

Historical Narratives of Encyclopaedia on Africans: The Chinese Chronicles

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Abstract

Chinese race and identity construction among Africans have been greatly influenced and shaped by government records since the dynastic era. The central aim of this research work is to examine how the encyclopaedias of the dynastic court of China have documented, influenced, and remained a primary source of data about Africa. Data for this research work were obtained through the historical descriptive method, and content analysis was used in the investigation of this work. Certain factors, such as Sino-African relations, encyclopaedias, gazettes, historical narratives, personal diaries, and perceptions, were adopted in this research work. It adopts Robert Darnton's Communication Circuit of the book as its theoretical framework. He argues that encyclopaedias were widely influenced by a lot of external factors and created to enlighten, educate, and shape public opinion. This research work identifies that encyclopaedias serve as powerful primary sources of history that can influence the decisions of modern scholars without any form of prejudice. Primary sources in research hold reliable data; however, modern scholars often fall prey to the dogmatism of over-relying on such data from history. This overreliance reinforces existing data, especially with respect to a particular race or group, which might lack objectivity and clarity. Likewise, the verification of historical documents weakens the ability to authenticate the sources of information transferred on a national level. Nevertheless, this research concludes that these documents offer greater insights into the records and details of Chinese-African contacts and their perceptions of Africans.

Keywords: *china-africa relations, encyclopaedia, gazettes, historical narratives, personal diaries and perception*

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自王朝时代以来，非洲人的华人种族和身份建构就深受政府记录的影响和塑造。这项研究工作的中心目的是研究中国王朝宫廷的百科全书如何记录、影响并保持非洲数据的主要来源。本研究工作的数据是通过历史描述的方法获得的，并在本工作的调查中采用了内容分析的方法。本研究工作采用了中非关系、百科全书、公报、历史叙述、个人日记、感知等因素。它采用罗伯特·达恩顿（Robert Darnton）书中的通信电路（Communication Circuit）作为理论框架。他认为，百科全书受到许多外部因素的广泛影响，其产生的目的是启发、教育和塑造公众舆论。这项研究工作表明，百科全书是历史的强大主要来源，可以在不带任何形式偏见的情况下影响现代学者的决策。研究的主要来源拥有可靠的数据；然而，现代学者常常陷入过度依赖历史数据的教条主义。这种过度依赖强化了现有数据，尤其是关于特定种族或群体的数据，这些数据可能

缺乏客观性和清晰度。同样，对历史文件的验证削弱了验证国家层面上传输的信息来源的能力。尽管如此，本研究得出的结论是，这些文件为了解中非接触的记录和细节以及他们对非洲人的看法提供了更深入的见解。

关键词：中非关系、百科全书、公报、历史叙事、个人日记与感悟

Introduction

As Chinese-African relations continue to build momentum over the years, the need for an historical narrative cannot be overemphasized. This research, therefore, intends to convey different information about Africa in historical times. It also intends to examine how Chinese perceptions were reinforced by historical data through their continuous stimulation from ancient texts. To understand history, we must comprehend all forms of documentation and knowledge that were stored to protect the events and happenings within the particular era of study. Over the years, the study of history has proved to be the theoretical practice of modern research. The knowledge inherent has been applied to the new happenings around us, and it has brought forth social consequences that are embedded in the events of the past. History offers us an insight into not what things are but how they came to be. The social construct of a race identity for Africans by the Chinese is clearly crafted in the historical knowledge they hold and observe. Historians have observed that knowledge of the past focuses on the unique rather than the general, and as such, people must act within the purview of the events they are exposed to. Wallace and Van Fleet (2012) posits that the attempt to derive meaning from the past is a tradition that is as old as culture itself. The tenets of culture itself depend on the belief in a common history that members of a particular culture recognize and share together.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989) defines history as “a written narrative comprising a constant systematic record, in order of time, of significance or public events, especially those connected with a particular country, people, individual, etc.” Although there is a recurrent realistic anticipation that a historical study will reveal an understanding that can be applied in the present or in the future, history is inevitably about the past, and no direct practical outcome or impact is essential to a good historical study. The best historical research may be pure research that is relatively free of the biases and desires of applied research (Wallace and Van Fleet, 2012).

History therefore serves as a bond for a social culture and its fabric. The knowledge embedded in it, whether biased, non-biased, testimony-based, comprehensive, or predictive, creates an everlasting impact and impression on the people of that particular society. Encyclopaedias and gazettes are historical documents that preserve the knowledge of the past, and Herodotus (C. 484–425 BCE) opines that

these historical documents are used for inquiries and research. He also observes that historians use encyclopaedias to preserve the memory of the past by putting on record the achievements of the people and the conflicts of that particular time (MacGinnis, 1986).

Ancient Africa became obvious to dynastic China a million years ago, and the evidence stems from historical documents and texts found in the archives of the Chinese courts. These archival documents were found in encyclopaedias or gazettes. They were documentations of the events of the Chinese courts, and they also offered information and acted as source documents for the populace about the events of the government. Thus, for a modern understanding of Chinese-Africa relations, we have to investigate the various historical documentations by Chinese scholars. This research work focuses on primary sources that discuss initial Chinese interaction with Africans. The core reason for the documentation of this work is that they offer insights as contemporary primary sources into an understanding of Chinese-Africa relations and interactions. This work aims to depict narratives that have been carved out to identify and create characters for Africans in early Chinese courts.

Literature Review

An encyclopaedia comes in different forms, such as the Encyclopaedia of Bacon, Wolf, or Comte. It simply reveals the different modes of scientific classification that scholars or writers have adopted. When this notion is adopted in reference to a book, it depicts a work in an order of alphabetic nature, a scholarly review of different works at once (Korkunov, 1909). Encyclopaedias form a significant series of sources for national-level data about the production of various areas of the economy. They are frequently able to give more locally relevant and appropriate data about specific subject matter or themes (Altbach and Hoshino, 2015). Nevertheless, while such a historical account is of great significance and a desideratum in literature, the task of such compilation by an individual of competent ability with requisite care and research could be a work of greatest interest and importance (Traill, 1860). Encyclopaedias aim to preserve and protect ancient and valuable pieces of information while ensuring that their knowledge is available to secure and guarantee the lives of the human race (Diderot and d'Alembert, 1985).

Accordingly, an encyclopaedia is the circle of human knowledge, a work that harbours all the information from every unit or department, a source of knowledge that is arranged alphabetically (Chambers, 1998). It is also seen as a compendium that provides knowledge from all the various disciplines that we have, which provide us with factual information that concerns the subject in question named in the article title (Hartman and Gregory, 1998). Diderot et al. (1751–65) asserts that the encyclopaedia is both a dictionary and a treatise of everything the human

mind wishes to know. Lough (1968) suggests that an encyclopaedia is a dictionary of the human mind that has careful definitions of topics arranged alphabetically. He also sees it as a treatise that has different entries, which was sought to view its topic from every possible angle that is transcending the general movement of contemporary thought in order to work for future generations.

Wade (1977) sees the encyclopaedia as a body of knowledge that delved into the details of different topics that considered genre, *differencia, specifica*, qualities, causes, uses, and the elaboration of method. To him, they contain controversial essays, which are often followed by refutations of central claims and arguments. Béjoint (2000) opines that encyclopaedias are historical documents that cover general topics in every field; they contain guides on how to do a variety of things as well as embedded dictionaries and gazetteers. Hartmann and James (1988) observe an encyclopaedia as an important accumulated knowledge within its subject domain that covers different professions such as medicine, philosophy, or law. They suggest that the depth of discussion in any encyclopaedia is dependent on its audience.

Loveland (2012) describes encyclopaedias as a compendium of a comprehensive scope of topics that are discussed in depth and organized in an accessible, systematic manner. Examples of such are Chambers' Cyclopaedia, or Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences (1728), the Encyclopaedia of Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert (1751), as well as the Encyclopaedia Britannica and the Conversations-Lexikon. As a result, encyclopaedias cover all areas and fields of subjects, but they should have certain characteristics. Steinberg (1950) outlines the features of 'Encyclopaedias' as applying to a general work of reference, accessible to the average educated layman, dealing with subject matter arranged alphabetically, and trying to impart unbiased information. Likewise, Charles Van Doren (1962), in his essay on the Encyclopedie Francaise, characterizes an encyclopaedia as including the tradition of dedication to truth and completeness. To him, an encyclopaedia encompasses all significant areas of study with its accuracy and comprehensiveness. He believes an encyclopaedia should have an underlying subject structure and a pedagogical purpose, but it should also be an authored work of art and aim to change society. He concludes by saying that an encyclopaedia, which is a printed and bound dictionary, is like a fossil. Barzun (1962) attempts to capture an inclusive characteristic of an encyclopaedia, to him, they must have the following: a set of answers to questions about matters of historical or scientific fact: names, places, dates, relationships, titles of books, terms of art, definitions of ideas and principles, formulas, distinctions between cognate systems, compendious records of lives, deeds, and their consequences, descriptions of methods of inquiry, and delimitations of fields of knowledge. Collison (1966) likewise outlines the characteristics of an encyclopaedia; he believes it must be written in the language of the

country in which it was published; its contents arranged in alphabetical order; its articles of any substance written by specialists; its subject specialists employed either wholly or part-time as sub-editors; and it must include living people's biographies as well as illustrations, maps, and plans.

From the above literature, we can deduce that an encyclopaedia is a reference material for the nation that offers a collection of knowledge that has been preserved over the years and centuries. Likewise, we infer that encyclopaedias come in alphabetical order on a wide array of topics, which may be controversial or skeptical. Furthermore, we construe that encyclopaedias are comprehensive reference materials that intend to stir up perceptions and opinions about Sino-African relations and engagements.

Methodology

Data for this research work are from Chinese databases that focus on the discourses of China-African relations in ancient times. Secondary data relevant to the historical perspectives of China-African relations was extracted for use in this study through books, journals, academic articles, and newspapers. The data used were representative of how Chinese societies represented and perceived Africa through encyclopaedias found in the ancient Chinese courts. Data were sourced from the internet through academic central Chinese databases as recorded in Taiwan, Beijing, Shanghai, Xiamen, and Guangzhou. Likewise, this research employed search engines like Academic Info, iSeek Education, Virtual LRC, Refseek, Core, and Google Scholar. Finally, a content analysis method was adopted to study the diverse documents from these different databases in order to expose the narratives, descriptions, and initial discourses that centred on Africans in the historical era of China.

Theoretical Framework

This research work adopts Robert Darnton's Communication Circuit as its theoretical framework. Darnton (1982) adopts the use of circuits to identify the people and the industry functions that contribute to book production and the consumption process, including authors, publishers, printers, and readers. He depicts external factors such as intellectual influences, economic and social conjuncture, and political and legal sanctions as variables that affect all parts of the cycle. Darnton highlights the role of the actors in his circuit, and as such, their role is more universal; their publication, manufacture, distribution, and survival are applicable across many eras and locations. The interaction points between the stages in the cycle provide clues to how the book is shaped and received. Within the context of an encyclopaedia, it offers a means of tracing the influences that brought this type of book into being and characterizing how its users understand it. Darnton's circuit was produced as a critical response from Thomas Adams and Nicolas Barker (1993),

in which Darnton identifies the role of actors and Adams while Barker pinpoint the role of processes. As a result, their circuit is more universal; publication, manufacture, distribution, and survival are applicable across many eras and locations. Adams and Barker identifies the role of external influences around the circuit in communication. For example, political, legal, and religious influences are only seen to affect the publication and manufacture, not the reception or distribution. Darnton acknowledges those actors in the communication circuit that embark on the writing of a book, such as an encyclopaedia, are often influenced by the social, intellectual, and often commercial factors of their environment. He posits that the work on an encyclopaedia involves the works of many people, who are often seen as collaborative cultural artifacts requiring a distinctive voice to create a unified whole.

This theory is applicable to this research work because it gives a detailed description of the encyclopaedia communications circuit and illustrates how this form of the book is experienced by those who create, read, and access it. He also exposes the different kinds of people involved in the writing and publication of an encyclopaedia. Darnton made explicit arguments that their works are largely influenced by external factors, which might include their own intellectual capacities, economic and social conjunctures, as well as political and legal actions. Darnton also informs us of the aim of the encyclopaedia, which was to educate and bring books into the lives of their readers across time.

Discussions

Chinese Encyclopaedias and Gazettes were usually called “Lèishū 类书” and there were many different kinds of “Lèishū 类书” or “classified matters” or “classified books”. They all can be routinely translated as “encyclopaedias,” which were compiled in China for diverse purposes. The encyclopaedias were made up of official documents, gazettes, and records of personal diaries. Unlike a modern encyclopaedia, Chinese encyclopaedias typically consist of large numbers of excerpts from primary sources rather than specially written articles. The arrangement is usually by subject or by rhyme. Most Chinese encyclopaedias cover events and topics like Heaven (astronomy, heavenly portents); Earth (geography, antiquity); Man (emperors, officials, prominent individuals); Events (government, economy, culture); Arts and Sciences (animals, plants, man-made objects, including technology, agriculture, and medicine) (Wilkinson, 2000).

There are several Chinese encyclopaedias published during the Qing Dynasty (1644–1922) for the purpose of records, information, documentation, and historical knowledge. These documents formed the initial source of awareness for the Chinese, with explicit information that could be factual or non-factual. Classification (Chinese encyclopaedias and personal diaries) and discourse into some of them

would be made, specifically for those that are related to the subject matter, Chinese interactions with Africans.

Chinese encyclopaedias

The first book of discourse is the Treatise on Armament Technology, or Records of Armaments and Military Provisions, “Wu Bei Zhi 武备志”. It was authored by Mao Yuan-yi (AD 1594–1640) and was the most complete military masterpiece with the largest scale and the most amount of content. It was also known as an encyclopaedia of classical military study (Miksic, 2013). How does this relate to China-African relationships? It is a resourceful material for Chinese military expeditions and voyages across the continent. It provides Chinese early expeditions with maps of the world, most especially Africa. During the reign of the Ming dynasty, Yongle Emperor China’s maritime strength increased on a drastic level. With the flourishing of trade in this period, the Emperor instigated a sequence of voyages sponsored by the court to reveal the force of the Chinese Dynasty to its commercial partners (Hansen and Curtis, 2013). Scholars have evidently questioned the purpose of the Chinese Naval Expedition during this period. Their submission ranges from China’s quest to build a fortified country with its allies or to expand Chinese sea routes while dealing in commercial commodities of sulfur, copper, ores, timber, drugs, and horses. Despite the speculations of scholars about the guiding intention of the increase of such maritime activities in this period, one obvious fact is that they bestowed honor, power, and fame upon China at this time in history.

Zheng He first voyage set out on its mission in 1405 with Chinese accumulated fleets found in Soochow and navigated it towards the numerous kingdoms found in the South. Ku Ch’i-yuan (1565–1628) observes that Zheng He’s mission consists of a team of diversified, skilled, and talented officials who embarked on one of the greatest voyages in ancient times (Goodrich, 2002). The ships reveal China’s maritime trade prowess, which was based on its knowledge of maritime technology, which guided the designs (Ebrey and Walthall, 2013). On his third voyage, he plotted a route while making stops at Dhofar, Aden, Egypt, Brava, and Malindi (Kenya). Emissaries from over thirty countries in Southeast Asia were brought to the Chinese court to pay their homage in 1415 (Friedman and Figg, 2013). From 1417 to 1419, significant voyages were made to most trading ports in Africa, India, Arabia, and Asia and invited their rulers to the Chinese court in Beijing for the inaugural ceremony of the Forbidden City and Chinese hospitality. The Chinese voyage after leaving Calicut was to visit the East African Coast city, which was documented in the Chinese Mao Kun chart that was assembled after the sixth voyage. Their visit there was to return the ambassadors who had visited the Chinese court; they returned

ambassadors to Mogadishu (Somalia) in the north, Zanzibar (East Coast), Kilwa in Tanzania, and Sofala (Mozambique) (Menzies, 2003).

The African Kingdom of Malindi (Kenya) also presented the Yongle Emperor with a giraffe, an auspicious gift because the giraffe, whose name in Somalia is ‘girin’, was taken to be the ‘qilin or unicorn’, the appearance of which was the sign of a sage-emperor whose presence attracted “distant people in uninterrupted succession.” In return for this homage, Yongle sent Zheng on a fifth voyage to accompany the Malindi Ambassadors home, he made a display of military force at Mogadishu in Somaliland. The sixth expedition, consisting of 41 ships, also reached Africa, going as far as Mogadishu and Brava (Zheng, Wakeman, and Wakeman, 2011). This document explored the expeditions of China across the continent and to Africa and the diplomatic ties China sought to bind through trade. The picture below reveals the gift to the Chinese Emperor, the trade routes, and a copy of the map from Wu Bei Zhi.

Gift to the Chinese Emperor from the African Kingdom of Malindi



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<http://www.npm.gov.tw/zh-TW/Article.aspx?sNo=03003061>

The second historical document in the Chinese encyclopaedia was “A Gazetteer of Four Continents (Sizhou Zhi 四洲志) by Lin Zexu’s 林則徐”. After 1840, Chinese literati began progressively to pay attention to the subject of world geography, and by 1861, more than twenty-two books had been written. Commissioner Lin championed such study under his auspices; passages from Murray’s Cyclopedea of Geography were translated into Chinese in 1841 under the title “A Gazetteer of the Four Continents.” A pioneering and comprehensive work was done by Wei Yuan’s “illustrated discourse on the seafaring kingdoms,” which had its origins in Lin. The materials on foreign countries gathered by Lin were turned over to Wei in 1841, which

compiled them into a large work of fifty ‘chuan’ in 1842 and published it the subsequent year. This was the first noteworthy Chinese work on the west, and the contents of the encyclopaedia include the geographical information and culture of the many African countries (Fairbank, 1978).

Lin Zexu’s source is the *Cyclopedia of Geography*, which offers an inclusive illustration of the earth’s physical, statistical, civil, and political situation. It also gives insights into the relations of heavenly bodies, its physical makeup, and the natural history of each country, the industry, commerce, political situations, and the civil and social state of all nations (Murray et al., 1834). Murray adopted some of the work of his colleague J.R. McCulloach’s *Dictionary, Practical, Theoretical, and Historical of Commerce and Commercial Navigation*, first published in 1832. They were both fascinated and curious about adding value to their knowledge of world geography. Thus, their work is significant in light of recent breakthroughs made and African colonies established within the period of research. Murray’s encyclopaedia of Geography represents one of the earliest all-inclusive attempts to bring international geography to a popular Chinese audience (Rodriguez, 2002).

The third historical document found in the Chinese encyclopaedia under analysis is the *Illustrated Treatise on Maritime States* (*Haiguo Tuzhi*, 海國圖志). It was compiled by Wei Yuan 魏源 (1794–1857). He was a late Qing period (1644–1901) philosopher and writer (Pang, 1997). His records are landmarks in China’s modern history; evidence also points out that he included the drafts of memorials that he had presented and the completed texts of his edited translations of *Foreign Views on Matters and Macau Monthly* (Weizheng, 2015). His work also documents Lo-p’o-ssu (Berbera Coast), a city in the country of present-day Somaliland, and Ts’eng-yao-lo (Zengbaluo), “East Africa. His records reveal the geographical nature of the area, wildlife, lifestyle, climate, and conditions. Specifically, he captures Africa as barbaric, uncivilized, poor, rurally agrarian, and living in the wild. (Dayuan and Jiqing, 1975).

Additionally, a brief insight into the “A Brief Description of the Ocean Circuit (Yinghuan Zhilue 及其《瀛環志略》 1848)” is a straight summary of world geography based on Western sources (Teng and Fairbank, 1979). It presents the geographical account compiled from various Western and Chinese sources by Xu Jiyu in 1848. In 1861, Xu wrote about Africa: “Africa is boiling hot; it’s miasmatic and pestilential; its ambience and its people are the worst of the four continents of the world.” He further says, “The black Africans are a crippled race, barbaric in their ways, and they live in the most ancients’ times; they have no abilities to develop, and civilization is far from them” (Xu, 1974).

These official documents examined above offers an initial construction of Chinese perceptions of Africans and their geographical entity. It constructs an identity based on the perception of an individual, which can either be factual or realis-

tic. As an official document of the court, its influence and power as an official state ideology for the citizenry are encompassing and overwhelming. Some of their documentation also emanates from secondary sources that has been flawed by scholars of the past and present. The main reason for this is the source of their information could not be verified nor ascertained. Gossips and heresy cannot be qualified as authentic sources of information but can be questionable and be subjected to scholarly debates.

Personal diaries

Certain personal diaries are also documented in the Chinese encyclopaedia, although personal diaries are indeed insightful into historical research; not only do they offer the writer's opinion but also disclose assured facts that can be inferred from the experience of the writer. The essence is to document a historical experience for further research. The first personal diary under discourse is "Du Huan's diary" (Chan, 2015). Du specifically speaks of a country he calls "Mo Lin Guo," which is about 1,000 kilometers away from Spain. He writes, "The residents there are black and tough; they have little rice or wheat, and grass or trees are almost unknown to them. They have horses, which they feed on dried fish; their people eat Persian dates; and this area has frequent cases of bubonic plague" (Huang, 2005). He further describes their religion, cuisine, customs, and traditions (Wilensky, 2002). His work also documents Lo-p'o-ssu (Berbera Coast), a city in the country of present-day Somaliland, and Ts'eng-yao-lo (Zengbaluo), East Africa. His records reveal the geographical nature of the area, wildlife, lifestyle, climate, and conditions. Specifically, he captures Africa as ferocious, uncivilized, poor, rurally agrarian, and living in the wild. (Dayuan and Jiqing, 1975).

The second diary under our purview is the work of Ma Huan (1413–1433): The diary of He is remembered chiefly for his partaking in one of the supreme achievements of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) (Boyd, 1999). He writes, "I am but a stupid, incompetent traveler, but in the discharge of my work with the mission of Zheng He, I candidly and honestly set down many strange things and nothing more, for I am without literary ability, unable to use an image or amend a text. I can only put down things as I know them to be" (Tsai, 2001). Ma portrays the port of Mogadishu in Somalia and not only affords Chinese people information about places and people they have never seen or visited but also those not yet encountered by European travelers (Boyd, 1999). He expresses his views about the Maldives, which he called "The Country of Liu Mountains." He explains it as having a positive, financially viable significance founded on the overseas sale of ropes, ambergris, bonito fish, and cowries. He talks about the landscape and resources of this country (Ma and Feng, 1997). Ma's opening sentence exposes his initial reason for the documentation of

these places: to reveal the existing situation of these societies. It offers a narrative approach that encapsulates itself in a form of objectivity and scholarly splendor.

Furthermore, another historical document comes within our purview: “The Miscellaneous Morsels from ‘Youyang Yōuyáng Zázù’(酉阳杂俎)” by Duan Chengshi 段成式. His text is based on personal observation, and some of his titles or entries are so cryptic that they seem beyond understanding (Reed, 2003). Duan describes the world that he had heard about and read about (Kauz, 2010). Duan writes about a detailed description of today’s Berbera in Somalia, a place he named “ba ba li” in his book, in which he discloses that the people live nakedly, rurally, and violently (Reed, 1995).

Various individuals have put down their thoughts in their diaries about Africa. They have relied on primary, secondary, official and unofficial sources of information in documenting the culture and traditions of Africa. These personal diaries have a large influence on influencing and educating the people.

Findings

This work reveals the influence of primary sources; they are strong and influential sources of information that can be used over time. This fact has been revealed in Chinese encyclopaedias that initially documented Africa. The Treatise on Armament Technology portrays Africa as a weak and subservient continent to the Chinese state, as emissaries had to come from Africa to pay homage to the Chinese emperor. While it documents that it was a military expedition that dealt with commercial commodities, it also invited most of its trade partners to China and had to pay homage to the Chinese emperor.

Darton explains the role of actors in the creation of an encyclopaedia. In the Chinese context, the West and its sources are core actors in the crafting of knowledge about Africa. Adams and Barker identifies the influence of external influences in the creation of an encyclopaedia. This research work also discovers the dangers of relying on secondary sources; they portray the image of the writer and craft strong images in the minds of the readers who cannot verify the authenticity of the writer. A Gazetteer of Four Continents was a translation of a western document, Murray’s Cyclopaedia of Geography. There are two issues in this work: the use of Murray’s cyclopaedia to portray Africa and the dangers of translation. While the facts from Murray’s work are lacking, the dangers of translation are evident in the loss of certain documents, and the biases and languages of the translator are obviously designed around his translated works. It also observes that the Chinese made intense efforts to understand the geographical location of many African countries and their cultures. Africa under study at this period of time was undergoing colonization, and as such, the West has the influence of the media to create an identity for Africans. Malone (2010) asserts that the West has a history in Africa, one of co-

lonialism and the underdevelopment of Africa. The West is often accused of robbing Africans of their identities, values, traditions, and cultures (Wasserman, 2016). Thus, such literature emanating from the West about Africa might not be objective but truly subjective. It would be literature clouded in the Western narcissistic ego of fortified culture strength over a misconstrued fragile weak culture.

The different historical official documents are a basis of knowledge for the Chinese literati and the Chinese people. It is an official document that over-relied on secondary sources emanating from the west. Scholars have argued about the inherent shortcomings of secondary data in research and historical analysis. Secondary sources remove direct contact, involvement, or relationship with the event being researched. History books or encyclopaedias that are written by historians often remove more of the actual event being described, and they are frequently viewed as the least useful sources of information (Johnson and Christensen, 2008). In essence, this historical document is systematically flawed due to its over-reliance on secondary sources of data. The documents above reveal the official encyclopaedias and gazettes of the Chinese courts that documented Africa in the early eighteenth century. These documents laid the initial images and perceptions of what Africa looks like to the Chinese people. As official documents, they were documents of authority that were not to be questioned or challenged.

The Chinese, in their recording titled 'A Brief Account of Island Barbarians', offers insights and narratives of what African culture looks like. Africa is portrayed as barbaric, uncivilized, crude, strange, underdeveloped, and wild with an unfavorable climate. The Chinese encyclopaedia about Africa also relied on unverifiable accounts of hearsay, as documented by Duan Chengshi in the *Miscellaneous Morsels*. Duan relied on gossip and hearsay, which were later accepted and absorbed into the official documentation about Africa. The fact remains that the Chinese encyclopaedia that documented Africa relied on a lot of personal opinions, and the sources are controversial and clouded with biases and prejudices.

Conclusion

The encyclopaedias and personal diaries discussed above provides the foremost documentation of Africa in China. The sources of their information, although very controversial, were intended to offer insights and exposure to the African continent. The *Treatise on Armament Technology* reveals that China's magnificent glory since the dynastic era. This splendor of China had two dimensions, voyages were built on a formidable military prowess and might that sought not to forcefully expand its coasts but to seek diplomatic relations and ties. It was also a feat to expose countries around the world to the ancient civilization of China.

Evidently, from these ancient historical texts, one can deduce the representations of the African continent to the Chinese: "A conglomerate of weak, barbarian,

and uncivilized countries.” Overwhelmingly, Chinese official records dating back from the eighteenth century constructed an African identity that was not based on pure facts but on secondary data. African countries were thus seen as having no equal power with China and should be dependent on the powerful countries for their survival. Perhaps this has defined the relationship between China and Africa in modern times. The rhetoric of a “weak African state” in literary discourses is not a new phenomenon. The weaknesses of African states are fully perpetuated and celebrated by the West, which adopts a viral and contagious methodology to cloak Africa with an identity. European scholars have over the decade intended to promote Africa consciously based on their own worldview. Frantz Fanon sees this as emanating from the ambivalent desire and narcissism of racism. He sees the West as being paralyzed by a superiority complex and a black inferiority complex (Janis, 2013). Such inferiority complexes were fully visible in the data adopted in the design and construction of an African identity. The initial perceptions of Africa found in the Chinese authoritative sources reveal that Africa is “uncivilized, primitive, and exists in a state crippling epidemic quiescent form.” These were the foremost perceptions of Africa among the Chinese. This work brings initial primary sources discourses initial Chinese interaction with Africans. It provides a platform for scholars to have greater insights into Chinese encyclopaedias, gazettes, Chinese repositories, and personal memoirs or diaries of independent travelers on initial Sino-African contacts.

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