

# African Diaspora in China: Reality, Research and Reflection

by

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## Abstract

The history of human beings is a history of (im)migration. From the ancient times, people moved from one place to the other to find better environments for survival or development. After the modern international system came into being with borders being a necessity of the nation-state, immigration became an issue, be it from national policy or international concerns. With the recent development of China-Africa relations, a wave of bilateral migration occurred.<sup>1</sup> This phenomenon created an enthusiasm for the study of migration between China and Africa. There are studies on Chinese either on the African continent (Li, 2000, 2006, 2012a), on particular regions (Ly Tio Fane-Pines, 1981, 1985), or on different countries (Human 1984; Yap & Leong, 1996; Wong-Hee-kan, 1996; Ly-Tio-Fane Pineo & Lim Fat, 2008; Park, 2008), yet the African diaspora in China is much less studied. As Bodomo correctly points out “Africans did not just start moving into China in the 21<sup>st</sup> century”, “This history must be placed in the context of the wider African presence in Asia, which itself has not yet been the subject of sustained research” (Bodomo, 2012). This article constitutes a historiography of the African presence in China; it is aimed at getting a clearer understanding of the connections between reality and research, and if possible, provide some indication for future study. It is divided into four parts, African people in early China, the issue of *Kunlun*, the origin and jobs of African people in ancient China, and the study of African people in contemporary China.

## Were Africans in China in Early Times?

There is a long history of China-Africa contact, illustrated by Chinese classics such as dynastic histories<sup>2</sup> and classics by Du Huan, Duan Chengshi, Zhou Qufei, Zhao Rukuo, Wang Dayuan, Fei Xin, Ma Huan, etc., and contemporary studies (Dart, 1925; Zhang, 1930, 1977 [1930]; Cen, 1935; Duyvendak, 1947; Filesi, 1972; Ma & Meng, 1987; Shen, 1989; Brunson, 1995; Li, 2006, 2012a; Wyatt, 2010).

Yet whether Africans existed in early China is another question. Scholars have done studies on Black people in China since the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Lacouperie, 1887; Li, 1928; Weidenreich, 1939; Ling, 1956; Coon, 1963), yet the Black people mentioned in their works seem to be Pygmy, Negrito, or Oceanic Negroids of Melanesian type (Yang, 1995). And it is also suggested that people of African heritage in early China were related to the Rouzhi (pronounced as Yuezhi, Yueshi) or the Persian (Chen, 1993; Schafer, 1991:46).

Chinese historians generally agree that African people came to China during the Tang Dynasty (618-907 A.D.) (Zhang, 1928, 1930; Xu, 1984; Ai 1987; Jing, 1998). Yet, archaeological discoveries seem to challenge the view. Archeological evidence indicates the possibility of contact between China and Africa in an earlier time. An excavation report on the Shang Dynasty (17<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> century B.C.) sites at Anyang, the capital of Shang, shows that there are similarities between the skull that was discovered and that of the Oceanic Negroids and people in Africa (Chang 1968; Yang 1969). Many Negroid images in stone, metal and jade were also found in Anyang. Sati burial existing in Nubia, Egypt and Mesopotamia, and thousands of cowrie shells used for money and more than five hundred of jade objects were also discovered in the tomb of Lady Fu Hao (14<sup>th</sup> century B.C.), who served as the principal consort and general to Shang King, Wu Ding, described as the “evidence of African participation in royalty” by Brunson, who concluded that “[I]t can be safely estimated that an African presence existed in China from a most remote period and an evolution of this physical type is an indigenous phenomenon.” (Brunson, 1985). The estimation is rather bold. In Guangzhou, a city of south China, more than 1000 tombs of the Han Dynasty have been excavated since the 1950s, where 152 pottery figures were found, some looking like Black people (Qin 2010). Three explanations were offered for the Black origin, first, they were from islands near Indochina, and therefore the indigenous people of Indonesia, and people of West Asia or East Africa (Guangzhou Shi, 1981). Second, *Qilin*, an imagined fortunate animal in ancient China, appeared in a stone sculpture in the Han Dynasty (202 B.C.-220 A.D.), resembling a giraffe (Xuzhou Museum, 1980), as indicated in Picture 1.<sup>3</sup>



Picture 1: *Qilin* in stone sculpture in the Han Dynasty (202 B.C.-220 A.D.) resembles a giraffe.

Third, during the Han Dynasty, Ethiopia and Alexandria were mentioned in *Shi Ji* (Records of the Grand Historian, 104-91 B.C.), *Han Shu* (History of the Han, 80 A.D.) and *Wei Lue* (Brief Accounts on the Wei Kingdom), and next, the astronomer-geographer Claudius Ptolemaeus of Alexandria described China and the silk-road in his *Geography* in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century.

The earliest indication of Black people (*hei-se-ren*) in China seems to be in *Juyan Han Jian*.<sup>4</sup> Hence, sixty pieces of *Juyan Han Jian* recorded individuals with their identity, such as *jun* (as prefecture, unit above county), *xian* (county), *li* (grassroots unit), rank, age, height and skin color. With height and skin color as identity elements, it is possible to understand the physical features of individuals at the time. Two studies are particularly interesting. According to Zhang's study, 55 cases with skin color are identified among 60 individual cases, and 53 recorded as "black".<sup>5</sup> In addition, one was labeled "brown black" and another "yellow black". This is very impressive even considering that Han China was a multi-ethnic empire. Were the black-skinned people from a specific area? Or did they belong to a *zhongzu* (ethnic group or race) different from the Han Chinese? The significance of the study lies in the analysis of height and color, two of the physical characteristics of the Chinese in the Han period. The author argued that since the 53 black-skinned individuals were from different parts of the empire, they were ordinary Han Chinese and did not belong to one or more specific *zhongzu* that was different from the Han Chinese (Zhang, 1977).

Yang came to a different conclusion after the study of *Juyan Hanjian* and related literature such as *Yilin* which was published almost at the same time. First, there were hundreds of thousands of foreigners living in the Hexi area and the surrounding area of Chang-an, the capital at the time and an international metropolis. Second, most of the black-skinned people lived in the Hexi area, a fact that Zhang failed to explain. Among 25 cases of the black-skinned people in the records of *Ji-guan* (birth place or origin), 17 were from the Hexi area. Thirdly, the height of the Black people was generally 165.6-177.1cm, taller than ordinary Chinese (161.2-167.6cm), but similar to the Nilotic people in Northeast Africa or the Pamiri. Fourth, married black-skinned men positioned as border officials who lived with their families should have settled in the region much earlier, possibly at the beginning of Emperor Zhaodi's rule (94-74 B.C.). Fifth, two Black women in *Yilin* with sunken eyes lived a different life, not married to Han Chinese, theirs should be regarded as different pattern of culture. Thus, Yang believes that the Black people there may have been foreigners who came from overseas, most probably from the Western Region, a specific term for the Chinese to describe the vast area west of China (Yang, 1995). The conclusion is that there were Black people in early China, possibly of foreign origin, or even of African origin.

After a long period of war and instability, China entered an era of prosperity in the Tang Dynasty (618-907 A.D.). Foreigners came to China as diplomats, officials, visitors, traders, workers, etc., and some settled down in China. Two terms “*Sengzhi*” and “*Kunlun*” appearing in the literature referred to Black people.

The record shows that in the year 724 two *Sengzhi* (Zandj) girls from the Kingdom of Palembang were offered to the Chinese Emperor, and four *Sengzhi* enslaved people, five *Sengzhi* boys and two *Sengzhi* girls were sent to Emperor Xian Zhong (805-820 A.D.) in 813, 815 and 818 respectively, all from islands of the present Indonesia as tribute. *Kunlun*, used as a name for mountain, water or place (Goodrich, 1931), official position and state, in ancient time, turned out to be a name for an ethnic group with a specific meaning, e.g., Black people (Zhang, 1930; Ge 2001).

### ***Kunlun* or Black people: Different Views and Ethnocentrism**

There was an increasing number of Black people during the Tang and Song dynasties (960-1279, A.D.) and “*Kunlun*” became a fashionable topic (more than *Sengzhi*<sup>6</sup>) in the literature. Who were the “*Kunlun*” people? Where did they come from? What did they do in ancient China? There are three kinds of evidence supporting the presence of *Kunlun* during that period - paintings, pottery figures, and literature.

Dunhuang is located in Northwest China, where there are hundreds of Buddhist caves in which the paintings of the Tang Dynasty are preserved. Among the famous Dunhuang wall-paintings, quite a few of them contain black-skinned figures, such as Dunhuang Yulin Cave No. 23, Dunhuang Caves No. 103, 194, 220, 332, 335, 431, etc., and Black people also appeared in paintings as well. Secondly, from the 1940s on, many black pottery figures were discovered in Xi-an (formerly Chang-an) area, the former capital of the ancient dynasties, such as 1948, 1949, 1954, 1955, 1956, 1960, 1972, 1984, 1986, 1994, 1996, etc. The pottery figures aroused excitement among archeologists. One in Madam Pei’s tomb (850 A.D.) in Xi-an is obviously a Negroid - 15 cm tall, with curly hair, red lips, white eyes, high and wide nose, impressive muscles and short in body, a typical African figure (Du, 1979), as shown in Picture 2.



Picture 2: Black pottery figure in Madam Pei's tomb (850 A.D.) found in 1954 in Xi-an

Thirdly, *Kunlun* or Black people became a rather popular subject in various writings during the Tang Dynasty and beyond, either in official works or in literature, such as *Jiu Tang Shu*, *Xin Tang Shu*, *Zizhi Tongjian*, *Tang Hui Yao*, *Cefu Yuangui*, *Youyang Zazu*, *Taiping Guangji*, *Zhu Fan Zhi*, *Pingzhou Ketan*, etc. Therefore, there are quite a few studies on the topic by contemporary scholars, either during the Tang period, or the dynasties afterwards (Zhang, 1930, 1977; Duyvendak, 1947; Filesi, 1972; Du, 1979; Xu, 1980, 1983, 1984; Brunson, 1985; Ai, 1987; Jing, 1998; Ge, 2001; Wilensky, 2002; Smidt, 2009; Wyatt, 2010).

Regarding the identity of *Kunlun*, there are generally two views: they are either seen as Negroid from Africa or as Negrito from Southeast Asia. Zhang Xinglang (originally spelt as Chang Hsing-lang), who made a great contribution to the study of China-foreign relations, published in 1930 an article in English and a collection of rich materials of *Kunlun* in the Tang literature.

The article dealt with eight issues, trying to identify *Kunlun*, their origin and the linkage with the Arabs, and instances of the use of the term of *Kunlun* and *Kunlun nu* (*Kunlun* slave) in Chinese literature. Zhang's conclusions are very affirmative. The land of *Kunlun* is present Siam, which had nothing to do with *Kunlun* as people. *Kunlun* or *Kunlun nu* was used frequently to describe black servants or slaves in China, they were from *Kunlun Cengqi* which was identical to Zanzibar (Zhao 1225) and usually brought to China by Arabs who were involved in traffic in slaves for a long time, some imported through the South Sea. His conclusion is that the *Kunlun nu* were not from Zhenla (present Cambodia) or Southeast Asia, a view put forward by scholars in the Qing Dynasty (1616-1911), they were black slaves from Africa (Zhang 1930, 1977 [1930]). His works provided a convenient access to the international academia (Goodrich 1931), yet his problem is also obvious. By using subtitles such as "The verification of *Kunlun nu*", "The origin of *Kunlun nu*" or "The Trade of *Kunlun nu* to China", together with his argument, the specious generalization that all the *Kunlun* were slaves is far from the truth, which has greatly influenced the latter study at home and abroad.

Zhang is supported by many scholars (Hu & Zhang 1961; Zhang 1963; Xu 1983; Zhang 1987; Jing 1998). They argue that China-Africa relations started very early, and quote Zhang's view directly or indirectly, indicating the Black people were from Africa. How did African people come to China during the Tang Dynasty? Since a sea route between Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania and China was recorded in *Xin Tangshu* (History of New Tang 1060, A.D.), some scholars suggest that the Africans came through the sea, or "Silk Road" by sea (Shen 1985, 1990; Jing 1998). Ai argued that before the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Black people were mostly sent, not sold, by Persians, Arabs or Javanese to Chinese authorities. There was no road from Africa to China for the enslaved to be transported. After the Atlantic holocaust of enslavement started, Europeans brought Africans to China, the Dutch had enslaved Black people in Taiwan, the Portuguese took them to Macao, the British and French used them as servants in coastal China. During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the Chinese government prohibited the entrance of enslaved Africans into China and the capture or use of Chinese as slaves by colonialists (Ai 1987).

In 2001, Chinese historian Ge Chengyong criticized Zhang's view in an article to probe the origin of Black people living in Chang-an city in the Tang Dynasty and drew a conclusion different from Zhang's. Considering the thesis of the "African origin" not convincing enough, he suggested that the Black people were not Negroid from Africa but Negrito from Nan Hai (south sea, present Southeast Asia). Some of the *Kunlun* were part of foreigners' annual tribute to Chinese authorities, some were left in China by foreign envoys, and some were enslaved people sold to the coastal regions. As for the term *Sengzhi*, it is generally considered to be identical to Zanj (other forms such as Zinj, Zenj, Zandj, Zanghi) and is a word used by the Arabs to refer to the East African coast. "It still survives in the name, Zanzibar. The Arabs called the Africans who came from the East African coast, the Zanzi" (Rashidi, 2010:143).

Ge did not agree with the view, considering *Sengzhi* an expression of Buddhism in Nanhai in early times. It is more proper to look for the origins of Black people in Southeast Asia rather than in Africa (Ge, 2001), a view that is accepted by scholars in China (e.g. Cheng, 2002; Liang, 2004).

There are few studies on Black people in pre-modern China in international academia for a couple of reasons, and the mastery of classical Chinese is apparently an important one. The works by Julie Wilensky and Don Wyatt are exceptional. Wilensky's article made a detailed study on the concept of *Kunlun* and the shifts in Chinese perceptions of people with dark skin and Chinese knowledge of Africa in ancient China. Although the author borrowed heavily on Zhang's work in the first two chapters, her mastery of Chinese is impressive. The work used various Chinese sources of dynastic histories, fictional literature, geographical and travel notes, etc. The writings of officials are important sources in the article, such as Customs official Zhao Rukuo, or Fei Xin and Ma Huan who both worked in Zheng He's fleet as a Navy official and interpreter respectively. Owing to the long period and the enormous materials on the subject, the conclusion is somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, the author acknowledged that "[i]t is difficult to assess the complex legacy of pre-modern Chinese perceptions of Africa and dark-skinned people". On the other hand, it is concluded that the Chinese have had specific "negative attitudes towards Africans and other people with dark skin" (Wilensky, 2002:43), which is a rather common view (Dikotter, 1992; Wyatt, 2010).

Wyatt's book is also an important work in the field, although less promising as the ambitious title suggests. As professor of history, Wyatt is skillful enough to make maximum use of two pieces of information. One is a paragraph recorded in the dynastic history of Tang of the murder of Lu Yuanrui, the rapacious governor who wanted to cheat foreign merchants in the sale of their goods. Accidentally, the murderer was a courageous *Kunlun*, who not only killed the governor in front of his guards, but also other officials, and successfully escaped. The author put the case in a broad historical context and elaborated on the implications of the murder by a *Kunlun*. Another is Zhu Yu's *Pingzhou Ketan* (Tales of Pingzhou, 1119 A.D.), a collection of anecdotal trifles and notes which described the social life of Guangzhou, (especially that of foreign residents). It contains several references to *Kunlun* as domestic enslaved people and laborers employed on a shipboard to caulk leaky seams below the waterline from the outside, as they were expert swimmers. "However, for any modern Western observer who, more than a millennium after the fact, seeks to penetrate and decipher this most unexpected of references in a pre-modern Chinese text, understandably and justifiably, endeavors to reconstitute the context of Zhu Yu's striking commentary depend most of all on the question of origins. In short, who were these slaves?" (Wyatt, 2010: 55). Did he find the answer? Yes, it was "nowhere else than Africa" (Wyatt, 2010: 10, 78), a conclusion made by Zhang eighty years ago.

*Taiping Guangji* (Comprehensive Collections of the Taiping Era<sup>7</sup>, 978 A.D.) is a work containing various stories of *Kunlun* as positive figures. It is interesting that Wyatt did not quote anything from the book except in a footnote. Why? One reason might be that the book is fictional, therefore not considered worthwhile as evidence. Yet fiction is a meaningful form which reflects the reality and social or ideological change, and a historian should use any material possible to explain what happened. Intentional or unintentional bias might be another reason, since the cases in the book are contrary to Wyatt's views.<sup>8</sup>

For example, Mo Kunlun, a Black boy was born in an unusual way after his mother's dream of an alien monk (similar to Jesus Christ's birth), yet grew up as a brave guard and lived a happy life accorded by the emperor. Another case is *Kunlun Nu*,<sup>9</sup> a fictional story with a strong, smart and brave *Kunlun* hero named Mole who helped his master in a unique way.<sup>10</sup> Do the positive figures reflect something in the period?

Since *Kunlun* or *Kunlun nu* was frequently used during the period referring to Black people and has the connotation of "race" and color, I would like to make two points. First, ethnocentrism is a universal phenomenon, and second, the Chinese prejudice was against all foreigners, not just "Africans and other people with dark skin". Ethnocentrism (different from William Graham Sumner's notion) is an attitude or action of a group of people who regard themselves as normal, beautiful and clever while looking down upon other human groups, which usually involves the use of derogatory terms to describe them. Ethnocentrism is universal between any groups of people without communication and mutual understanding, especially in ancient times. As Wyatt correctly points out, "during this period in global history, so much before the time when frequent transcontinental contact would begin to become commonplace, people were willing to believe or at least entertain even the most prejudicial and outlandish things about people foreign to themselves." (Wyatt, 2010) The Romans looked at all non-Romans as barbarians and the Greeks regarded themselves the most civilized in the world. The Indians thought they were living in the center of the world (as the Chinese did). Africans had prejudices against the whites. Ibn Battuta told us that Malian cannibals did not eat the whites, since "eating a white man is harmful because he is not ripe" (Hamdun & King, 1975:51; Ibn Battuta, 1929). And interestingly, Winnie Mandela described her grandma as the first racist she ever met, because she told Winnie the whites must be sick with their blue eyes and pale skin (Mandela, 1985).

The Chinese were "by no means immune to such willfully misanthropic misconceptions" (Wyatt, 2010:65). Being self-centered and conceited, the Chinese looked down upon others, using derogatory names to describe their neighbors in all four directions, e.g., *dong yi* (east barbarian), *nan man* (south barbarian), *xi rong* (west barbarian) and *bei di* (north barbarian). In the extreme cases, foreigners were called *gui* (devil), not human. They termed Black people as *fan nu* (barbarian slaves) *hei gui* (black devils) or *Kunlun nu* (Kunlun slaves), and named whites *yang guizi* (foreign devils), *hong mao gui* (red-haired devil), *fangou* (barbarian dog) or *gui lao* (devil male) and *gui po* (devil female) (Dikotter, 1992).<sup>11</sup>



Keeping this in mind, we can understand that Chinese prejudice was against, not just only Black people, but also whites, or any “others” for that matter. Yet if ethnocentrism changes to racism which was mobilized to justify the action of militarily suppressing, economically exploiting, and politically dominating other human groups as modern colonialism did, it is another story which goes beyond this article.

## **Kunlun or Black People: Their Origins and Jobs in China**

As mentioned above, foreigners were present in China during the Han Dynasty, and China during Tang and Song resumed an empire with many metropolitan cities hosting foreign residents. The cities enjoyed their international fame, such as Chang-an, Guangzhou, and Quanzhou. As capital of the Han, Chang-an during the Tang Dynasty attracted again many foreigners, including prosperous Arabs, Indians and other Asians. Guangzhou in the south with a reputation for foreign traders had close relations with the outside world even during the Han period. Another southern port, Quanzhou, was named “*Shijing Shizhou Ren*” (city with people from ten continents) or “foreigner’s port” at the time and continued to be reputed as “the most important port in the world” in the Song and Yuan (1206-1368, A.D.).

As early as the Dong Jin Dynasty (317-420, A.D.), *Kunlun* was used to describe Black people in dynastic history, but that is no indication that enslaved Africans were known in China at the time, as Zhang suggested (Zhang, 1930:44). The term “*Kunlun Ren*” (Kunlun people), not *Kunlun nu*, appeared in *Sui Shu* (History of the Sui Dynasty, 636 A.D.) However, the Arabs carried on with trade activities on the East African coast for a long time, and the enslaving of Black people were just one of many of their activities (Beachey, 1976; Segal, 2001). With many Arab merchants coming to China, they brought Black people with them as attendants, porters, and enslaved people who they presented to the Chinese authorities as gifts. During the Tang and Song Dynasties, an increasing number of *Kunlun*/Black people appeared in the literature, and were usually described as honest, brave, strong, willing to help others, or with some special skills, reflecting the reality at the time.

People of African heritage comprised a large group who settled down in various places in the world, including south India, the islands of Indian Ocean, and Pacific Ocean, so there is no reason to confine them in China to only one origin. When Arabia sent its delegation headed by its ambassador to China in 977 A.D., “their attendants had sunken eyes and black skin and they were called *Kunlun nu*”, according to the history of the Song dynasty, the Black people there could have been from Africa. As for those of Indian origin, there were two groups of Negroid, one known as the “black untouchables” who as the indigenous inhabitants contributed a great deal to the civilization of the Indus River Valley.<sup>12</sup>

The other comprises those who migrated by themselves to India or were brought by Arabs or Indians from East Africa as enslaved people (Rashidi, 1995: 65-120). The third origin is Southeast Asia, which many works have mentioned, with Ge's as representative of this group (Ge, 2001). And another view considers that the Black people of the Han and Tang Dynasties were from Southeast Asia and East Africa respectively (Hu & Zhang, 1961).

Regarding the origin of Black people in the Tang period, Zhang points to Africa and Ge suggests Southeast Asia, a kind of "singular origin". After examining both arguments, although with rich materials and sound logic, each however emphasized the positive evidence while neglecting materials negative to their view. Zhang thus stressed that Black people were brought by Arabs, yet he ignores those from Zhenla (present Cambodia) or Keling (present Java).

Ge made the same mistake by stressing that the Black people were from Nan Hai, yet he lost sight of the enslaved brought by the Arabs. Historical research should be more careful and open room for an alternative explanation. In sum, multiple origins might be a more reasonable and convincing answer to the overall question (Li, 1982).

Were all Black people enslaved in ancient China? This is a very sensitive or even provocative question. The question is raised here for three reasons. First, a common impression among the Chinese is that the Black people were mainly slaves (especially during the Tang period) owing to several reasons, including the influence of Zhang's work. Secondly, several recently published works in English suggest the same view with titles like "Magical Kunlun and 'Devil Slaves'" (Wilensky, 2002), or "The Slaves of Guangzhou" as the title of a major chapter in *The Blacks in Premodern China* (Wyatt, 2010), a book that "bolsters a conceptualization of African history and of Africa's historical connections with the rest of the world as a history of slavery", which is always "defined by master-slave relations" (Bodomo, 2013)<sup>13</sup>. Thirdly, as Runoko Rashidi correctly points out: "The story of the African presence in early Asia would be incomplete without the expose of the black role as servant or slave" (Rashidi, 1995). An objective answer to the question can provide a more comprehensive picture of their life and work at the time, which is a purpose of this study. Hence, it is found that besides slaves and servants, Black people also served as soldiers or military leaders, royal guards, government officials, traders, artists, animal trainers and labourers in ancient China.

Since various pieces of literature of the Tang Dynasty and beyond illustrate that some of the Black people were *nubi* (slave-servant), there is no doubt that being domestic servants was one of their major roles. Wyatt did make a comparison at one point: “The perceptible cultural shortcomings that all *kunlun*, regardless of breed, exhibited had the effect only of encouraging Chinese designs on their enslavement and reinforcing the moral legitimacy of the practice as beneficial to the enslaved, much in the same way that the ‘white man’s burden’ premise justified the most egregious imperialist actions whereby Victorian Britons subjugated millions of people of color around the globe in the nineteenth century” (Wyatt, 2010:41).

This comparison is inadequate, since there was a world of difference between the two, the system, pattern, scale, treatment, volume, etc. It is beyond this article to study the issue, yet Joseph Needham expressed his understanding of the difference as follows: “The Chinese and other Asian nations had been using negro slaves for many centuries, but the fact that their slavery was basically domestic kept the practice within bounds short of the massive imports for plantation labor that dominated the Atlantic Trade” (Needham, 1971). Bodomo points out that although Africans and Chinese met a long time ago, they were “on equal footing for the most part, and Africans and Chinese never owned each other as slaves on any large scale or in any systematic manner” (Bodomo, 2012, 2013). What is more, as early as the Tang Dynasty, several emperors issued orders to prohibit the trade in slaves (Schafer, 1963:45). The Chinese government prohibited the trade of Chinese women by foreigners in 1614, because of a serious problem caused by European slave traders in the coastal regions of China.

Juyan Hanjian indicates that quite a few Black people in the army became officials, nobilities, or border officers. Among 53 Black people, 16 had the rank of nobility, including four officials, and the highest rank being the first class (Zhang, 1977). Black people also became members of the retinue of royal families or even of the emperor. *Song Shu* recorded that Emperor Xiaowu (454-465, A.D.) trusted a *Kunlun* named Baizhu who was often ordered to cane the officials. The Asian Art Museum in San Francisco possesses a 14<sup>th</sup>-century Chinese painting of a Black official, obviously of a high rank judged by his costume and bearing (Rashidi, 1995:141). A famous artist, Liu Guangdao, has a painting, “Yuan Shizhu’s Hunting” (1280, A.D.), which portrayed Emperor Kublai Khan on a hunting expedition. As part of the picture, Emperor and Empress with two attendants were present, with a Black person on horse on Emperor’s left side. He must have been an important military officer or a personal guard. Some Black people also served in the army. When the Dutch invaded Taiwan, Africans were among both the Dutch army and the Chinese army.



Picture 3: Liu Guangdao's painting "Yuan Shizhu's Hunting" (1280, A.D.)

Some Black people or Africans were also merchants in China. When Ibn Battuta visited China, he met his country-fellow doing business in China who "had about fifty white slaves and as many slave girls, and presented me with two of each" (Ibn Battuta, 1929). Ahmed, a post-doc at Peking University, did a research on the contact between the Sudan and China and found that there is a long history of business between the Sudan and China. In his interview with Ahmed Salih Sabit, he found Salih's grandma to be a Chinese who went to the Sudan with her husband Mohamed al Haj who did business in China for several years (Ahmed 1987, 1999).

Black people in China worked as actors, musicians, acrobats, wild animal trainers, porters, and peasants. European encounter with China also brought enslaved Africans to the coastal regions. An increasing number of Africans served as porters, guards, soldiers, and domestic attendants in foreigners' residence or in the coastal areas in China (Ai, 1989). Zhu Wan, an official of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), indicated in his work *Pi Yu Zaji* that African people were used in the Portuguese army in the colonial occupation of Macao; the Chinese army once captured more than 60 soldiers in a battle and three of them were from Morocco, Ethiopia, and Sudan respectively. And also, in the fight against the Dutch army in Taiwan, African soldiers were in the Chinese army led by Zheng Chenggong during the Ming period.

## **African Diaspora in Contemporary China: Opportunity and Challenge**

Owing to the rapid development of China-Africa relations, the African diaspora in China has become a hot topic in the international academic community. Since a survey on Africans in China has been published (Bodomo 2014), I will discuss this topic very briefly and emphasize more on other issues that the survey did not cover, such as special contributions and African students in China. I will also examine the works of Chinese scholars that the international academic community is less familiar with.

Various African social groups exist in China such as traders, diplomats, artists, students, and professionals. The African trader is by far the largest which aroused a great interest among international community. Studies generally focus on African trading communities in China (Bertoncello & Bredeloup, 2006, 2009; Bodomo, 2007, 2009c, 2012; Bertoncello, Bredeloup & Pliez, 2009; Ditgen, 2010; Cissé, 2013) or their economic practice in Guangzhou, a city hosting the largest group of Africans (Bertoncello & Bredeloup, 2007a, 2007b; Bodomo, 2010; Lyons et al, 2008, 2012, 2013; Li et al, 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2012; Osnos, 2009; Li & Du, 2012a, 2012b; Bodomo & Ma, 2010; Diederich, 2010; Bork et al, 2011; Müller, 2011; Haugen, 2012; Bredeloup, 2012; Yang, 2013) and Yiwu, the biggest center of commodities in China (Le Bail, 2009; Bertoncello, Bredeloup & Pliez, 2009; Pliez, 2010; Bodomo & Ma, 2010, 2012; Ma 2012), and their business negotiations and deals in Hong Kong (Bodomo, 2007, 2012; Ho, 2012; Mathews, 2000; Mathews & Yang, 2012) and Macau (Morais, 2009; Bodomo, 2012; Bodomo & Silva, 2012). Other researches include the living conditions, social practices or religious activities of the African diaspora (Li et al, 2008, 2009a, 2009b; Li & Du, 2012a, 2012b; Bertoncello & Bredeloup, 2009; Bodomo, 2009a, 2010; Xu, 2009a, 2009b; Yang, 2011; Müller, 2011; Haugen, 2013b), difficulties between Africans and Chinese, management of the African diaspora by the Chinese authorities or the reaction of Chinese citizens (Li and Du, 2012b; Xu, 2009a; Osnos, 2009; Morais, 2009; Bodomo, 2010; Haugen, 2012). The African entrepreneurs' role in transmitting their conceptualization of China to their own countries explains the impact of Chinese development in a global context (Marfaing & Thiel, 2014; Cissé, 2013). A cyber network TADIA (The African Diaspora in Asia) was established to bring together scholars of different disciplines, and it is recognized as a project associated with UNESCO (Jayasuriya and Pierre-Angenot, 2006).

Among scholars of the African diaspora in China, two are prominent, Adams Bodomo and Li Zhigang. Bodomo made the best use of his experience of staying in Hong Kong for more than ten years and studied the African diaspora in China, covering various aspects. His training as linguist offered him the sensitivity about language, food and the life styles of diasporic groups. Being a person of African heritage, it provided him convenience in contacting African diaspora members in different cities in China, and he has published extensively on the subject.

Bodomo's important contribution lies in his "immigrant community as bridge" theory. Since push/pull theory was first applied in 1959, and it has been well received in academia. However, it is a 'double-end' approach, which neglects the process itself and the immigrants' role after their arrival.<sup>14</sup> By using a three-dimensional approach that recognizes the target community, its source community and its host community, Bodomo put forward the "immigrant community as bridge" theory, suggesting that given the right conditions, the target community can serve "as a bridge — connecting its place of origin (its source community) with its new place of domicile (its host community)" (Bodomo, 2010, 2012).

Li Zhigang has focused on the African community in Guangzhou, and as an expert on urban and human geography, places the African diaspora in the context of economic globalization and transnational migration. Using the theoretical framework of "enclave" in migration studies, Li analyzes the development of "ethnic economic enclave" with double-character, high mobility and diversity on one hand and high possibility of residential segregation on the other (Li et al., 2008). The enclave includes three circles of social ties: the core of African traders, circled by their communities, and the third, so-called China-Africa circle of the interactions between Africans and local Chinese, which forms a part of the process of globalization. The social space and networks under transnational entrepreneurialism mark the coming of a new era of globalization in urban China, providing opportunity and challenge for local government (Li et al, 2009; Li & Du, 2011). The most impressive feature of his study lies in the approach of taking the "ethnic economic enclave" as a historical process, forming and transforming constantly, not just as a pattern.

Next, sociologist Xu Tao's works emphasized social adaptation of African merchants in Guangzhou and found them to have multiple features of social relations. Concentrated or spread, their adaptation takes three forms - individual, re-socialization, and network with various supportive measures. The characteristic of the African diaspora is one of coexistence of heterogeneity, and an international community emerging (Xu 2009a, 2011, 2012, 2013).

And continuing, Ma Enyu's study focuses on the African community in Yiwu, analyzing its change from a small town to an internationally well-known commercial hub and its role in China-Africa relations (Ma 2010, 2012; Bodomo & Ma, 2010, 2012). A comparison between an international community in Yiwu and the African community in Guangzhou indicates various differences, especially of social capital (Chen, 2012). The theory of social support is thus applied to analyze the extent, role and impact of social support on or social capital of African diaspora in Guangzhou (Xu, 2009b; Chen, 2012).

It is noticed that the media played an important role in formulating the image of Africans in Guangzhou, and more contact, more positive view towards the Africans (Li et al, 2009). And thus, British coverage on immigrants and its strategy is discussed in order to provide a lesson for Chinese media in the coverage of the African diaspora in China (Dang, 2013).

For the above-mentioned works, several features are in common. They are fruits of fieldwork and the data collected in Guangzhou, Hong Kong or Yiwu. Second, most of the works are project-based, research-reality combined, either as a result of, or explanation for, the fast development of China-Africa relations. Thirdly, the influential works are usually done by team-based research, which includes African, Chinese, or European partners. The African diaspora is characterized by its full engagement in the economy of their host cities and by poor social integration, caused by a lack of communication, misunderstanding, a strict immigration policy, cultural difference and a lack of religious tolerance in Chinese society. And whether there is racism in China, there seems to be different views.<sup>15</sup>

Although most international students are not classified as immigrants, Bodomo correctly pointed out that the process of trade between Africa and China began with African students who studied in China and remained there to do business (Bodomo, 2013). After African countries won their independence, they started to send students or technicians to China for advanced studies. Students from 14 African countries regularly came to China till the end of 1966, when China closed all universities because of the Cultural Revolution. Among them, a Ghanaian student Immanuel Hevi complained about racism and other unpleasant phenomena in China (Hevi, 1963; Liu, 2013). From Ghana where President Nkrumah who was strongly pro-socialist, Hevi's negative story about China behind the iron curtain brought about applause from Western analysts, who were looking for bullets to charge at China and his book provided one. Yet Hevi's complaint was understandable for three reasons. First, in the early 1960s, China witnessed its most difficult time in its economy and could not have provided any better conditions for students, and second, social taboos and regulations set a kind of "segregation" between African males and Chinese females, and third, the pervasive politics of the time created a vacuum (Li & Liu, 2013).

China also resumed educational cooperation with Africa in 1972 and trainees of railway technology came from Tanzania and Zambia first, then regular students followed in 1973. African students in China from 1973-1976 numbered 355, and with an increasing number, problems occurred, and the racial tension broke out at the end of the 1980s when African and Chinese students held demonstrations and accused each other of various wrongs (Sautman, 1994). In analyzing the situation from today's perspective, cultural differences seem to be a major cause, since the trigger was usually the close contact between African male students and Chinese female students (Li & Liu, 2013).

And with the set-up of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), the number of African students greatly increased.<sup>16</sup> Hence, the first studies on the issue in China was by scholars at the Center for African Studies at Peking University based on the archives of the Ministry of Education, with the focus on African students in China (Editorial Group, 2005; Li Baoping, 2006, 2013).

Studies on this topic focus on four subjects - cultural adaptation, China-Africa cooperation, student management, and language teaching.<sup>17</sup> Psychology is often applied in cross-cultural research and two works are worth mentioning. One is an article based on SASS (Study Abroad Stress Survey) of Africans and westerners which indicates that academic and interpersonal sources of stress were the most common and daily hassles defined as high pressure and challenge among both males and females.<sup>18</sup> Another psychological study found that all African students experienced a culture shock in China, more serious for undergraduates than graduates, females than males.<sup>19</sup> Other studies are either on cultural adaptation (Yi & Xiong, 2013; Gong, 2014), cultural difference and its impact (Long & Xiong, 2014) or different concepts of time and family (Ye Shuai, 2011). As for the role in China-Africa cooperation, Ketema found that there is an important role for Chinese universities in China-Africa cooperation (Ketema Meskela et al, 2009), King saw the presence of African students in China as an indicator of China's soft power (King, 2012), Haugen analyzed China's policy on the enrollment of African students and its effect and outcome (Haugen, 2013a), while others argued that China's educational assistance formed an essential part of China-Africa cooperation and offered substantial support to Africa (Li, 2006; Li & Luo, 2013; Xu, 2007; He, 2007; Lou & Xu, 2012). Studies also focused on the management of African students in China, either in universities or in society (Cheng, 2012; Zheng, 2012, 2013a, 2013b; An et al., 2014). The fourth subject always involves language teachers who are looking for a better way to teach Chinese languages (Lin & Ren, 2010) with a common features of the studies as one of cross-cultural theory with questionnaires as methodology and as concrete suggestions. However, the short-coming was that the studies were usually based on a case-study of African students in a place (or a university) or from a country, thus limitations are inevitable, coupled on how best to apply these theories in case studies presented another problem. Thus, with a rapid increase of African students in China, this remains an important topic of study (Li, 2014b).

## **Conclusion**

Since the title covers a wide range, the limitation of the article is obvious. It should be taken as an "opening-remark" rather than a "conclusion". It indicates that there are various issues in China-Africa relations, be it historical or contemporary, or in different disciplines. The bilateral migration provides both opportunity and challenge. There are cultural similarities and differences between China and Africa and mutual learning is always beneficial to both (Li, 2012b, 2014a).



There is still a lack of solid studies on the topic. How do we carry out research on the historical links between Africans and Chinese? What is the best way to build the linkage between the two cultures, thus facilitating the process to transfer from “enclave” to “bridge”? How do we promote the efficiency of African talents as they study in China with the hope of promoting African development? Why is there a gap between the African diaspora and local communities in China and how do we narrow this gap?

How can we manage intermarriages and the attendant increasingly mixed group of children, and who should be in charge of the African community, the Chinese authorities or African community leaders, or a combined team? Is it necessary to give up one’s own culture and adapt to another, or is there a better way for diasporic communities to keep their own culture and fit in the host society? All these questions are relevant for Chinese communities in Africa as well.

My view regarding China-Africa relations is unique: the more problems, the better. Why? The answer is this: if there were no contacts at all, there would be no problems. When contacts get wider and deeper, of course there are bound to be more problems. China and Africa are on equal footing trying to solve their problems. As each problem gets solved, the relationship gets closer.

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I would like to thank Wu Yugui, Wang Xiaofu, Adams Bodomo, Li Zhigang, Zhou Muhong, Xu Liang, Shen Xiaolei, You Guolong and Tian Xin for their help in my writing of this article. I use the term “diaspora” in the sense that Africans in China (or in any other countries) do not only constitute a migration group, but became a community with its own social network, cultural pattern and value system, which does not need assimilation (Bodomo, 2012). There are quite a few studies of the definition of African diaspora as a whole (Harris, 1993; Shepperson, 1993; Alpers, 1997, 2000; African Union, 2005; Davies, 2008; Zeleza,2005,2008).

### **Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> It is reported that there is a boom of inter-marriage between Africans and Chinese in Guangzhou, China (Marsh, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> In ancient China, the government had a specific administration unit in charge of writing authentic dynastic history. Therefore there are Twenty-four Histories which covered Chinese history from the earliest time to the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). References of those dynastic histories are omitted owing to the limit of space.

<sup>3</sup> D. Ferand discussed the linkage between giraffe and *qilin* (or *ki-lin*) in *Journal Asiatique* in 1918. Duyvendak even imagined that it was the giraffe “that caused the Chinese to sail to Africa.” (Duyvendak, 1949). A story in Kenya offers a contemporary interpretation of the role played by this historical *qilin* (Li Xinfeng, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> *Juyan Han Jian* comprises government archives discovered in Juyan, Northwestern China, “*Han*” indicates Han Dynasty, “*Jian*” means records kept (through sculpture) in wood or bamboo. *Juyan Hanjian* of about 10000 pieces ranging from 102 B.C. to 30 A.D. was discovered in the 1930s by Chinese scholars and Folke Bergmana, a Swedish scholar. As official archives, *Juyan Hanjian* covers various subjects both collectively and individually, such as the political system, economic activities, military organizations, and the field of science and culture.

<sup>5</sup> The identifiable surnames are listed here and involves people whose skin color is labeled as “black”, such as Wang (1), Jia (7), Sima (8), Wang (9), He (10). Gongcheng (11), Gongcheng (14), Hao (15), Su (16), Du (17), Tang (19), Xie (22), Tang (24), Nie (25), Sun (35), Sun (40), Feng (41), Gongcheng (42), Sun (55). The numbers that follow in brackets indicate the number of cases in Zhang’s article.

<sup>6</sup> Wilensky argued that “[t]he scarcity of references to *sengchi* and *zengqi* (here meaning *Sengzhi*) in nonfiction sources suggests that the Chinese did not necessarily link the word Kunlun to the Arabs’ *sengchi* slaves during the Tang.” (Wilensky, 2002, 8).

<sup>7</sup> There are different translations of the title, such as “Records of the Taiping Era”, “Extensive Gleanings of the Reign of Great Tranquility”, “Extensive Gleanings from the Reign of Great Peace”. Yet the book is comprised of various aspects of literature from the Han Dynasty to the beginning of the Song Dynasty. A monumental work ordered by Emperor Taizhong (939-997, A.D.) and of 500 volumes, it cannot be considered as gleanings. It was compiled in the Taiping Kaiyuan period (978, A.D.), therefore I translate it as such.

<sup>8</sup> Another case of his bias is the interpretation of *huanchang* (or *huanchangwei*, change of bowels or stomach) as “cultural imperialism”. In Zhu Yu’s passage about the slaves, “They eat raw food. But once they are acquired as slaves, they are fed cooked food. They thereupon endure days of diarrhoea, which is referred to as ‘converting the bowels (*huanchang*).’ This is in fact a long-time life experience in China as a vast land with its different climatic regions and food styles, which simply means it takes time for people to adjust to local food.



For example, diarrhoea may occur in first few days when a Hunanese moves to Guangdong. Yet Wyatt translated it into “converting the bowels”, and the word “convert” somewhat implies “being forced to change”, which better fits the author’s description of *huanchang* as “cultural imperialism” (Wyatt, 2010: 60). It is noticeable that Dikotter translated *huanchang* as “changing the bowels” (Dikotter,1992,9).

<sup>9</sup> It is not an “anonymous tale” as Wyatt claimed (Wyatt, 2010: 146). The story was written by a famous novelist Pei Xing in the Tang Dynasty, published in his work titled *Chuanqi* (Legend), and was later included in *Taiping Guangji*.

<sup>10</sup> Master Cui told his servant Mole the most salient secret in his mind (his love for a singing girl) and Mole helped him to overcome various difficulties to fulfil his wish. It is really incredible considering the master- servant relation. Because of the interesting figure of the Tang legend, Mole became a popular hero in fiction or drama afterwards.

<sup>11</sup> Zhou Zikui, a Jinshi (a successful candidate in the highest imperial examinations) in the late Ming Dynasty even thought that xiyang ren (the Europeans) cannot be called yi (barbarians), but can only be termed qin (birds and beasts), because barbarians were still human beings, and Europeans were not human beings (Zhu Chunting, 2004).

<sup>12</sup> It is believed that “India would experience many magnificent ‘Transformations,’ spurned and perpetuated by the race which gave India her first civilization and culture —the Black race.” Wayne B. Chandler, “The Jewel in the Lotus: The Ethiopian Presence in the Indus Valley Civilization.” (Rashidi, 1995, 105, 233-249)

<sup>13</sup> This worry is by no means groundless. In a special issue of *African and Asian Studies*, although the editors seem to emphasize various aspects of African diaspora in Asia, most articles describe Asia- Africa historical relations as “master-slave relations”. *African and Asian African Studies*, 5:3-4 (2006) (Jayasuriya and Pierre-Angenot, 2006).

<sup>14</sup> Push factors refer to the condition of the country of origin and motive for migration (instability, poor economy, etc.) while pull factors refer to what attracts migrants (education, better social conditions, etc. (Bogue, 1959; Bagne, 1969).

<sup>15</sup> A Ghanaian student told her experience in China, saying, “Others often ask me if I found Chinese to be racist, and whether their treatment of me as a spectacle -- taking pictures, touching my hair, rubbing my skin, staring at me -- does not indicate a racist attitude. I respond that I find them curious. Many of the experiences I had were borne of ignorance, not racism. Despite always being identified as ‘black’ and ‘African’, I never felt discriminated against or antagonized, but rather treated with warmth and friendliness. Because I spoke Mandarin, I could often understand what people said about me, and they were rarely disparaging or maligning.” (Baitie, 2013)

<sup>16</sup> In 1996, the Chinese scholarships for Africans jumped from the previous year of 256 to 922 while the self-funded African students reached 118, the first time more than a hundred. During 1996-2011, there were 84361 African students in China, 36918 enjoyed Chinese scholarship while 47443 were self-funded. In 2005, the self-funded Africans (1390) for the first time surpassed the scholarship students (1367). In 2011, the self-funded African students reached 14428, more than doubling those Africans on scholarship (6316) (Li & Liu, 2012).

<sup>17</sup> There are 47 articles by the entry of key words “African overseas students” (2003-2014) in Chinese Journals Network which contains journal articles and MA dissertations covering various subjects, it is impossible to discuss all of them. Reports and memoirs also provide information of the experiences of African students in China (Li & Li, 2006; Lokongo, 2012; Li, 2013; China Africa Project, 2013).

<sup>18</sup> SASS was carried out in 2003 to evaluate gender difference (male vs female) and cultural difference (Africa vs West) in the perception of stress, with 200 forms sent out to foreign students at colleges in three cities in China, which contain 30 questions divided into four categories, e.g., interpersonal, individual, academic and environment. 156 valid forms returned with 82 of Africans (46 males, 36 females) and 74 westerners (32 males, 42 females). No group differences existed in the subtotal perception of the four stressors. Group variations existed only in their sub-divisional areas of stress. Cross cultural orientation is suggested for foreign students (Hashim, et al, 2003).

<sup>19</sup> It is an MA dissertation based on an investigation of 181 feedbacks out of 210 forms, a rather high ratio for an investigation. The author is an African student and the aim of the study is to get a real picture of cultural shock and adaptation of African students in China. It is found that all African students experienced cultural shock and the best way is to increase social contact with local people (Disima, 2004).

<sup>20</sup> For Chinese literature, an English title is directly used if there is one originally provided. For Chinese names, the surname is placed first without a comma after.