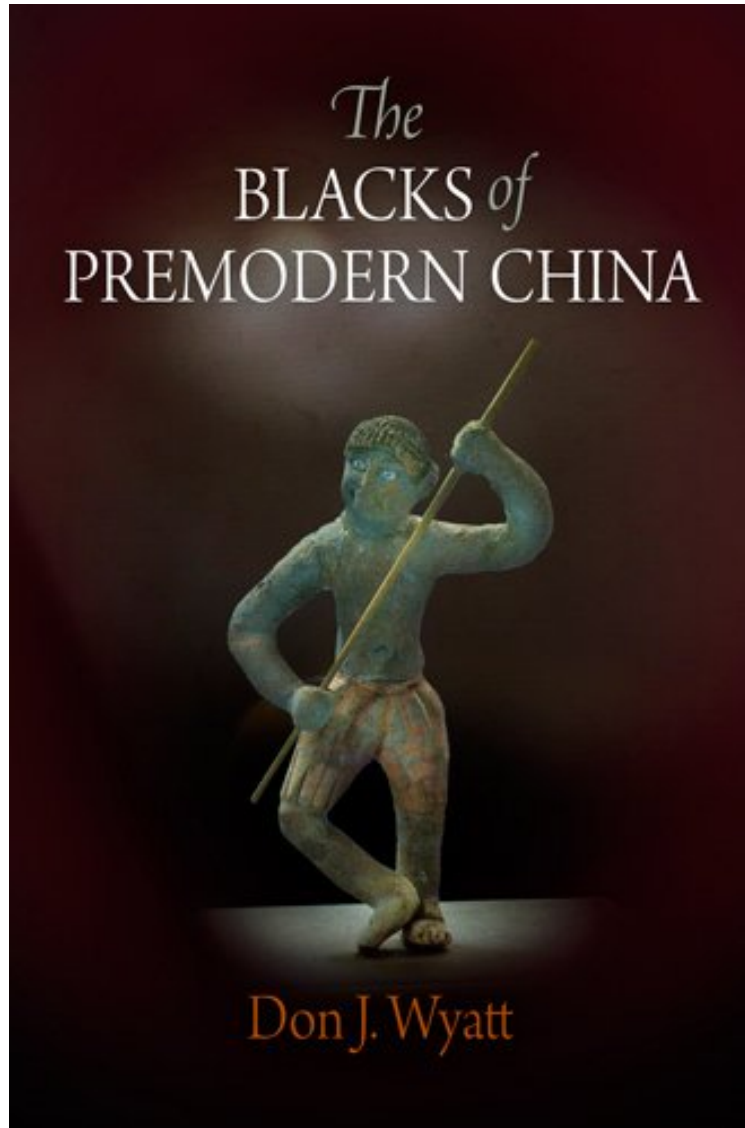


(Pdf free) The Blacks of Premodern China (Encounters with Asia)

## The Blacks of Premodern China (Encounters with Asia)

*Don J. Wyatt*

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**Don J. Wyatt : The Blacks of Premodern China (Encounters with Asia)** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Blacks of Premodern China (Encounters with Asia):

3 of 17 people found the following review helpful. totally racist!!!!!!By Mugisa Rathael Fambrothis is definitely a racist Eurocentric position this guy takes. all of the australoid and negrito, (just to use terms he, and so called scholars like him like to use, even though there pejorative to the people who have already named themselves), all over Australia, india, middle east, southeast asia, china, japan, Europe, the America's from the remotest of times, prior to these "slave" times that he only seems to know about, are all black africanoids, meaning genotypically and

phenotypically black African from the out of Africa migrations.all these racist want to delegate Africans to inferior positions as slaves, when they were not only masters prior to this, but were dominant over these same areas initially. The first three dynasties were ruled by Black Africans in china!!!!!!!!!!!!I will wipe myself with this book.

Premodern Chinese described a great variety of the peoples they encountered as "black." The earliest and most frequent of these encounters were with their Southeast Asian neighbors, specifically the Malaysians. But by the midimperial times of the seventh through seventeenth centuries C.E., exposure to peoples from Africa, chiefly slaves arriving from the area of modern Somalia, Kenya, and Tanzania, gradually displaced the original Asian "blacks" in Chinese consciousness. In *The Blacks of Premodern China*, Don J. Wyatt presents the previously unexamined story of the earliest Chinese encounters with this succession of peoples they have historically regarded as black. A series of maritime expeditions along the East African coastline during the early fifteenth century is by far the best known and most documented episode in the story of China's premodern interaction with African blacks. Just as their Western contemporaries had, the Chinese aboard the ships that made landfall in Africa encountered peoples whom they frequently classified as savages. Yet their perceptions of the blacks they met there differed markedly from those of earlier observers at home in that there was little choice but to regard the peoples encountered as free. The premodern saga of dealings between Chinese and blacks concludes with the arrival in China of Portuguese and Spanish traders and Italian clerics with their black slaves in tow. In Chinese writings of the time, the presence of the slaves of the Europeans becomes known only through sketchy mentions of black bondservants. Nevertheless, Wyatt argues that the story of these late premodern blacks, laboring anonymously in China under their European masters, is but a more familiar extension of the previously untold story of their ancestors who toiled in Chinese servitude perhaps in excess of a millennium earlier.

About the Author Don J. Wyatt is Professor of History at Middlebury College. Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. Introduction Within the span of the nearly three centuries of China's illustrious Tang Dynasty (618-907), the year 684 is conspicuous mainly for two infamously related events. In the second month of that year the notorious Wu Zhao, or Empress Wu (Wu Hou) (ca. 625-705), initiated her successful bid to become the Middle Kingdom's only female aspirant to emperorship in its four-millennia-plus traditional history. Almost from the first, her usurpation of power was resisted not only by the legitimate members of the dynasty's imperial family but also by a disgraced aristocratic bravo named Li Jingye (d. 685). In the ninth month, proclaiming either his real or his fictitious intent of restoring the rightful emperor to power, Li Jingye initiated the first internal rebellion actually directed against the state in more than sixty decades. These distinct but related events of 684 precipitated bloodshed on an unimaginably massive scale. Owing to the harsh gender biases militating against her ascendancy in the political arena, Empress Wu could claim and consolidate her supreme position only by means of the trail of poisonings and dismemberments that she initiated in 684 and carried out well beyond her imperial accession of 690. Once installed through this chain of usurpation as China's first and only woman emperor, Wu Zhao would spend the next two decades as she had for at least a decade before that achievement meting out death to all real or perceived threats to her power, including numerous members of the legitimate imperial family. By contrast, the tyranny of Li Jingye was far less long-lived. He rebelled largely because he had felt his personal honor besmirched and seen the privileges of his noble standing curtailed. Therefore, he directed his suddenly amassed forces of one hundred thousand in bringing death to countless thousands through his revolt. Wu Zhao met Li Jingye's rebels with a three-hundred-thousand-man army of suppression of her own. Li, however, did not live long enough to witness the complete destruction of what he had ignited, for he met his own end in short order when a treacherous subordinate, seeking to collect a reward on his defeat and, through dissociation, save his own life, elected to behead him. Thereafter, as was customary repayment at that time for sedition against the throne, all of Jingye's known surviving family members were exterminated to the last person, and their tombs were desecrated by obliteration. With few exceptions, most subsequent scholars have regarded the usurpation of the empress and the insurrection of the renegade as assuredly the two most noteworthy events of the year 684. This is an entirely understandable assessment, given that each produced ramifications that emanated like seismic shock waves, profoundly affecting nearly every aspect of the future fortunes of the Chinese Tang empire's remaining two-plus centuries of life. However, there was yet an additional act of violence smaller but hardly unnoticed that transpired in that same critical year of 684. Occurring in the interim months between the previously mentioned cataclysms, this incident constituted a much lower order of violence than either of the aforementioned disruptive events of 684 that framed it, and it therefore understandably has generally not garnered attention on a level that is commensurate with its significance. Yet, we can scarcely overemphasize the portentous nature of this event, and it would prove no less consequential in its implications for the subject of this study than either of the other two has customarily proven to be to any study of Tang politics or institutions. The event in question is the sordid and unseemly murder of the civilian official Lu Yuanrui, who, during the seventh month of 684, died savagely while serving as governor of the remote and still somewhat marginally incorporated southern Chinese port of Guangzhou, the future Canton. *Kunlun Exposed and Evolving* By the standards of our culture and times, by most

accounts Lu Yuanrui was not wholly undeserving of the fate that befell him. He was a petty man and a rapacious bureaucrat, so much so as not to merit independent treatment anywhere in the authoritative sources, despite his relatively high position. Consequently, we first learn about Lu only because of the survival of a terse description of his death and nothing more that is included in the officially commissioned biography of the successor to his post. Nevertheless, in the eyes of certainly what was a preponderance of his countrymen, Lu's deficiencies as a functionary and as a person hardly made him deserving of what happened to him, for from the single, unadorned entry on his fate in the *Jiu Tangshu* (Old Tang History) we learn the following: "The territories of Guangzhou border the Southern Sea. Every year, the kunlun merchants arrive in [their] ships, laden with valuable goods to trade with the Chinese. The previous governor tried to cheat them out of their goods, so a kunlun had come forth with a concealed knife and killed him." The assailant was not content simply to cut Lu Yuanrui down on the spot. Wielding his knife or perhaps knives (the original Chinese is actually unclear), he also, in what must have been a horrifically savage bloodletting, dispatched a dozen or possibly more members of the governor's immediate entourage. Moreover, adding insult to the considerable injury, by effectively evading all pursuers and avoiding capture, the culprit managed to put out to sea and thus escape justice. Now as well as then the deed itself was grave enough. However, the matter was made all the more deplorable by the single individualized reference to the perpetrator as a kunlun, a term essential to our present purposes because it was the first certifiable signifier to emerge in China for identifying a kind of person considered by Chinese standards to be utterly unlike themselves—that is, someone construed by premodern Chinese to evince the characteristics of being ethnically black. In Chapter 1 we will revisit the violent death of Lu Yuanrui and deliberate in still greater detail than we have thus far on all that is implied by his manner of death. A reason as sound as any for focusing on this episode at this early juncture is its prime functionality as an initial signpost for all our further deliberations on premodern China's relationship to its blacks. Whereas Lu the man is easy enough for us to relegate to obscurity, we will find that the circumstances of his death are not, and they will collectively come to serve as well as any compass to point us in the direction of the crucial questions that will most preoccupy us. Indeed, it is the reality of his death at the hands of some variety of kunlun that catapults us forward into engagement with the intermeshing themes that dominate the discourse entailed over the remainder of this book. In sum, the importance of the recording of Lu Yuanrui's murder lies principally in the fact that it comprises the earliest and least equivocal historical documentation we now have of the undercurrent tensions and occasional outright enmity that had, by the ninth century if not well before then, evolved to become a fixture of Chinese-kunlun relations. The specific matter of Lu Yuanrui is also of supreme value to us at this stage for the seminal kinds of questions it evokes. Not the least weighty but certainly among the more expected questions for us to ask are, who were the kunlun and, since they were no more imaginary than the merchants who seasonally ported at Guangzhou and on one infamously unfortunate occasion claimed the lives of Lu Yuanrui and a good number of his subordinates, from where did they come? We shall discover that, much like these queries, the answer to each question is locked in interdependency because we will learn that over several centuries the Chinese of premodern times affixed the appellation kunlun to an expanding array of peoples, most of whom by our contemporary standards should have represented quite distinct nationalities and ethnicities to them. Moreover, and somewhat counterintuitively, we will witness how this succession of peoples to which the designation kunlun was applied actually underwent expansion even as Chinese knowledge of the greater world commensurately increased. Increased geographical exploration, initially to the south but later in the westward direction, and greater exposure to peoples not previously encountered had the effect of contributing to a swelling rather than a diminution of those included under the kunlun rubric. We will come to regard the still larger questions elicited by such discoveries as this one as contributing immeasurably to the arrestingly engrossing quality of our inquiry. By the time of Lu Yuanrui's murder, the Chinese had already experienced perhaps a half-millennium of contact with an expanding succession of peoples whom they designated as kunlun. However, even if it was sustained, as the case of the use of Guangzhou as a port of call certainly implies, we should not assume that contact over the centuries had necessarily become generally more cooperative or felicitous. Familiarity need not assure contempt, but neither is there sufficient reason for our believing that Tang Chinese perspectives on the peoples they sometimes indiscriminately called kunlun had advanced greatly beyond their initial exposure to them in the early centuries of the Common Era. Despite their vaunted reputation for cosmopolitanism, the Chinese of Tang times were also heirs in large degrees to the far less pluralistic ages that had preceded them. Just as we today are inclined to wonder whether life "as we know it" abounds on some other planet, Chinese of the first centuries C.E., like peoples of ancient times elsewhere who were often cut off from all but incidental and near-miraculous contact with those geographically remote from themselves, doubtless reflected on the relative similarity or dissimilarity to themselves of the few alien peoples they chanced to encounter. Often even the fundamental humanness of foreigners was debated, for it was considered far from a certainty. The topic under scrutiny is admittedly exotic, even for other sinological specialists. However, the approach adopted in the present book is strictly pedestrian. Hence, herein there are no grand explanations of the vast history of cross-cultural human experience; as I have already intimated, I have sought merely to provide answers to a provocative yet quite strictly circumscribed set of questions. Foremost among these questions of concern is, to the best that we can determine, precisely when did individuals of Chinese ethnicity, by dint of contact

stemming from actual sightings and interaction, first become aware and therefore knowledgeable of individuals whom they, just as we are disposed to do today, considered black? In other words, when exactly did peoples of or descended from African ancestry first enter upon the consciousness of the people of China? What historical event or series of events first provided the Chinese with palpable evidence of the existence of black peoples, and how was this evidence received and internalized? This task of detecting how or under what circumstances Chinese first became aware of blacks is just as challenging as ascertaining when such awareness arose. Moreover, there is every reason to believe that obtaining tenable answers to the former question has the potential for being substantially more rewarding than any answer to the latter. Any success in answering with any thoroughness how such a consciousness arose undeniably makes a profoundly more valuable contribution to the early history of cross-cultural intercourse than just answering when. This opinion has served as the motive impetus behind my writing this book. However, ultimately our capacity for determining the how as well as the when in the dawning of Chinese cognizance of peoples whom they perceived as black goes well beyond any self-seeking aggrandizement of our own interest and knowledge, for it can result only in a narrative with the widest and most fascinating of historical implications. Simply in the telling we should expect this story of the first face-to-face contact between Chinese and blacks to illuminate, even if only partially and somewhat incompletely, all comparable histories of meetings between members of two vastly culturally dissimilar peoples without confirmed previous exposure to each other. Thus, such a story should also be historically edifying because it would enrich our overall understanding of the dynamics at work in the initial interactions between previously unexposed cultures at all prior and subsequent stages in world history. The version of the story of earliest detectable Chinese-black contact furnished here presents all of these potentialities. Yet, I have become convinced that even to imply that it is a self-contained "story" is itself a distortion. As is herein revealed, Lu Yuanrui's sensationalistic murder notwithstanding, there never was any single watershed occasion of interaction between Chinese and blacks. Instead, what we confront is a protracted sequence divisible into several clusters of salient events, with each spaced discretely and discontinuously across premodern times; thus, the tale to be told the saga, for lack of a better term is truly episodic. By as late as the turn of the sixteenth century of our Common Era, interaction between blacks and Chinese had already infrequently occurred for more than a millennium before direct and regular Sino-European contact began. We should not be surprised that those occasional interactions were characterized qualitatively by the complete spectrum of human emotions, ranging at different times and by turns from mutual awe to mutual indifference to mutual disgust. Before beginning in earnest, we should recognize that there are three other prominent dimensions of the saga of premodern Chinese-black interaction that we will profit from bearing constantly in mind. Regardless of whether we approach the story as historian specialists or as general observers, these considerations will assist us immeasurably by functioning as kinds of cautionary intellectual beacons. Without heeding the informing light cast by these beacons at all times, the potential for self-misdirection is enormously heightened and perhaps unavoidable. First, we need to bear in mind that over the course of the history of their premodern contact, with virtually no exceptions that can now be ascertained, the status roles of the Chinese and the blacks with whom they chanced to come into contact remained constant and unchanging. Such is not to say that we should construe status relationships as having been static and immutable within each of the two distinct groups. Regardless of his own social status, a Chinese of that time would certainly have regarded a kunlun emissary to the imperial court, whether encountered or not, as possessing higher status than a kunlun merchant or a common kunlun slave, even if only in relative terms. Nevertheless, judging from the documents we have, these status relationships were surely invariant in the sense that they were never reversed or inverted between the two groups. In other words, the Chinese were always the more powerful party in terms of status, possessing the proverbial "upper hand" in all relations with the blacks. Surely in all the instances of domestic interaction for which we possess records, even after they became facilitated by Arabs via their prolific slave trading in Africans from approximately the ninth century C.E. onward, we must see the Chinese as having initiated contact with the blacks, typically through the act of seeking to procure them as slaves, and also thereby as having controlled its terms, often to the detriment, subjugation, and degradation of the black subjects with whom they came into intercourse. The historical record gives no indication that members of these culturally disparate peoples ever met or interacted on terms of equality, and therefore the indulgence of the kind of delusional thinking that allows such to become the case should not be permitted. Second, for any aspect of Chinese-kunlun relations that are subjected to scrutiny, we should remain vigilantly mindful of the exclusively one-sided nature of the combined record of contact. In the single directionality of its narration, the story of earliest Chinese perceptions of the blacks they encountered approximates what we are coming to learn, for instance, about the perspectives of the citizenry of continental Europe during the Renaissance or, with more circumscription, those of the English of Tudor (1500-1603) and Stuart (1603-1714) times on the nascent but growing communities of Africans, East Indians, and eventually African Americans in their midst. However, even granting this single parallel of the largely one-way nature of the racializing discourses evinced in both of these comparable cases, the contrasts we are forced to draw between the continental European situation in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and the British situation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries versus the Chinese one from the seventh through the twelfth still seem far more extreme and more numerous than the similarities. The medieval Chinese records are preciously fewer, less comprehensive, and less consolidated than their

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

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

One Hue throughout Three Vistas

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

Chapter 1 is foremost devoted to answering the specific question of precisely when a Chinese consciousness of peoples who are black first arose, and toward that purpose it explicates not only the incremental emergence of the traditional Chinese construction of otherness but also, over centuries, that of the much lesser known construction of blackness. However, even in concentrating on the when, we find that we can never entirely divorce our deliberations from the how. Nor, evidently, can we afford to dismiss all consideration of the where. In this chapter we find that the first encounters between the Chinese and those they deemed black occurred not in China proper so much as in the various proximate archipelagos and islands that comprised China's southernmost oceanic frontier. Moreover, we learn that the Chinese construct of blackness exhibited great elasticity. Under its rubric we discover that the Chinese included not only an array of

verifiable blacks, such as Malays and Khmers, with whom they were known to have interacted but also a number of sundry peoples so described whose exact identities cannot be verified. Additionally we find that we cannot avoid a consideration of the Chinese entertainment of the existence of wholly imaginary blacks, who were indeed beings who occupied that shadowy middle ground between the human and the animal. Yet, most importantly, this chapter demonstrates that prior to their actual historical encounter with African blacks, the Chinese already maintained an abiding, if semifantastical, internal concept of what being black as opposed to Chinese necessarily meant. Chapter 2 provides an unusually enlightening portal of interiority by bringing us to China proper and thereby to a consideration of blacks brought to and inescapably inserted in neither really immersed nor integrated into the Chinese cultural context. In this venue we find that three factors dominated. First is the localization or even confinement of this particular set of blacks exclusively to the southeast coastal city of Guangzhou. Second is their invariant status as slaves. Third is the ethnogenesis—the formation as an ethnic group of these slaves as having derived from their original homeland (or, as is shown to have been the case from the Chinese perspective, habitat), which based on the accrued evidence we are led to conclude can have been nowhere else than Africa. In the end, however, despite what it reveals, our encounter of the blacks in their Chinese setting is perhaps as frustrating as it is revelatory because for every aspect of their apparently wretched existence that is revealed to us there remain countless other aspects that are destined to hopeless irretrievability. Moreover, although it thematically transverses the entire book, readers will find that the important subtheme of slavery dominates as the central subject of concern only in this second chapter. Chapter 3 relocates us to what probably is, at once, the most expected and yet least explored venue for our unveiling of and exposure to premodern China's blacks, and this setting is the northeastern coastline (incorporating specifically the Horn) of Africa. This occasion for Africa as venue for the consequential interaction between these two distinct peoples was afforded entirely by the unprecedented voyages embarked upon to this and other Indian Ocean lands under Chinese imperial commission between the years 1405 and 1433. However, heretofore, the voyages themselves have commanded greater sway over the attentions of scholars and, by extension, the public than any encounter between the Chinese and a single people or collection of peoples resulting from them. In this chapter, by focusing to the exclusion of all else on this often vaguely referenced but inadequately explored or understood story of encounter between Chinese and Africans in the native place of the latter as opposed to the former, I have endeavored to rectify this situation. My approach aims at raising this singular moment of intersection to the level of something more than a sidebar. Thereby, while stopping short of augmentation that is either exaggerated or misrepresentative, I hope to have made the potency of the first known arrival of the Chinese in Africa and its relevancy to the more extensive history of China's premodern dealings with its blacks not only better known but also better felt than previously. Needless to say, reconstituting the saga of encounter between premodern Chinese and the diverse array of peoples they described as black, whether inside or outside of China, is a complex enterprise. Any reconstitution of the story, no matter how earnest and engaged, must necessarily also reflect its convolutions. In the attempt provided herein I hope to avoid the summary pitfall forecast near the middle of the previous century by the eminent early Asianist Paul Pelliot (1878-1945), who theorized insightfully that trying "to unravel such an entangled skein would require a whole monograph, only to reach perhaps an indifferent result." In the end my labors reflected here may well not advance us as significantly toward the objective of untangling Pelliot's most aptly described skein as might ideally be desired. Nevertheless, with any luck I have at the very least eluded such an ignominious fate in this matter as rightly befalls one who tenders only the kinds of conclusions that will elicit indifference.