyages, one occurring between 1330 and 1334 and the second between 1337 and 1339.[110] Many Chinese view him as the first Chinese person to visit East Africa.[111] Wang's work consists of list of 108 countries, ninety-nine of which Wang claims to have visited himself and nine of which he had only read about in other works.[112]

Although Wang uses the same format as Zhou Qufei and Zhao Rugua, he rarely quotes the Song geographers and often uses different characters to transcribe the names of the countries described in the Song accounts. The extent of the differences between his account and the Song geographies suggest that Wang did not even read Zhou and Zhao's works. Rockhill and Hirth write that because Wang wrote from personal observation rather than the reports of others, as did the Chinese writers of the Song, his account is "trustworthy" and is perhaps the earliest firsthand Chinese account of the countries and people of Africa.[113] After reading some of Wang's fantastic descriptions of the countries that he claimed to have visited, however, it seems unlikely that such stories could be based on firsthand observation.

Unlike Zhou Qufei and Zhao Rugua, who describe the country of Kunlun Cengqi as an island off the coast of East Africa, Wang Dayuan uses the term *kunlun* for an ocean

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[109] W.W. Rockhill and F. Hirth, "Notes on the Relations and Trade of China with the Eastern Archipelago and the Coast of the Indian Ocean during the Fourteenth Century," *T'oung Pao* 16 (1915), 63.

[110] Roderich Ptak, "Images of Maritime Asia in Two Yuan Texts: *Daoyi zhilue* and *Yiyu zhi*," *Journal of Sung-Yuan Studies* 25 (1995): 52.

[111] Snow, *Star Raft over China*, 11.

[112] Ptak, "Images of Maritime Asia," 52.

[113] Rockhill and Hirth, "Notes on the Relations of...," 63.

and island in Southeast Asia off the coast of Vietnam, the present-day Pulau Condore.[114] Wang describes the "Kunlun Mountain" in the middle of the "Kunlun Sea," through which ships must pass on their way to the "Western Ocean."[115] The term *kunlun* seems to revert to its earlier Tang usage to describe the islands and peoples of Southeast Asia, except this time the word refers to a specific location off the coast of Vietnam. Wang describes the people on the Kunlun Mountain:

> Even though the land has no unusual products, and the people no dwellings, hill nests have several dozen men and women, of strange shape and weird appearance, who live in caves and fend for themselves in the wild.
>
> Since they do not have even coarse clothes, and they eat mountain fruits, fish, and shrimp by day and sleep in tree nests by night, it's as if they replicate the world of the wild. How is it possible to know what it's like?[116]

Although Wang departs from earlier depictions of the *kunlun* in that he does not comment on their skin color or credit them with magical abilities, the *kunlun* retain a primitive, animal-like quality. Later Ming geographies repeat major elements Wang's description of the Kunlun Mountain and Kunlun Sea, demonstrating the shift in use of the word *kunlun* from the Song to the Yuan that persisted through the Ming.[117]

Later in his book, in a different section, Wang describes Africa. His description of the African territories of present-day Zanzibar and the Berbera coast depart from Tang and Song accounts in that it does not mention the inhabitants' racial characteristics, magic powers, or system of slavery. His description of Cengyaoluo 層搖羅, which repeats the *zanj* sound of Zhao Rugua's Kunlun Cengqi or Cengba, does not report anything unusual about the country or its people, simply saying that the land is poor and the inhabitants trade ivory and ambergis for rice.[118] Wang's descriptions of Liqieda 哩伽搭 and Luoposi 羅婆斯, which some historians locate in the present-day Berbera coast of Somalia, only slightly resemble Tang and Song descriptions of the region.[119] Wang

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[114] That this island is Pulau Condore is from Rockhill and Hirth, "Notes on the Relations of...," 63.
[115] Wang Dayuan, *Daoyi zhilue* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju chubanshe, 1981), "Kunlun," 218.
[116] Wang Dayuan, "Kunlun," 218.
[117] Fei Xin, *Xingcha shenglan*, see discussion below.
[118] Wang Dayuan, *Daoyi zhilue*, "Cengyaluo," 358. Also translated in Rockhill and Hirth, "Notes on the Relation...," 622-3.
[119] Rockhill and Hirth, "Notes on the Relation...," 622.

mentions that in Liqieda, "Men and women are thin and tall and have a strange (*guguai* 古怪) appearance," but he does not describe their skin color, customs, religions, or values.[120] He writes, however, that the inhabitants of Luoposi "do not use fire in preparing their food, but only eat birds and beasts uncooked (*rumaoyinxue* 茹毛飲血)," reminiscent of Duan Chengshi's Tang account of the people of Bopali drinking raw cattle blood.[121]

The Africa Wang Dayuan depicts is no longer the homeland of the magical black *kunlun* slaves; it is simply a group of foreign countries described in ways very similar to the countries of Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean. In his Africa, there are no *kunlun* or other dark-skinned people who cast spells on foreign ships. Also, Wang does not mention the Arabs, either as slave traders or lighter-skinned inhabitants of the East African coast, suggesting that the Arab influence in the maritime trade of the Indian Ocean was already declining by the mid-fourteenth century.

One aspect of Wang's work that does not appear in earlier geographic accounts of Africa and Africans is the author's praise of the Africans' simple lifestyle. In a benevolent, somewhat condescending tone, Wang reports about the inhabitants of Luoposi that "although their food and lodgings are thrifty (*jie xuan* 節宣), this cannot be considered a deficiency."[122] He ends his description of this country with a longing for the primitive bliss of ancient times: "No wonder that they do not give up eating raw food and do not change their nesting places or caves, this is the same as the paradise of antiquity!"[123] Although Wang perhaps regrets his own society's loss of innocence in comparison to the Africans, he does not call for a return to primitivism. His lack of direct criticism distinguishes him from earlier writers, but his tone is condescending; in dismissing the Africans' customs as a relic of "antiquity," he affirms the advanced nature of Chinese civilization.

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[120] Wang Dayuan, *Daoyi zhilue*, "Liqiedan," 349. Also translated in Rockhill and Hirth, "Notes on the Relation..." 626. In addition to "strange," the word 古怪 can also mean "anachronistic," perhaps tying into Wang's nostalgic, romantic view of Africa and Africans.

[121] Wang Dayuan, *Daoyi zhilue*, "Luoposi," 373. Also translated in Rockhill and Hirth, "Notes on the Relation of..."626. Translation of 茹毛飲血 courtesy of Victor Mair.

[122] Wang Dayuan, *Daoyi zhilue*, "Luoposi," 373. Also translated in Rockhill and Hirth, "Notes on the Relation..." 626.

[123] Wang Dayuan, *Daoyi zhilue*, "Luoposi," 373.

Accounts of Africa and Africans during the Ming: Fei Xin's *Xingcha shenglan*

Although a few Chinese may have traveled to Africa before the fifteenth century, the seven voyages of the Muslim eunuch Zheng He and his fleet of giant "treasure ships" between 1405 and 1433 provide the first documented evidence that large groups of Chinese traveled to Africa. Between 1405 and 1433, Zheng He led seven expeditions, some with as many as three hundred vessels and 30,000 people, to Southeast Asia, India, and the East Coast of Africa.[124] These ships followed two major sea routes: the East Sea Route that included Java and Borneo, and the West Sea Route to the Indian Ocean via the Straits of Malacca.[125]

One firsthand account of these voyages, Fei Xin's 1436 *Xingcha shenglan* 星槎勝覽 (Overall Survey of the Star Raft), includes descriptions of the Kunlun Mountain on an island in Southeast Asia as well as countries on the East Coast of Africa.[126] Fei Xin went on four voyages with Zheng He's fleet in a military capacity between 1409 and 1433.[127] Although Fei Xin claimed to have visited all the countries he described, some historians argue that he did not travel beyond the Persian Gulf.[128] Even so, his descriptions of African countries and their inhabitants are based on descriptions of Chinese who traveled there, not Arab traders as in the earlier Song accounts.[129]

Fei Xin's description of the Kunlun Mountain off the coast of Vietnam is a slightly abridged version of Wang Dayuan's account:

> This mountain produces no unusual articles. The people have no houses. They eat mountain fruits, fish and shrimps. They have caves for dwellings and nests in trees, and that's all.[130]

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[124] Bruce Swanson, *Eighth Voyage of the Dragon: A History of China's Quest for Seapower* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1982), 33. The dates of these expeditions are from Duyvendak's "The true dates of the Chinese Maritime expeditions in the Early 15th century," *T'oung Pao* 34 (1939), 356-390. He gives the dates as: (1) 1405-7, (2) 1407-9, (3) 1409-11, (4) 1413-15, (5) 1417-19, (6) 1421-2, (7) 1431-3.

[125] Swanson, *Eighth Voyage of the Dragon*, 38.

[126] Another account, Ma Huan's c. 1436 *Yingyai shenglan* (Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores), also describes these voyages, but since Ma did not go to East Africa or include accounts of these countries, I did not include his account here.

[127] Fei Xin, *H'sing Ch'a sheng-lan* (The Overall Survey of the Star Raft), trans. J.V.G. Mills, revised and edited by Roderich Ptak (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1996), 32. The dates of the missions Fei gives are 1409-1411, 1412-1414, 1415-1416, and 1431-1433.

[128] Wheatley, "Analecta," 91.

[129] Wheatley, "Analecta," 91.

[130] Fei Xin, Feng Chengjun, ed., *Xingcha shenglan jiaozhu* (Taibei: Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan, 1962): Part II, "Kunlun shan," 9. Also translated in Mills (revised by Ptak), *Hsing Ch'a Sheng-lan*, 40.

Rather than returning to earlier images about the *kunlun's* supernatural powers and swimming prowess, Fei Xin continues the trend from Wang Dayuan of dismissing the *kunlun* as the primitive and slightly strange residents of a particular island.

Fei Xin's descriptions of East African countries also repeat Wang Dayuan's account and echo earlier descriptions as early as the Tang. Fei Xin describes the land and people of Zhubu 竹步 (Juba, in present-day Somalia):

> ...their customs are pure. Grass and trees do not grow. The men and women have tightly curled (*quan* 拳) hair. When they go out they use a cloth to cover their bodies and heads. The mountains are uncultivated and the land is broad. There is no heavy rain.[131]

This account recalls Wang's images of poor land and simple, pure people. Perhaps Fei Xin found the Africans' "tightly curled" hair startling, but he does not mention their skin color, suggesting that dark skin was not unusual in the places Fei Xin traveled. Like Wang, Fei Xin does not mention the Arabs or the slave trade.[132]

The Chinese of the fifteenth century as well as modern readers view the account of Fei Xin, and others who had gone on Zheng He's voyages such as Ma Huan, as more reliable than earlier secondhand accounts because the writers went to the places they described, or at least obtained information from Chinese who had gone there. Gu Po's 1451 "Postscript" to Ma Huan's account attests,

> When I was young, I looked at [Zhao Rugua's] *Record of Foreign Nations*, and I learnt... about the difference in customs [and] about the appearance of human beings....Yet I suspected that the book was written by a novelty-seeker, and I ventured to think that such things did not exist in reality. Now I see the actual facts in the record... and I see for the first time that the statements in *Record of Foreign Nations* are credible and not false.[133]

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[131] Fei Xin, *Xingcha shenglan,* Part II, "Zhubu guo," 19-20. Also translated in Mills, *Hsing ch'a sheng-lan*, 100-1.

[132] Although Fei Xin does not mention the slave trade, the Arabs continued to control the East African slave trade until the arrival of the Portuguese in the late fifteenth century. Chinese official histories report that small numbers of black slaves continued to enter China at least through the early Ming as tribute from the Southeast Asian country of Heling (Java), which presented 300 "black slaves" (黑奴) in 1381 and 100 black slaves (both male and female) in 1382. *Ming shi* (Ming History) vol. 5, *Ershiwu shi* vol. 50 (Taibei: Xinwenfeng chubanshe, 1975), 324: 3653.

[133] "Ku P'o's Afterward of 1451(?)," in J.V.G. Mills, trans., Ma Huan, *Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores*, 179. I was unable to locate the original Chinese of this passage, so I use J.V.G. Mills's translation.

Gu's account demonstrates that fifteenth century Chinese readers used the firsthand accounts from the Zheng He expeditions to vindicate the reliability of earlier secondhand works, not to correct earlier misconceptions. Because Zheng He and his men did not stay long in any given African port, however, their comments are very impressionistic, suggesting a superficial knowledge of Africans and their customs. Large-scale Chinese travel to Africa in the early fifteenth century, then, was not a turning point in the formation of Chinese perceptions of Africa and Africans; instead, it seemed to confirm existing ideas and impressions.

Images of the *Kunlun* in the late Ming: Mei Dingzuo's play *Kunlun nu jianxia chengxian*

A major question remains, however: what happened to fictional images of the *kunlun* after the Tang stories in the early Song anthology, *Taiping guangji*? It would be ideal to compare fictional sources with nonfiction from each time period. The only fictional source I could find about the *kunlun* after the Tang, however, is Mei Dingzuo's 1584 play, *Kunlun nu jianxia chengxian* 崑崙奴劍俠成仙 (How the *Kunlun* Slave Became an Immortal), based on the *Taiping guangji* story "The *Kunlun* Slave." Although this play was published well after the Zheng He voyages, it reveals how the connotations of *kunlun* shifted significantly from the Tang to the Ming.

Although the Tang short story and Ming play are two different genres, the portrayal of the *kunlun* slave Mo Le as a mysterious and magical being in the play shows the extent to which the *kunlun* figure has been mythologized in Chinese culture and divorced from its earlier associations with Africans and other non-Chinese with dark skin. This play follows almost exactly the plot of the Tang story and also adds a religious theme; Mo Le not only rescues his master Cui and escapes from his adversaries but actually achieves immortality, becoming a "person of the way 道人" who has "immortal friends 仙友."[134] Except for Mo Le's title of the "*kunlun* slave," one cannot determine whether Mo Le is Chinese from reading the dialogue in the play.[135] Mo Le is a slave

[134] Mei Dingzuo, *Kunlun nu jianxia chengxian*, in Shen Tai's *Sheng Ming zaju*. No publisher or publication date is listed, although it seems to be a print of a 1629 edition. Volume 7: 19, 22.

[135] For example: When his master asks Mo Le, "Do you reminisce about your former town? Do you want to go there?" he uses standard language that could refer to any town. Mo Le's response offers an

because of an obligation from a past life, and he makes frequent literary and historical allusions that suggest that he is the civilized one stuck amongst uncivilized and common immortals.[136]

The only evidence in the play that Mo Le is not Chinese is visual, a print from the 1629 *Sheng Ming zaju* 盛明雜劇 (Assorted Plays from the High Ming), shown below:

Cui and Mo Le in the concubine's courtyard[137]

ambiguous hint that he might be foreign: "How could my spirit be flying back to my former country?" The rhetorical nature of this question, however, makes it unclear whether Mo Le is from another country or simply being facetious. Mei Dingzuo, *Kunlun nu*, 30.

[136] He compares himself to Su Wu, for example, a legendary figure from the former Han dynasty (206 BC – AD 25) who was kidnapped by the Xiongnu, an enemy nomadic tribe. Rather than capitulate to the Xiongnu, Su Wu remained loyal to the Han, herding sheep for nineteen years until the Xiongnu and the Han reached a settlement in 81 BC.

In this picture, a large, strong-looking man – presumably Mo Le – gestures at Cui, a slim young Chinese man in traditional dress.[138] Mo Le is the same height as Cui, although his build is much bulkier. Mo Le does not resemble a typical artistic depiction of a Chinese man: he has large eyes, a thick beard, and wears non-Chinese dress. The two men walk outside a decorated pavilion, from which a slim young woman (presumably the concubine) gazes at them. Unlike the portrait of the *kunlun* slave Mo He from the *Taiping guangji*, who clearly has dark skin, this depiction does not offer any insight into the *kunlun's* race.

The Ming play preserves the earlier Tang connotations of the *kunlun* as a magical and mythological figure in fiction. In this version, however, the *kunlun* loses his characteristic black skin. Though not necessarily representative of all Chinese perceptions during the Ming, this play reveals the broad changes that occurred in the shifting meanings and representations of *kunlun* and Chinese perceptions of Africa and Africans from the Tang to the Ming.

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[137] Artist and date unknown. Print from "*Kunlun nu*" in the 1629 edition of Shen Tai's *Sheng Ming*, 1.

[138] Mei Dingzuo, *Kunlun nu*, 1.

Conclusion

A key shift in Chinese perceptions of Africa and Africans was not a result of the voyages of Zheng He in the fifteenth century but appears in the 1349 account of Wang Dayuan, whose descriptions depart significantly from earlier sources. Wang's account also demonstrates a later general shift in the connotations of the word *kunlun*. In the Tang, *kunlun* referred primarily to the islands of Southeast Asia and their dark-skinned inhabitants; in the Song, Zhao Rugua linked the *kunlun* to the East Coast of Africa with his description of Kunlun Cengqi; and in the Yuan, Wang used the word to refer to a specific island in Southeast Asia, and this usage persisted through the Ming.

These shifts were not uniform, however, since multiple meanings of the word *kunlun* persisted over time, and new meanings coexisted with, rather than replaced, old connotations. Although Wang Dayuan and Fei Xin used the term *kunlun* in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to describe an island rather than dark-skinned people, the word still retains the connotation of Africanness. For example, current Chinese art history books describe figurines that appear to be of African descent as *kunlun*.

Several factors about the nature of my sources influenced my analysis. Since we do not know who read these premodern sources, it is difficult to say whether discrepancies between two accounts indicate general changes in Chinese perceptions or merely differences in the quantity and quality of information the authors received. Also, we do not know how many other premodern sources reveal Chinese perceptions of Africa and people with dark skin. I used footnotes in secondary sources to track down primary sources and also did a computer database search of relevant terms such as *kunlun* and *sengchi* in the official dynastic histories, but there are likely other terms not cited in the secondary sources that might reveal similar (or different) Chinese perceptions. Fiction and other types of sources such as geographies also present a challenge, since I was unable to do a computer database search of these materials to find additional sources.

Regardless of the number of premodern sources describing Africa and people with dark skin, the content of the sources is extremely impressionistic. Fictional tales about the *kunlun* slaves and brief descriptions of African countries in the histories and geographies do not indicate that the Chinese possessed in-depth knowledge about African countries and their inhabitants. Even the Chinese who actually traveled to Africa on

Zheng He's voyages did not spend much time in each port they visited, and their brief impressions added to a collection of enduring stereotypes about Africa and people with dark skin.

It is difficult to assess the complex legacy of premodern Chinese perceptions of Africa and dark-skinned people. Certain pervasive images of the *kunlun's* physical characteristics and customs remained part of Chinese popular mythology for centuries. The Chinese clearly made certain assumptions about people of African descent based on their physical appearances, long before the development of a Chinese "racial discourse" in the nineteenth century that categorized people into "races" based on physical characteristics.[139]

In *The Discourse of Race in Modern China*, Frank Dikotter cites a geographical account from 1848 describing West Africans as slaves who "never complain and try to escape" and East Africans as animals "living in holes."[140] These descriptions are eerily reminiscent of Zhu Yu's twelfth-century account of the *kunlun* "devil slaves" in China and Wang Dayuan's fourteenth-century description of Africans, revealing how premodern perceptions of Africa and people with dark skin informed later works.

These negative attitudes towards Africans and other people with dark skin have persisted throughout the twentieth century and still exist today. In the 1960s, a Ghanaian student studying in China wrote in his memoirs that Chinese doctors asked him why his skin was so black if he washed regularly, leading him to conclude that the Chinese were either "supremely ignorant or supremely ill-intentioned" towards Africans.[141] In December 1988, clashes between African and Chinese students led to violence at Hehai University in Nanjing, allegedly sparked by conflict over interracial dating between African men and Chinese women.[142] An African student remembers a mob of more than 3,000 Chinese students crowded outside the foreign students' dormitory, chanting, "Kill

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[139] Dikotter, *Development of Race in Modern China*, viii.

[140] Dikotter, *Development of Race in Modern China,* 49-50, citing Xu Jiyu, *Yinghuan zhilue, juan* 4.

[141] Emmanuel Hevi, *An African Student in China* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1963), 187. Reference provided by Dikotter, *Discourse of Race in Modern China,* 194.

[142] Jonathan Mirksy, "Black student tells of humiliation and violence in China," *The Independent,* 26 January 1989, 12. [Lexis-Nexis online database]. Accessed 11 April 2002. Available at www.lexis.com.

the black devils!"[143] Although assessing modern Chinese attitudes is beyond the scope of this essay, these anecdotes demonstrate the enduring legacy of premodern perceptions of Africa and people with dark skin.

[143] Mirsky, "Black student tells of humiliation."

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