

# Contested Encounters: A Select Literature Review of Dynastic China and Ancient Africa

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## Abstract

This article focuses on China's initial encounter with the African continent from the perspective of a select literature overview. It reflects on the very earliest contacts between dynastic China and ancient Africa and shows that the current contestation in the Western media as well as literature over this more recent contact is not new. Given the dearth and disparate nature of the information on these first encounters, it does this through the lens of what has been written on the subject of the speculated first contact in a selection of secondary English-language literature. It does so by considering the prevalence of such literature in three distinct periods: prior to 1949; from 1950 to 1990; and a selection of research published thereafter. It shows that China's encounter with Africa reaches far back into the history of the continent, but more importantly so does the volatile contestation surrounding the contemporary contact.

**Keywords:** China and Africa – early encounters – literature review – Zheng He – Chen Ho – contestation

The outcry, the outburst, if not the outrage, about China in Africa has, over the past few decades, become a media cacophony (Epstein, 2010; Allison, 2015; Larmer, 2017). Within academic circles there are widely differing opinions and claims about China's paramount presence on the African continent with China being characterized on the one hand as "exploitative" and on the other as "benevolent" (Alden 2007: 1; Shinn & Eisenman, xiv; Park 2016). It is indeed a contested encounter, but one that this article will argue has been contested in a different context in the literature regarding the very first encounter between China of the dynastic era and an Africa of ancient times. The article sets out to turn the clock way back to take a look at how the very earliest encounters between China and the African continent were reflected upon and will reveal that contestation is not new — there has been a variance of opinions in the literature, if not a dissension, about the actual occurrences and the very nature of these early encounters. Given the relative dearth and disparate nature of the information, it does this through the lens of what has been written on the subject of the early encounter in a selection of secondary literature written in English. It does so by considering the prevalence of three periods of literature. This will show that while China's encounter with Africa reaches far back into the history of the continent, so does the contestation which currently surrounds the contemporary contact.

## Introduction

The writing of history is not only determined by historians and their audiences, but also by the sources available to them. While the historian approaches the past with certain

questions and concerns and writes from a particular ideological standpoint and period in time, what he or she is able to write is to a large extent also determined by and dependent on the sources. Thus, the nature of the primary sources that are available, indeed even accessible, plays a critical role in the historian's ability to reconstruct the past. In his seminal work on the *Practice of History*, G. R. Elton (2002: 60) makes this point by stating that what matters "are the sources, that is to say the physical survivals from the events to be studied." Although Elton urges the historian to "know all the evidence," he admits it would be "an impossible counsel of perfection." However, he also elaborates on the situation faced by the ancient historian where the evidence is not so abundant and where historians have to rely on the work assimilated by (for example) archaeologists (Elton 2002: 61). In the context of early African history Robert Collins and James Burns (2007: 3) make a similar point that the dearth of written records has forced historians to use other academic disciplines such as linguistics in their search for the ancient past. Here they are primarily referring to the primary sources, something which in the case of China's early encounter with Africa are often contentious, scattered, or even at times non-existent.

Elton (2002: 60) also makes reference to the importance of secondary sources. These reflective accounts generally often have the advantage of hindsight and greater perspective in their reconstruction of the past. On this aspect Elton (2002: 60) states that "the historian ... must have done his utmost to learn what has been written in and around the topic with which he is concerned," adding that "knowing what other historians have written is vital to a proper job ... and also assists in covering the range of sources, suggests questions, and opens lines of fruitful discussion."

It is in the light of Elton's comments that this article turns to a selection of historians and other authors who have published their work in English and presents a brief overview of what has been written about this early encounter between China and Africa — and how this encounter has been portrayed and often contested. It is divided into four parts: the first introduces the source material; the second focuses on the early but scant literature in the period prior to 1949; the next considers the work that appeared in the half century from 1950 to 1990; and the fourth looks at a selection of research published subsequently. The former sections rely partly on an article written in 2003 (Harris) titled "Early encounters between China and Africa: A Myth or Moment," while the latter takes the overview further by briefly focusing on some texts that have appeared subsequently and within a different global political and economic context. The article is thus essentially a literature overview of a selection of accounts primarily emanating from the Anglophone world on China's early encounter with Africa over an extended period dating back to the start of the Common Era (ce) and ending at the beginning of the twenty-first century, which flags a range of forms of contestation regarding this encounter at various levels.

### **China and Africa — Primary and Secondary Sources**

It is indeed the case that China's ostensible unity and apparent continuity over centuries has been ascribed to its propensity to record its history. It is believed that through the perpetual transmission of knowledge, despite its discontinuous and often tumultuous past, China was able to maintain a perceived cohesion as well as a position of being one of the "most

advanced civilizations in the world” (Hong, 2002). According to renowned historian and China-Africa specialist Anshan Li (2012: 2-3) as well as other scholars, from as far back as the first century BCE, encyclopedic records were kept of events and leaders as well as accounts of relations with other lands (Mote, 1991: 337; Hong, 2002). These early contemporary documents dating from the Tang, Song, Yuan, and Ming dynasties, many of which are housed in the imperial archive, have been appraised by John Shen (2012: ii-iii) as being both of value but also not without shortcomings. In his discussion of the use of Chinese documents for the reconstruction of East African history — where the first contact between or knowledge of the African continent is said to have occurred — he indicates that court scholars often rewrote the original texts and relied on Arab traders of the Indian Ocean for information. Moreover, these court scholars were also sometimes inclined to alter or destroy documentation as a result of competition between factions within the Imperial court. For example, Geoff Wade (2005: 45, 51) has raised similar concerns about the discrepancy in figures reflected in these early sources when considering the records relating to the famed Ming maritime travels of Zheng He (Chen Ho) in the early fifteenth century. On the latter event Shen (2012: ii-iii) goes further and states that the “obliteration of documents from Chen Ho’s voyage illustrates a deeper problem with Chinese historiography: the vulnerability of historical documents to distortion by secondary handlers.” However, he does concede that despite these “occasional distortions of records, Chinese scholars generally transcribed and transmitted historical documents with a high degree of fidelity.”

Chinese writing on Africa, or on Chinese contact with the continent, has been suggested to have begun as early as the sixth century BCE. This has been described as “indirect knowledge” by private civilians who had possible information about Egypt. Anshan Li (2012: 21) agrees that documents from the Han Dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE) might include references to parts of Africa, but that these were essentially “ambiguous hearsays,” which again underlines the contestation related to the records regarding the early encounter with Africa. Many others agree that the first encounters date back to the work of historian Sima Qian in the first century BCE in which he makes reference to a region identified as Egypt (Duffey, 2008: 26). Another early reference to Africa from the same time emanates from the *Book of Han* written by historian Ban Gu who refers to a “country ... in the far west beyond the sea,” possibly Ethiopia (Hong 2002: 1-2).

In the Tang dynasty (618-907 CE) references to Africa apparently became more frequent. One particularly noteworthy work was that written by abducted Chinese military clerk Du Huan which appeared in 762 CE and described areas identified as modern day Morocco, Kenya, and Eritrea (Wheatley, 1964: 145-6; Duffey, 2008: 27; Li, 2012: 22). This was acclaimed as the “first Chinese impression of Africa” (Snow, 1988: 4) and was subsequently translated into English, French, German, and Japanese (Hong 2002: 2). Other works that appeared during the Tang dynasty were more geographical in nature, charting the distances from China to the various east African regions and including descriptions of some of the customs encountered. Again it appears that present-day Egypt and Kenya featured in these accounts along with Sudan, Tunisia, and Tanzania (Hong 2002: 3). During the Song dynasty (96-1297 CE) Chinese records reflect an increased trade with Africa judging not only by the geographic descriptions but also by the traded products that were listed. By the twelfth century China had evidently become a more active maritime nation and this was replicated

in the proliferation of work on travels overseas. Geographer Zhao Rushi produced *A Survey of Foreign Nations* which included fifty-seven nations, ten of which were apparently located on the African continent (Duyvendak, 1949: 20). Sinologists Jan Julius Lodewijk Duyvendak (1949: 20) and Philip Snow (1988: 11) agree that included in these descriptions were references to Madagascar in the southern Indian Ocean. Further evidence of the contact with Africa in the Song period was the maritime archaeological discovery of the wreck of an ocean-going junk on the Quanzhou coast dated to around 1270 which contained remains of African traded products (Snow 1988: 5).

This interaction between China and Africa appears to have increased in the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368) judging from maps and nautical charts as well as descriptions of various regions recorded. It was then that Wang Dayuan, a Chinese maritime explorer, wrote *A Survey of Island Foreign Countries* which included references to places on the east African coast. In addition, Zhu Shibei compiled a map depicting a southward-pointing Africa apparently predating both European and Arabic renditions (Hong, 2002: 4-5; Snow 1988: 9-11). However, sinologists remain divided about these early encounters between Africa and China and there is conjecture and contestation as to the origin and reliability of the information recorded. Some, such as Snow (1988: 8-13), believe that most of the compilers of these state records were “purveyors of hearsay” and few, if any, had actually ventured to Africa. Rather the information and traded items were acquired from middlemen from Persia and Arabia. They conclude that actual contact between China and Africa only transpired in the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) with the advent of Zheng He’s numerous voyages down the south-east coast of Africa (Duyvendak, 1949: 20; Wheatley, 1964: 140-1; Filesi, 1972: 73).

Notwithstanding the above mentioned issues regarding the destruction of the records of Zheng He’s early fifteenth-century voyages, these expeditions remain pivotal to the narrative on the China-Africa encounter. Carried out between ca 1405 and 1433, the seven expeditions left not only records but tangible proof of the contact between China and Africa. As indicated, as part of China’s increasing “introversion” the official records of Zheng He’s maritime ventures were destroyed in 1480 in order to deter others from pursuing such “mistaken policies” (Duyvendak, 1938: 397-8; Mirsky, 1965: 248). However, adequate alternative records, although “diverse and scattered,” including the record of a soldier participant Fei Xin and an accompanying interpreter Ma Huan, as well as other memoirs, poetry, and paintings, provide adequate information along with archaeological evidence to reconstruct these events (Snow, 1988: 26-7). It is also believed that as the Chinese archives become more accessible to both local and foreign researchers, more information on these early encounters might emerge (Willers 1991: 8). These it is hoped will also address the prevailing contestation of the records as well as the nature of this globally significant encounter.

As regards the African contemporary recollection of this encounter, there were no written records other than the tangible archaeological finds that reflect the remains of a possible Chinese presence. Porcelain shards and Chinese currency abound at many ancient ruins and sites across the east African coast, but this does not prove actual Chinese contact (Harris, 2003: 53-5; Duffey, 2008). At the time of these possible early encounters, ancient African communities were held to be for the most part illiterate and hence written records are lacking (Collins and Burns, 2007: 3).

Thus with the passing of time, as Chinese primary sources recording China's early encounter with Africa were lost or destroyed, historians had to rely on the secondary transcriptions which in effect now became the "primary" texts. This then points to a contestation already at the inception of the primary sources, often making the writing of this history that much more challenging.

### **China Encounters Africa: Pre-1949**

Starting in the seventeenth century Western scholars intermittently attempted to write on aspects of the history of the early contact between China and Africa. This was probably aligned to a general interest in the Orient which perpetuated what Edward Said referred to as an intellectual conquest following on from the political and physical conquest of parts of the East (Cuddon, 2013: 497). These early Western writings include but were not limited to the work of a Jesuit priest, A. Kircher, who in 1654 wrote about China's surmised contact with Egypt; a member of the French Academy, M. de Guines, who in 1759 repeated this idea; and the French founder of the Société Asiatique, C. de Paravey, who in 1853 also wrote of this early China-Egypt encounter based on snuff bottles that subsequently proved to be a hoax (Duyvendak, 1949: 5-7; Wheatley, 1964: 139-140; Harris 2003: 56-7). While these publications attest to a fascination with this China-Africa encounter they were essentially refuted and of no consequence. However, particularly in the twentieth century southern African scholars began to produce more work, which made a noteworthy contribution. The work emanated from a disparate group of individuals, some of whom had an apparent cultural-anthropological bent which at the time uncritically equated race and culture and sometimes presented racialized representations of physical features.

However, in the first half of the nineteenth century most African scholars were more focused on clarifying the past and discovering their ancestry (Snow, 1988: 6), while dealing with the struggle for independence in a post-colonial world. It is also relevant to note that by the mid-twentieth century there were no more than thirty-five full-time archaeologists across the African region (Posnansky, 1982: 345), making a chance foreign encounter with Africa no more than a remote scholarly possibility. This would begin to change from the later part of the twentieth century in parts of East Africa.

Thus literature from Africa on the China-Africa encounter is relatively thin (Shinn, 2016; Harris, 2003: 56), with only a handful of writings appearing from the first quarter of the twentieth century by scholars emanating primarily from South Africa. There is however a solitary article by the German-American sinologist, Frederick Hirth, titled "Early Chinese Notices of East African Territories" that appeared in 1909. He assesses some of the early Chinese accounts of Africa, but refutes the possibility of China's physical encounter:

[T]he earliest accounts in Chinese literature of Western territories contain no allusions of any kind that we might interpret as referring to any part of the African continent. (Hirth, 1909: 46)

He concludes that while the trade in goods between the regions is apparent, it was Arab (and sometimes Persian) traders who mediated between Guangzhou in the Far East and the African ports and their Arabian homes (Hirth, 1909: 54-55). This view was supported by

many other sinologists in decades to come, but was one to which a number of early South African scholars did not apparently subscribe.

One of the first of these South African publications to appear was written by the Australian-born South African medical academic and anthropologist Raymond Dart. In an article titled "The Historical Succession of Cultural Impacts upon South Africa" published in the journal *Nature* in 1925, he described the San (Bushman) rock paintings in the eastern Cape region as "unassailable evidence" that the Chinese were present in this part of the world. He claimed there were numerous depictions of figures with "sumptuous apparel" and wearing on their heads "Chinese hats" that demonstrated "an extremely ancient cultural impact upon the aboriginal Bushman" (Dart, 1925: 427). Just over a decade later Dart (1937) again published on the Chinese in Africa, but this time highlighted the physical connection between the Chinese and indigenous peoples. From a cultural-anthropological stance he claimed that the Cape Bushmen of the extreme south Kalahari had, as a result of a China-Africa encounter, "mongoloid features." In 1939 Dart published yet another paper on a Chinese wall motif in Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) claiming this as evidence of this early encounter. A quarter of a century later Dart (1954) persisted with his thoughts on this encounter between China and Africa by presenting a series of eight talks on national radio about "China's African horizon."

In the same year as Dart published his first study, South African amateur archaeologist and journalist F. R. Paver (1925) also wrote an article titled the "Asiatics in South-East Africa" published in the *South African Journal of Science*. Here he corroborated some of Dart's views and quoted Chinese writers from the fourteenth century that indicated a Chinese fleet had visited the East coast of Africa in 1270, claiming that it was "settled history that a fleet had touched at Mogadishu in 1430" (Paver, 1925: 516-522). Following shortly after Dart and Paver, paleontologist and geologist E. H. L. Schwarz (1927, 1938) added his voice to the discussion with two articles in which he referred to the presence of Chinese along the east African coast over some three centuries (1000-1300 ce). He based his assumptions on Portuguese maritime records that referred to the presence of "Chinese junks" in the Indian ocean as well as the writings of Marco Polo and Ibn Batuta that provided descriptions of the Chinese fleets they encountered (Schwarz, 1927: 7). He referred to a cultural impact of the Chinese encounter on the indigenous peoples, contending that the language of the Khoikhoi of southern Africa revealed Chinese influences, as they (supposedly like the Chinese) attached importance to the way a "word is pronounced in a level tone, or one which rises and falls" (Schwarz, 1927: 8). In a later article Schwarz (1938: iv) took the impact of the encounter between the Chinese and the "Khoikhoi of southern Africa" much further and, like Dart, suggested an uncritical racialized representation of features by proposing that the latter had physical characteristics which revealed an "infusion of Mongoloid blood when millions of Chinese swarmed over Africa between ad 900 and 1200."

These various ideas were drawn together in a more populist mode by the South African amateur historian W. L. Spreight in a 1938 article titled "South Africa's Chinese visitors." Here again the antiquated cultural-anthropological approach is adopted as the Mongoloid features of the Khoikhoi and the Bahurutsi" were alluded to as well as the presence of the Chinese inspired "pagoda hat" being evidence of this encounter. In 1940 and 1941 South African archaeologist C. Fripp refuted much of the above research, and in particular the

work of Schwarz, which professed a cultural impact. This essentially British-based research contended that the Chinese only reached Africa around 1416. Not unlike Hirth and others, Fripp contended that the relics of Chinaware in Africa and Chinese knowledge of Africa were attributable to the early trade and maritime activities of the “Arabs and Persians” (Fripp, 1940: 95-96). This meager amount of literature from the first half of the twentieth century reflects on a contested, if not a contrived and distorted, perception of the China encounter with Africa.

### **China Encounters Africa: 1949-1990**

As evident from the above overview, as well as from David Shinn’s (2016) very useful “China-Africa Relations: A Bibliography” (see Figure 1), after this limited number of studies on the earliest encounters which appeared in the first half of the twentieth century, research and publications on China-Africa gradually increased between 1949 and 1990. This rise can probably be ascribed to a range of concerns and in particular to the interest in and fascination with China’s possible encounter with the African continent in the fifteenth century. Other interest in China’s presence in Africa might have been prompted by Sino-Soviet relations in Africa as well as the emerging two-Chinas dilemma between the Peoples’ Republic of China (prc) and the Republic of China on Taiwan (roc) along with the sporadic involvement of China in construction work in Africa, such as railroads, and selective Chinese Communist support of some of Africa’s liberation movements. Whatever the catalyst, it is important to note that in terms of Africa during the mid to late twentieth century, African studies tended to be dominated by a focus on the issues of post-colonialism and independence, and not, as Snow (1988: 2) indicates, on exploring “a possible encounter between [African] ancestors and other foreigners before the Europeans came.”

At the very onset of this mid-twentieth century literature stands the ground-breaking and influential work of sinologist J. L. L. Duyvendak and his *China’s Discovery of Africa*. This publication emerged from a series of lectures he presented at the University of London in January 1947. From the very outset he made the point that this was a topic on which there is “much conflicting opinion and confusion” (Duyvendak, 1949: 5), underlining its contested nature. In the first part of this 35-page account Duyvendak considered the apparent links between China and Africa and concluded that the accounts and knowledge of Africa were for the most part “based on hearsay.” From the Ming dynasty however, he argued that China did actually enter into “direct relations with several African countries, in which they indeed really discovered Africa for themselves” (Duyvendak, 1949: 26). Here he made use of and translated selections of Chinese records and archaeological inscriptions to piece together Zheng He’s voyages, which he regarded as a “major event in Chinese history” and one which is “only known to us in a fragmentary way” (Duyvendak, 1949: 28). He also pointed out that Zheng He, referred to as the “three-jewel Eunuch,” was put in command of these expeditions to “purvey articles of luxury for the court,” increase the Emperor’s prestige and “re-establish the overseas renown of the Chinese Empire” (Duyvendak, 1949: 26-7). In a later publication Duyvendak (1938: 341) described these China-Africa encounters in the first third of the fifteenth century as the “height of premodern Sino-African relations.”

In 1959 Teobaldo Filesi, an Africanist, again translated the documents used by Duyvendak in a publication titled *China and Africa in the Middle Ages*, ultimately corroborating the latter's pioneering work. Other Western studies that followed included those of G. S. P. Freeman-Grenville and Allen (1962) and Mirsky (1965), which again focus on the voyages of Zheng He. In Mirsky's (1965: 247) more popular work they are heralded as exercises in "grand diplomacy," whereby China's suzerainty was acknowledged by those they met along the east African coast. This episode thus persists in characterizing if not dominating the early China-Africa encounter.

Another key text that appeared during this intermediate period was the 1988 monograph by Philip Snow, *The Star Raft: China's encounter with Africa*. This important work includes a chapter on the "Chinese Columbus" (1-36) which focuses primarily on the seven (or possibly eight) expeditions of Zheng He. Based on official records and sources by Chinese historians, cartographers, and diarists, this chapter is regarded as the highlight of the book (Scott, 2014), referred to as an "eye-opening story" (Seidman, 1989: 691). According to Snow (1988: 23) both the relatively new Ming dynasty and the new Emperor Yongle — a usurper — required affirmation and prestige. Like Duyvendak, Snow argues that Zheng He therefore sailed these huge fleets across the south China seas and along the Indian Ocean coast of Africa to entice rulers to offer tribute and acknowledge the Emperor (Snow, 1988: 23). The expeditions were described by Snow (1988: 27) as carrying the "star-like radiance of an imperial ambassador," an image that he adopted to "depict the successive Chinese contacts with Africa" as "massive, sometimes brilliant, often benevolent, but so far oddly ephemeral" (Whiting, 1989: 167). The latter quotation from Snow is rather prophetic as within the space of little more than a few years after the publication of his book, China's contact with Africa would take on a far more permanent and penetrating profile.

A single event that apparently caught the imagination of both China and the West — and then more recently of Africa — was the arrival of a giraffe from Malindi (Kenya) at the Imperial palace in Beijing. This is an episode that both Duyvendak and Snow as well as others dwell on in much detail. In 1414 the new king of Bengal was apparently prompted by Chinese mariners to give such an animal to the Chinese Emperor. At the time of its arrival in 1415 the Chinese court officials apparently prostrated themselves and congratulated the Emperor, indicating that this was a "sign of Heaven's favor and proof of the virtue of the Emperor" (Hutchinson, 1975: 9). The image of the Emperor receiving the animal at the gates of the palace was preserved for posterity in Chinese paintings — and adorns the cover of Duyvendak's (1949) publication. As Snow (1988: 1) points out, this event was resuscitated in 1983 in a Beijing newspaper as evidence of an erstwhile friendship between Kenya and China when an official deputation of the latter visited the former. It was again resuscitated in 2015 (and at other times since) amid the "frenetic media salvo" about China's new inroads into Africa (Abraham, 2015). This corroborated Snow's (1988: 2) explanation that the Chinese set much store by being able to refer back to an earlier encounter "when dealing with the same people today" as they allude to their "shared past" (Hutchinson, 1975: 9). All these works were written at a time that predated the "second coming" of China as the "new imperialist" on the African continent at the turn of the twenty-first century (Harris, 2013) and were for the most part laudatory and approving.



## China Encounters Africa: Post-1990

The increased presence of China in Africa, particularly since the last decade of the twentieth century, led to a colossal proliferation of writing on this relationship from a range of ideological viewpoints. In 2006, in preparation for the monograph *China and Africa: A Century of Engagement* (Shinn and Eisenman, 2012), one of the authors, David Shinn of George Washington University, began compiling a bibliography on works which focus on China-Africa relations. While this 181-page document has continued to be updated and already comprises over 2000 entries, it does not claim to be exhaustive, although it does reflect solidly on the research produced in English between 1909 and 2016. An appraisal of each of these entries could produce some interesting perspectives on how this topic has been approached and how the subject has evolved over time — and is possibly a research topic for a postgraduate study. In light of this, the third part of this article takes a brief look at a selection of some of these more recent publications and how they reflect on the early phases of the China-Africa encounter.

As is evident in the graph below (Figure 1), which is based on Shinn's on-going bibliography, the trend in studies on China in Africa changed dramatically after 1990, with a proliferation of literature on the new and highly debated emerging relationship.

This upsurge in publications is obviously a reflection of an awareness of the heightened presence of China in Africa, but it also reveals both an interest in and concern about *inter alia* economics, social welfare, politics, international relations, resources, and security (Shinn, 2016). Thus in much of this more recent work the early encounter between China and Africa is not of prime concern and often only features in monographs that focus on specific events. One example is the popular history publication by Louise Levathes (1994) *When China Ruled the Seas*. Acclaimed by *New York Times* as a “notable book of the year,” this former staff writer for *National Geographic* presents a well-illustrated and colorful account of the “treasure fleets” in an accurate but more populist fashion. Another work which is dedicated solely to these early fifteenth century Chinese ventures is sinologist Edward L. Dreyer's (2007) *Zheng He: China and the Oceans in the Early Ming Dynasty, 1405-1433*. This is a biography which forms part of the Longman's World Biography Series, and although it is reviewed as having had “limitations imposed by ... [the] publisher,” it was (a decade ago) regarded by some as the “most judicious and authoritative study on the early Ming voyages available in English” (Graff, 2007: 213). Much like the earlier work of Geoff Wade (2005: 37-8), Dreyer questions the “‘popular’ perceptions of the Ming Eunuch” which Wade argues have become “excellent materials for conducting patriotic education for the Chinese nation.” In his reappraisal, Wade (2005: 37-58) is of the view that these expeditions were not designed to develop “relations of peace and friendship,” going as far as to suggest that the voyages “constituted a maritime proto-colonialism.” Dreyer's central argument also hinges on these expeditions being part of the Emperor Yongle's “power projection aimed at bringing distant states within the ambit of the Ming tributary system,” their idea being to “awe foreign potentates into submission” (Graff, 2007: 214). While these views continue to be revised and hotly debated (PTAK, 2007: 256-60) the enigma of Zheng He's voyages persists.

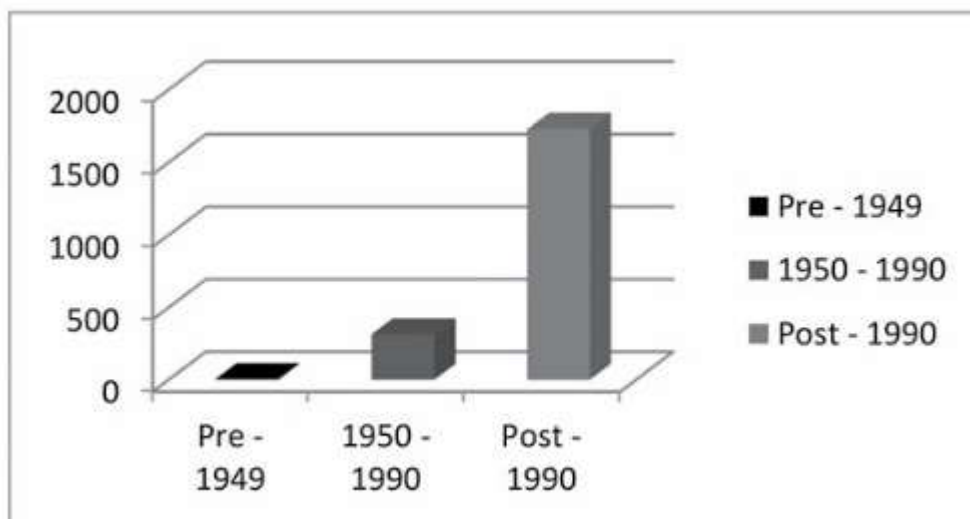


Figure 1: Studies in English of China in Africa, 1909-2016 — based on the data in David Shinn, 2016, “China-Africa relations: A Bibliography,” *African Research and Documentation*: 1-166. <sup>1</sup>

One publication that has capitalized excessively on the legendary Zheng He and requires a nod — if not a brush-off — is *1421: The Year China Discovered the World* by the non-academic Gavin Menzies (2002). While he has received an honorary professorship at a Chinese university for his work which claims Zheng He reached America prior to Columbus and circumnavigated the globe before Magellan, he has also been the victim of vitriolic attacks from academia where he has been berated as a “fantasist” and a “con man” (Anon, 2006; Anon, 2017). Yet Menzies’s book sold over a million copies worldwide running to 24 editions in 135 countries with a website following of more than 13000 subscribers, eight television documentaries and Warner Bros film rights (Davenport, 2003: 253; Anon, 2017). This has only served to popularize and forefront the voyages albeit in a very un-historic way, designed to create mass-appeal. One disgruntled reviewer wrapped up his commentary on the Menzies book with a quip from historian Henry Adams who said “history will die if not irritated” and the only service he could do his profession was to “act as a flea,” whereupon the reviewer concluded that “Menzies is a very troublesome flea indeed, and possibly an important one” (Anon, 2017).

This selection of more recent publications, despite their differing stances on the Zheng He voyages, are evidence of the continued fascination with this encounter and its relevance to today particularly in the light of China’s “return” to Africa (French, 2014) at the end of the twentieth century.

Before considering a selection of a few of the latest and more significant texts on the China-Africa encounter, there remains a small and at first sight rather insignificant contribution to look at. In 2002, librarian Hong Cheng presented a very short paper titled “Africa in Chinese Ancient Publications” at a conference hosted by the African American Studies Program at Boston University. This little-known but informative piece opened with an aside that the author hoped that his “description might raise your interest,” which indeed it did. This led another author to embark on more extensive research from a southern African perspective and write the above-mentioned article a year later (Harris, 2003). These two studies are

often overlooked in the broader scheme of things and merit at least passing acknowledgment.

Some of the more seminal works on China in Africa in the more recent past are those of Ian Taylor (2007); Chris Alden (2007; 2008 and 2014); Anshan Li (2012; 2015; 2016) and David Shinn and Joshua Eisenman (2012). Taylor's book, *China and Africa: Engagement and Compromise*, focuses essentially on Sino-African relations in terms of a selection of southern African countries and only reflects back to the establishment of the Peoples' Republic of China in 1949. In *China in Africa*, on the other hand, Alden (2007) considers the relationship between a range of African states and refers to the early China-Africa encounters of the medieval ages (1400s) in order to give historical perspective and depth to the current situation. *China Returns to Africa: A Super Power and a Continent Embrace* (2008), edited by Alden, Large, and Soares de Oliveira, includes contributions by some 24 academics on specific yet diverse aspects of this encounter. While the ancient historical connection is barely dealt with, the title in itself implies a second (if not third) coming of China to Africa. In another book co-edited by Alden (2014) with S. Chichava, *China and Mozambique: From Comrades to Capitalists*, a passing but telling reference is made to that earlier fifteenth-century contact:

Beijing likes to point to the constancy of Chinese solidarity with African interests.... A pre-colonial episode, the voyages of the Ming Dynasty Admiral Zheng He to Africa in the early 15th century, has been retrieved from the archives of history to underscore the constancy of China's intentions towards the continent. (ALDEN AND CHICHAVA, 2014: xiv )

In 2012 Li Anshan's *A History of Overseas Chinese in Africa to 1911* appeared as a translation of part of his larger body of work entitled *Feizhou Huaqiao Huaren Shi* (2000). As is evident from the 2012 title, the book focuses on the earliest encounters between China and Africa ending with the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911 and stands as a seminal work on the topic. Not only does it focus on the Chinese who ventured to Africa as either free or indentured individuals as part of the European colonization of Africa from the mid nineteenth century (chapters ii-iv) onwards, but it also extends much further back into early dynastic history (chapter i). The Introduction (1-16) presents a very valuable account of the available source material on overseas Chinese in Africa. This documentation includes China's archival records, domestic historical documents, unpublished and published government files, local official documents, and local newspapers (2-3). However, it is the first chapter, "The development of early Sino-African relations" (17-54), that offers the most recent and most detailed account of the China-Africa phenomenon. Based on ancient Chinese records and current archaeological evidence — both explicit and implicit — Li traces the earliest connection between China and Africa from pre-Han times to the Qing, elucidating the passage of China's knowledge of (and contact with) Africa from "indirect to direct" and from "hearsay to personal experience" (1, 17). In 2015 Li published an article titled "Contact between Africa and China before Vasco da Gama: Archaeology, Document and Historiography" in *World History Studies*. Both these contributions by Li offer scholars and researchers alike a keen insight into this early history as well as the source material behind it.

Another significant book to appear on the subject of Sino-African relations was David Shinn and Joshua Eisenman's (2012) *China and Africa: A Century of Engagement*. Although focused

on the 1911 to 2011 period, not unlike most recent studies, it pays specific attention to the period after 1949. However, the first part of chapter 2, “A Historical Overview of China-Africa Relations,” is presented as a backdrop to the twentieth-century encounter and briefly traces Chinese contact with Africa through the various dynasties. This again emphasizes the persistent reflection on these early contacts, which will continue to be evoked as China’s presence in Africa increases.

## Conclusion

This article has highlighted a selection of sources and texts — as well as some of the latter as text-sources — relevant to the literature written in English on China’s early encounter with ancient Africa. It thereby attempts to comply with Elton’s (2002: 60) axiom that historians must do their utmost to know what has been written on the issue with which they are concerned and shows that this kind of reflection makes the range and nature of deliberation and contestation apparent, leading to more “fruitful future discussion.” It reflects on the problem of writing about early histories and how in the absence of primary sources contemporary secondary texts can become primary. It shows how both primary and secondary materials are contested as they encapsulate diverging and opposing views. More importantly, the evidential problem surrounding the writing of the histories of the early Chinese encounter with Africa resonates with the contemporary popular and academic contested deliberation around China in Africa in recent times. Just like China’s early contact with Africa centuries prior to the twentieth century, the more recent encounter has given rise to similar speculation and conjecture — a repeat contestation. This is a phenomenon that is not new — the quandary is old and will continue to persist when historians of the future reflect on China’s encounter with Africa in this century.

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