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FROM BAGHDĀD TO BAGHPŪR

SAILORS AND SLAVES IN GLOBAL ASIA

Guangtian Ha

حکیم این جهان را چو دریا نهاد
برانگیخته موج از او تندباد

چو هفتاد کشتی براو ساخته
همه بادبانها برافراخت

*When the Wise God of the World created the sea
Raise He did by soaring wind massive swells
There He set on them seventy ships
All with sails hoisted high*

— Ferdawsī, *Shāhnāme*, trans. by the author

教門從西一隻船
金幫銀底幾千年

*Our religion is a ship from the West
With gold hull and silver keel it had sailed for millennia*

—a saying from China's Jahriyya Sufis (figure 3.1),
trans. by the author



Figure 3.1. Relief at the Jahriyya Banqiao Sufi Lodge, Banqiao, Wuzhong, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, China. Source: Photo by author.

This article explores how Asian Studies, in particular works with a focus on transregional inter-Asian connections, can contribute to a broadened understanding of global blackness that encompasses and transcends trans-Atlantic slavery. The title of the article, “From Baghdād to Baghpūr,” uses two rhyming words to draw attention to the extensive connection between Asia—Central and East Asia in particular—and the Perso-Arab Islamic world, via the maritime routes through South and Southeast Asia. Both words originate in Persian: Baghdād, the capital of the Abbāsīd Empire, means “God-given” (*bagh* means “God,” while *dād* is derived from the Persian verb *dādan*, “to give”), and *baghpūr*, meaning “God’s son” (*bagh* + *pūr*; *pūr* meaning “son” in Persian), is the title medieval Persians gave to kings and emperors in Inner Asia and China.¹ The latter, of course, is likely a Persian rendition of the Chinese term *tianzi*, “son of heaven.” Thus, when the Arab and Persian merchants left Baghdād and sailed across the Arabian Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the South China Sea in their junks or dhows, they were practically moving between the city of God and the land ruled by the sons of God.

In recent years, inter-Asian connections, premodern global connectivities, and the wider Indian Ocean world have drawn a considerably amount of attention from historians and anthropologists.² While this article shares the same passion in laying stress on the transregional, it also attempts to sketch out what might have remained less visible in this latest round of research keen on refashioning area studies theoretically as well as geographically. While transregional mobilities often animate cosmopolitan imaginaries, they at times create a differential of positions where some can move at the expense of others’ enforced immobilities. Scholarly attention paid to transregional trade or universalist *jihād* may also conceal the

transregional structures that enabled these mobilities in the first place while imposing movements on those with the least power to resist.³ In other words, behind each network of transregional mobility, do we find numerous networks of immobilities and involuntary mobilities—an infrastructure that is as essential to transregional flows of people, languages, commodities, and ideas as it is invisible?

It is with these questions in mind that I write this article. To demonstrate their substance, I will focus on the intersection of race, slavery, and seafaring in medieval inter-Asian exchanges that linked the Perso-Arab Islamic world to East and Southeast Asia. The scale is colossal, the time span is vast, and the languages involved are multiple. Yet I hope in this short article to indicate the directions this research can pursue in the coming years and the ways in which it may help us reconsider: (1) the intellectual contribution and the political work Asian Studies may be capable of in addressing the entrenched racial bias that structures the field itself (white people studying non-whites, Black people studying themselves, and Asians finding anti-Black racism a matter not directly relevant to their existence and scholarly pursuit), and (2) the under-theorization of race as it pertains specifically to blackness in transregional Asian Studies.⁴

A principal suggestion this article makes is that we expand our understanding of blackness beyond the extant focus on Africa and the African diaspora without displacing or belittling the unique brutality of European colonialism and trans-Atlantic slavery. The proposal is rather that we use the category of blackness—in lower case—and its referential expansiveness in Asia-Pacific to bring into focus the interconnection among otherwise disparate notions and structures of racialized hierarchy where people considered “black” have been subject to exploitation or enslavement. I thus use “blackness” in lower case in this article to refer to this often ambiguous color scheme (for who is considered “black” by whom and why varies across historical and societal contexts), and “Blackness” in upper case when the discussion pertains specifically to Africa and the African diaspora. In so doing, I hope both to highlight the continuity of the proposed project with current academic convention in Black Studies and draw attention to the unique contribution this research aims to make to this field. This article is written with the general hope that a new Afro-Asian solidarity can be reimagined and hashed out via rigorous work while keeping the crevices and ruptures running through that solidarity squarely in vision.⁵ The conclusive section of this article will clarify the pertinence of the research in question to this political vision.

Global Blackness

The preliminary idea that propelled me to propose this essay to *Who Is the Asianist?* is an enduring interest in investigating the global creation of notions of blackness that at once encompasses and transcends the trans-Atlantic

slave trade. While it is true that the amalgam of imperialism, capitalism, and nineteenth-century pseudobiology has given racism in the Euro-American world a particularly cruel form, it is still essential to acknowledge that anti-blackness both has a longer history and a more varied existence than can be accommodated by a singular framework. A recent article by Rachel Schine titled “Race and Blackness in Premodern Arabic Literature,” for instance, shows with conclusive evidence from early Islamic literature that anti-black racism, akin in its intensity to a certain biological determinism, evolved during the high Abbāsīd period to the point where a stronger association of blackness with slavery began to take root in classical Arab-Islamic societies from the thirteenth century onward, if not earlier.⁶

The very significance of race as an essential prism for rewriting global history has not gone unnoticed in transnationally oriented Asian Studies. Already, twenty years ago, in a private exchange between Amitav Ghosh and Dipesh Chakrabarty, which was later published in *Radical History Review*, Ghosh contemplated that “[r]ace was much more than just a tool of Empire: it was (in the Kantian sense) one of the foundational categories of thought that made other perceptions possible.”⁷ Admittedly the context wherein he made this postulation is when Ghosh recounted the British response to the Japanese invasion of Malaya and Burma: “In Malaya while evacuating their government from the north, they stuck absolutely resolutely to the principles of race: trains were forbidden to transport ‘non-Europeans.’ . . . Similarly, in northern Burma in 1942, in a moment of total crisis, with hundreds of thousands of civilians heading for the mountains, the British still found time to set up ‘white’ and ‘black’ evacuation routes.”⁸ In addition to the most obvious, Ghosh’s remark exposes a quintessentially binary racial mindset that afflicts more than the colonial Britons: in both medieval Perso-Arabic and Chinese accounts, we find the color black being used to refer to a wide range of populations—often other than oneself—and the color white invariably celebrated as a marker of (one’s own) beauty and nobility.

If indeed one is to take Ghosh’s suggestion seriously—that race ought to be considered a category on a par with, say, space and time in Kant, or “society” à la Emile Durkheim—then confining it only to modern empire or European colonialism may well dull the edge of an intriguing provocation, a theoretical as well as political challenge to think with race and to treat race as Marx does class or Lacan does sexuality. While this conceptual move has been definitive to the discipline of ethnic studies, it has barely caught on in Asian Studies, for which the potentially transformative theoretical innovations of ethnic studies are at times reduced to studies of marginalized “ethnic minorities” in postcolonial and postsocialist regimes. Some recent works on Sinophone Muslims in China, for instance, while aware of the numerous transregional and multilingual religious networks that animated the histories of Islam in China, still tend to portray their objects of study as monolingual “minorities” under a reigning nation-state

framework.⁹ Treating race as a category with its own conceptual integrity may help us explore an alternative, premodern, subaltern transregionalism: the fact that both coastal East Africans and coastal Southeast Asians are referred to as being “black” in medieval Arabic and Chinese accounts, and that both are employed in different legs of the trans-Indian Ocean journey to staff the ships of seafaring Muslim merchants, cannot but lead us to contemplate the prospect of theorizing a certain “Black Pacific”—à la Paul Gilroy¹⁰—where the simple black/white binarism, precisely because of its referential fluidity across histories and geographies, can be employed as a dynamic hinge to connect multiple structures of racial exploitation and subversion.¹¹

Is this expansive elaboration on race unduly a conceptual overreach, even an epistemic imperialism that generalizes a specifically Euro-American problematic—with a distinct US American tint—into a spurious universality? The answer to this question depends on whether we would be willing to entertain the possibility that there may have been other transregional mobilities comparable in their historical ramifications to the trans-Atlantic slave trade—mobilities that have created and entrenched alternative notions of blackness associated with racial hierarchization and structural oppression—in other parts of the world. This is not to deny the historical particularities of trans-Atlantic slavery nor to belittle its exceptional brutality. However, anti-B/black racism does not originate from capitalism nor does the West monopolize its production. Among Muslims, for instance, anti-Blackness reaches back to the days of Prophet Muhammad—and to pre-Islamic times. A Nubian poet by the name of Suḥaym (d. mid-seventh century), whose extraordinary talent earned him a place in the tenth-century Arabic book of songs, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, in attempting to redeem his fate, also revealed the pervasive anti-Blackness in the society where he was but a Black slave:

*My clothes harm my blackness not, for I am like musk—those who have
tasted its scent forget it not.*

*I am made to wear a gown of black, yet underneath is a shirt white round
the neck.¹²*

وما ضرَّ أثوابي سوادِي وإِنِّي لكالمسك لا يسلو عن المسكِ ذائقُه

كُسيْتُ قَمِيصاً ذا سوادٍ وتحتَه قميصٌ من القُوهِيّ بيضٌ بنائِقُه

It reads almost as though Suḥaym could accomplish partial vindication only by distancing himself from Blackness, whose presumably repulsive earthiness has to be sublimated—though not without remainder—through a cleansing act of burning and thus converted into colorless fragrance. The black gown is only for laymen’s gaze, while those in the know are to spot the ring of white that remains uncontainable under a cloak of black.

There is no doubt that Islam has a complicated relationship with slavery; and the Muslim trade in slaves, spanning Europe, the Americas, Africa, and Asia, was as transregional if not as brutal as the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Early Muslim slaves to the Americas were either direct victims of kidnapping by white European colonizers or war captives sold to the latter by local parties locked in blood feuds in the Senegambian river valley of West Africa.¹³ The Europeans did not invent slavery in Africa; they were the latecomers to a wider and historically more diverse and wide-ranging system, which they later developed into a qualitatively different form of exploitation and oppression. While sub-Saharan Black Africans constituted for Muslims a major source for slaves, to the point where the word *‘abīd* (“slave”) is still associated with Blackness in colloquial Arabic, slavery in Islam never quite followed the color line strictly. Ibn Battuta was known to rank his white Greek maidservant higher than others, and white slaves, Slavs in particular, were readily imported into the Muslim world in the Ottoman period.¹⁴ Manumitted slaves were known to rise in the military rank and file and eventually reign over eminent Islamic dynasties (such as among the Mamlūks in medieval Egypt). Their successful careers demonstrated the extent to which “slavery,” as a generalizing term, may not be able to cover the range of configurations that define how human beings were turned into property in Muslim societies.¹⁵

If the concept of slavery is in need of a historically informed and anthropologically sophisticated revision, the same can be said of Blackness. Just as slavery in Islam never quite traced the color line, the term “black,” or its cognate *Kunlun* 崑崙 in Chinese historical records, too did not always refer exclusively to men and women—whether enslaved or not—of African origins brought to China via the maritime trade of Arab and Persian merchants. While the earliest appearance of the term *Kunlun* in Chinese writing by no means indicated an association with blackness—it seemed to be a rhetorical description of the extraordinary heights of some mountains—by the fourth century or so, the term for the first time began to acquire a meaning that referred to the color black.¹⁶ Its obscure origin, for instance, is apparent in the following account given of Li Lingrong (351–400 AD; thus two centuries earlier than Suḥaym), concubine to the Jianwen Emperor of the eastern Jin 東晉 dynasty:

Her name is Lingrong and her birth was humble. While the Jianwen Emperor was still the Lord of Kuaiji, he had had three sons. Daosheng, the crown prince and heir apparent, had his status abolished, and another son, the Lord Xian, died young. All of his concubines could not birth a son for ten years (諸姬絕孕 十年無子). The emperor thus consulted a sorcerer by the name of Hu Qian, who said, “a woman in the servants’ quarter will give birth to two precious sons, one of whom will carry on the royal blood of Jin.” . . . For a few years, the emperor recruited a specialist

in physiognomy and showed him all his favourite concubines. Alas, none of them exhibited the right features. At the time in the weaving workshop there was a woman, who was tall and black, and all the servants in the palace called her [a] *Kunlun* (形長而色黑 宮人謂之崑崙). When she arrived, the physiognomist went “Here is she!” The emperor that night demanded her companionship. Thereafter she dreamed of two dragons encircling her knees and the sun and the moon falling into her embrace. These were indeed auspicious omens. Upon learning of this the emperor was amazed, and went into her. Thus were born Emperor Liezong and Lord Wenxiao of Kuaiji. She died at the age of fifty.¹⁷

The source here compels us to acknowledge the significant fact that one of the earliest appearances of *Kunlun* as associated with the color black was in the biography of a woman servant turned concubine. Nonetheless, the text affords no definite explanation as to the genealogy of the term. What further complicates the matter is the possibility that the word itself, while appearing to be native to the Chinese language, could have been a loan word. In the massive eighth-century dictionary *Yi Qie Jing Yin Yi* 一切經音義, the eminent Buddhist monk Shi Huilin 釋慧琳 explained thus:

the sound is *kun lun*, and colloquially *gulun* 骨論. Refers to the aliens on islands of the South Sea. Quite black, mostly naked. They can tame wild beasts—rhinoceros and elephants and such. There are multiple types [of *Kunlun*]: some are Sengqi, others are Tumi, still others are Gutang, Gemie, and others. Regardless, they are all base and lowly (種類數般 即有僧祇 突彌 骨堂 閣蔑等 皆卑賤人也). They have no manners, and they live by robbing and kidnapping. They are cannibals—like the evil *Rakasa*. Their language is odd and different from all the other aliens. Good at swimming. They can dive and spend a whole day under water without dying (善入水 竟日不死).¹⁸

Gemie likely refers to the ancient Khmer people in contemporary Cambodia, while Sengqi is often considered a Chinese transliteration of Zanj, the term medieval Muslims used to refer to sub-Saharan East Africans along the Swahili coast. We cannot take the entry at its word: there is no reason for us to believe that Shi Huilin, or the popular usage wherefrom he drew his source, knew how to distinguish among the diverse populations who seemed to share the same skin color, nor can we be sure that a Bantu slave, purchased by medieval Muslim merchants on their voyage, would not have first ended up somewhere in Southeast Asia before they were mixed up with other equally “base and lowly” peoples of dark complexion and sent off to China.

While Ronald Segal's estimation that, among the Black slaves traded in Islam, the gender ratio is roughly one male to every two females (in contrast to two males to every female in trans-Atlantic slavery) may be less than accurate, it is still true that slavery among Muslims laid more stress on domestic service than on hard field labor.¹⁹ For a Muslim merchant involved in transregional trade, the service may well include navigating a ship, thus the reason for Shi Huilin's inclusion of impressive diving skills in his entry on *Kunlun/Gulun*. The eighth-century poet luminary Zhang Ji once composed a poem with the very title *Kunlun er* 崑崙兒 (while *er* means "son," here, the word is a diminutive indicating contempt):

Home to the *Kunlun* are the islands amidst the sea;
 Yet, led forth by barbarian visitors, they have come to roam Han lands.
 Grasping language, they are the mythical Mynah birds,
 Crossing billowing waves, they first set foot on Yulin Island.
 Gold rings once dangled luridly from their ears;
 With conch-spiralled hair, long and coiling, they still refuse to bind their heads.
 Black as lacquer is the flesh and skin they cherish;
 They stride about half-stripped of tree-cotton garments.²⁰

崑崙家住海中州	蠻客將來漢地遊
言語解教秦吉了	波濤初過郁林洲
金環欲落曾穿耳	螺髮長卷不裹頭
自愛肌膚黑如漆	行時半脫木綿裘

While dynasties rose and fell, there seems to be a certain continuity in the transregional circulation of *Kunlun* insofar as the Chinese records are concerned. In 976 AD, it is said that three *dashi* diplomats—the “barbarian visitors” in Zhang Ji's poem—visited the Song court, and they brought with them a *Kunlun* slave with “deep-set eyes and black skin” (目深體黑).²¹ The *dashi* envoy were likely Arabs (*dashi* is a Chinese transliteration of *tāzh*, the latter being the name medieval Persians gave to Arabs), though they could equally have been Persians.²² Neither can we be certain that they were official envoys instead of intrepid merchants, for official duty and private profiteering were never quite separate in both the Abbāsīd and the Chinese imperial court. Zhang Ji's poem locates the origin of *Kunlun* in an oceanic world but offers no clue as to its whereabouts. Shi Huilin, whose dictionary was compiled in the same period, mentioned that the *Kunlun* language is “odd and different from all the other aliens,” which means that the crew on the ships might well have been multilingual as much as multiracial and multireligious, with Muslims playing the dominant role as the shipmasters and owners of the goods as well as the people in transit.

We have rare visual cues to help us imagine the composition of the crew of these seagoing vessels. An exquisite thirteenth-century illustrated manuscript of *Maqāmāt al-Ḥarīrī* includes a miniature that depicts a cross-Indian Ocean voyage of medieval Muslim merchants (figure 3.2). The ship is an Arab dhow, its design wonderfully echoing the restored model of the ninth-century shipwreck near Belitung in contemporary Indonesia.²³ In the hull, gazing expectantly at the horizon, are impeccably groomed merchants in luscious turbans. On the deck, however, are black sailors steering the ship atop immense swells. *Maqāmāt al-Ḥarīrī* was composed in the eleventh century and quickly became a popular collection of stories among Arabs of the high Abbāsīd period, and Yahya ibn



Figure 3.2. *Maqāmāt al-Ḥarīrī*, Paris Arabe 5847, folio 119 verso.

Source: Courtesy of Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

Maḥmūd al-Wāsiṭī, the painter and calligrapher who produced the illustrated manuscript in question, obviously wished to ride this tide of popularity in his own favor.

The story that figure 3.2 is supposed to serve as an illustration to is titled “The Omani Maqāma,” Oman being a key site in the medieval Perso-Arab maritime trade. Abu Ḥārith, the narrator, at the beckoning of some affair of importance, was called upon to visit Oman. While the ship was about to set sail, a mysterious figure appeared on the shore and requested to tag along; he was soon enough outed to be the very same trickster friend of Abu Ḥārith’s, Abu Zayd, who was often the true protagonist of the stories. Blackness figures only obliquely in the story: Abu Ḥārith states that in preparation for the trip he moved to the ship his “blacks.” The word used in the text is *asāwidī* (“my blacks”). Instead of translating the word literally, however, Steingrass’s translation only has “chattels.” And where slaves and servants are involved, the words used are either *‘abīd* or *ghilma* (“boys”), though in al-Wāsiṭī’s rich pictorial representation, all appear as black, with no evident association with Africa or the African diaspora.²⁴ One important detail in the original text, which is again lost in Steingrass’s English rendition, thus describes the slave boys when the latter were speechless concerning their master’s grief: “They spoke neither of white nor of black” (*lā fāhū bi-bayḍā’ wa lā sawdā’*), which appears in Steingrass’s translation as “[they] spoke not either fair or foul.”²⁵ The moralistic association of white/black with fair/foul is in line with the prevailing ideology of the high Abbāsīd Arab-Muslim society, and the idiomatic Arabic expression is thus done great justice in spirit if not in word by Steingrass’s carefully calibrated translation. The moralized opposition between fair and foul mirrors the binary mindset that pits white self against black other. Incidentally, the master king was also painted black, which is by no means implied by the original text (figure 3.3).

It must be noted at this point that the sources I have drawn on so far, while bilingual, exhibit a clear homogeneity in that most are drawn from literature or historical records with a strong fantastical flavor. *Maqāmāt al-Ḥarīrī* is a collection of popular anecdotes that may reflect some level of historical truth, while the biography of Li Lingrong and the dictionary entry for *Kunlun* both purport to be based on veritable history but display a mix of fact and fiction: the involvement of a physiognomist in one case, and cannibalism in another, certainly does not render them reassuring evidence on which reliable arguments can be built. Yet in many cases, evidence of this sort is the only material we have available to us, and one can make the argument that the fine line between fact and fiction, truth and fantasy, itself constitutes a local manifestation of a global literary convention that continues to obliterate B/black presences in the history of the transregional Muslim maritime trade. It seems as though conventional historical writings, in both Arabic and Chinese, could not but render those that fascinate and frighten

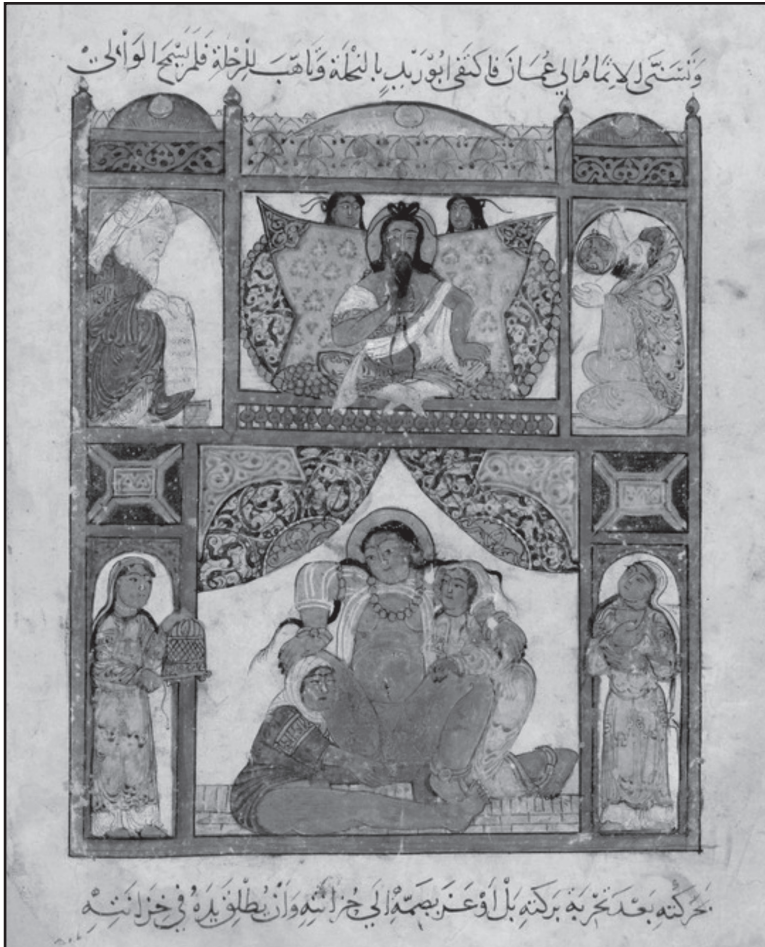


Figure 3.3. *Maqāmāt al-Harīrī*, Paris Arabe 5847, folio 122 verso.

Source: Courtesy of Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

them in fantastical language—that B/black sailors and B/black slaves employed on the seafaring journeys beyond Arabia and Persia could not but appear as ghosts and phantasmagorical beings in these writings. What intertextual resonances in the bilingual archive can help us give this speculation some evidentiary credibility?

From Intertextual to Transregional

Another common name given to *Kunlun* is *Mohe* 摩訶, of no less obscure linguistic origins. The term was popularized by a report in *Taiping Guangji* 太平廣記 (completed ca. 978 AD), or *Extensive Records of the Taiping Era*. It is said that on

a family visit to Canton, Tao Xian 陶峴, a descendent of the literary luminary Tao Yuanming 陶淵明 (ca. 365–427 AD), had the unusually good fortune to procure three exquisite treasures: an ancient sword, a jade ring, and a seafaring *Kunlun* slave (*Kunlun nu*) by the name of Mohe who “is an extraordinary swimmer—brave and agile” (善遊水而勇捷). “Every time he travelled on beautiful waters Tao Xian would drop the sword and the ring and order Mohe to retrieve both, simply for the fun of it all.” Such “fun” lasted for a couple of years, in the course of which Mohe lost a finger to a poisonous water snake—until at last, when they were undertaking a trip to Xisai Mountain in Hubei and Tao Xian did the same since the water “was dark and stagnant” and he thought “there must be some monster therein,” Mohe finally met his end:

[Tao Xian] dropped the sword and the ring in water and commanded Mohe to jump in and retrieve both. So he did. The water turned and swelled and after a while Mohe returned, empty-handed and consumed. “The sword and the ring can no more be retrieved,” he lamented. “Therein is a dragon of more than two *jang* long (i.e., over six metres), and the sword and the ring have fallen in his path. Every time I extended my hands to reach for both, the dragon burst into a daunting rage.” Thereupon Tao Xian replied, “The sword, the ring, and you are my three treasures. Now that the other two are lost, what use do I have of you? Return and retrieve both [or die doing it].” Knowing that his end had arrived, a great thunderous roar was heard from Mohe and his hair broke loose; blood of scarlet red flowed from his bulging eyes. And lo and behold, in the slave went and never did he return. Hours passed, and members of his body rose to the surface. There they lay foul and exposed.²⁶

Tao Xian’s fascination with and brutal exploitation of Mohe represents only one such instance where black slaves known to be “good at swimming” became the plaything of Chinese aristocrats. Keeping *Kunlun* slaves as entertaining natators for recreational purposes or more serious seagoing activities was apparently a popular status-marker that affluent Chinese adopted from the “barbarian visitors.”²⁷ Whether from Southeast Asia or coastal East Africa, we still know depressingly little about who these *Kunlun* slaves were, what languages they spoke, and whether they had been kidnapped or sold as war captives into slavery. They were not as “fortunate”—for want of a better word—as Omar ibn Said, the Muslim scholar who was kidnapped in West Africa in the early nineteenth century and sent off to South Carolina and who left behind a small archive of manuscripts that included a short yet significant autobiography.²⁸ However, how can we make tangential records resonate across languages and spaces so these *Kunlun nu* can begin to acquire a presence, if not an incidentally assertive one, as we have seen in al-Wāsiṭī’s illustration?

The tenth-century Arabic geographical work *‘Ajā’ib al-Hind* (*Marvels of India*) may be of use in this respect. Compiled reputedly by Buzurg ibn Shahryār al-Rām Hormuzī around 953 AD—exactly the same period when *Taiping Guangji* was completed—the work is a collection of sailors’ tales related to the author by globetrotting captains and adventurous merchants. Just as in medieval Arabic writing, the term *jāfā* is often used to refer to the wider Malay Archipelago instead of Java in particular; so too does India in this context cover a broad geographical area that ranges as wide as from East Africa to Sumatra, with China located in between. The stress is invariably on the coastal regions, and many of the related stories—from massive fish or turtles mistaken by credulous captains as islands in the middle of nowhere to colossal birds used as aerial carriers by shipwrecked sailors for daring escapes—find strong echos, both in plotlines and in the Arabic vocabulary employed, with early manuscripts of the popular *One Thousand and One Nights*.

One of the tales in *‘Ajā’ib al-Hind* was narrated by Abu al-Zahr al-Barkhatī, a notable of the port of Sirāf (in contemporary Iran) who converted to Islam after being a fire-worshipping Magian following the religion of India (*majūsiyyan ‘alā dīn al-Hind*). The story states that al-Barkhatī’s paternal grandfather traveled in a ship he owned, seeking to reach the island of Fanṣūr, and yet—as often happens in these stories—a violent gale blew them off course and threw them into the embrace of some unknown bay. Once the gale had passed, the sea was dead silent, with no wind to carry them where they needed to go. Unable to dock the ship, they drifted among the islands and were finally brought by the wave to one of them, on the shore of which they saw people resting and playing. Once the local people’s trepidation was put to rest, the stranded merchants began what they were best at: trade. The following, worth quoting at length, describes the scene at this particular moment:

We motioned to them and asked, “Do you have any merchandise we can buy?” “We have nothing but slaves (*raqīq*),” thus they replied. So we said unto them, “Good. Bring the slaves then.” So they brought them. Never had we seen finer slaves. They were cheerful in nature (*duḥūk al-sann*), they sang and played and bantered and took delight in funny tales. Their bodies were soft like cream, and they appeared so agile and brisk it seems as though they were ready to take flight at any moment. Except that their heads were small and below their flanks were wings like those wings that sea turtles have. We said unto them, “What the heck is this?” Laugh they did, and so they said, “all of the people of these islands are like this, so this is all you can have.” They motioned to the sky, “Indeed God created us thus so we saw nothing awry in this [shape of ours].” “This is an opportunity!” We said [amongst ourselves], as we saw this as a chance for

some good catch. Every one of us bought to the extent he could afford. We emptied our ship of goods and loaded it full with slaves and provisions. No sooner had we bought some slaves from them did they bring us even more beautiful ones, and before long our ship was freighted with creatures finer than which no one had ever laid eyes upon. Alas if we had been allowed to bring this business to fruition we would have enriched generations of our progenies. . . . When the moment of departure arrived, a strong gust began to blow to us from these islands and towards our land. We bid farewell, and they said unto us, "Come again, God willing!" We did wish to return, and so did the captain, who, however, desired to come back with his ship alone, sans the merchants. For the whole night he and his men studied the stars and the constellations and the horizons and the pathways for departure and return. All of us were over the moon. At the break of dawn off we went from the island, riding the wind [that blew toward our land]. Once the island had vanished from view some of the slaves began to weep. Our hearts tightened from such wailing. Then some of them said unto others, "Why are you crying? Come, let us dance and sing and find merriment!" Then all the slaves stood, and dance they did, and they sang and laughed. We found this quite marvellous. We said to ourselves, "Well, at least this is better than weeping!" So we left them to it and each minded his own business. Little did we know that they were playing fools on us! By God [I swear that I saw them] fly into the sea like locusts and the ship rode immense swells as high as mountains and as terrifying as lightning. We did not again gain a clear sight of them until the ship had overtaken them for about one league. We heard them sing and laugh and flap their wings. Then we knew that they would not have done this had they possessed no might to conquer the terror of the high sea, and now it was impossible for us to bring them back.²⁹

While we may not have space to discuss this episode in detail, it includes a number of significant elements that animate an informed historical imagination: similar to the trans-Atlantic slave trade, locals—in particular those who held power—also sold slaves to incoming merchant slavers. An accidental encounter, like the one described in this anecdote, could convert into a long-term enterprise. The text is wonderfully ambiguous concerning the identity of the slaves: for if the sellers belonged to the same group as the sold—that is, they too had wings attached to their flanks—then the moment of astonishment would seem oddly deferred for the Arab merchants. They showed no sign of being astounded when they first saw the natives lulling about on the seashore. Were the statements proclaiming the identity between the two groups thus a later Arab interjection because, in the eyes of the Arab narrator, they were after all fantastical creatures of the same island? No mention is made of whether the slaves being sold were

black. Yet the conflation of various indigenous peoples resonates strongly with the equally sweeping claim made by Shi Huilin that all *Kunlun*, whether from East Africa or Southeast Asia, were invariably black and equally “base and lowly.” Given the prevalent association of B/blackness with slavery in the high Abbāsīd Arab-Islamic society, the possibility of them having been black cannot be ruled out.³⁰

By a stroke of serendipity, al-Wāsiṭī’s illustrated *Maqāmāt al-Ḥarīrī* once again comes to our aid. For one of the illustrations he made for “The Omani Maqāma” depicts a ship, whereupon we find the rare copresence of both black sailors and half-human, half-animal creatures with wings sprouting out from their flanks (figure 3.4). Oman appears frequently in ‘*Ajā’ib al-Hind*, for the simple reason that both it and Yemen—the port of Aden specifically—were crucial entrepôts of trade for seafaring medieval Arab, Persian, and Jewish merchants. While some scholars



Figure 3.4. *Maqāmāt al-Ḥarīrī*, Paris Arabe 5847, folio 121 recto.
Source: Courtesy of Bibliothèque Nationale de France

have argued that this rich portrayal has largely been a figment of al-Wāsiṭī's painterly imagination, when the French Orientalist L. Marcel Devic used the same illustration as the frontispiece to his translation of *ʿAjāʾib al-Hind*, he obviously perceived more than an incidental correspondence.³¹ For an illustrator whose knowledge of Arab folklore would have been essential to his professional success, it would surprise no one if al-Wāsiṭī had consulted the popular pool of tales of which *ʿAjāʾib al-Hind* was but one representative; he might well have consulted the book itself. Shi Huilin's cavalier racism (that all *Kunlun* are "equally base and lowly") seems but a common reaction, his sanctioned ignorance colluding with the equally insouciant attitude of the Arabs to obliterate the diverse histories gathered in even just one hold of human cargo.

Conclusion: Race and the Prospect of a Subaltern Transregionalism

How are we to read these intertextual resonances and work through a puzzle of silences to restore some clarity to the often obscured figures of black sailors and slaves—the essential human infrastructure that underpins the connectivity of the medieval Islamicate world? Every so often, the sources present themselves like a hall of mirrors, and we are left with an amalgamation of skewed sights. It feels as though every observer was an onlooker, every writer an eavesdropper, every geographer an easy prey to marvelous illusions. Anecdotes abound, fantasies proliferate, yet history in the conventional sense seems in woefully short supply. We are thus compelled to look from behind, over the shoulders of those who saw but did not recognize, and by so doing wish for the best in reconstructing what is mostly missing.

In a recent article, Tom Hoogervorst insists on retaining the crucial distinction between maritime and mainland Southeast Asia in historical research. His remark on Srivijaya (三佛齊 San Fo Qi in medieval Chinese records), the Malay Buddhist thalassocratic empire that ruled much of Southeast Asia from the seventh to the twelfth century AD (the period that produced all the sources we have used in this article), is particularly pertinent to the present discussion:

Srivijaya infused unparalleled quantities of spices . . . gold, tin, precious stones, ivory, rhinoceros horns, exotic birds, rainforest products, commodities from the sea, and slaves into trans-Asiatic trade networks. This range of poorly accessible resources reached the ports of Srivijaya through the hands of semi-sedentary foragers with specialized expertise to obtain them. The relations of these groups with Srivijaya and later polities were constantly renegotiated and often leveraged between mutual dependence and political subordination, reflecting a wider pattern throughout Southeast Asian history.³²

Laying stress on the distinctiveness of coastal indigenous peoples in Southeast Asia thus skirts multiple boundaries of numerous empires and religions. If we are to consider the fact that the mighty Srivijaya systematically exploited the labor of Sama-Bajau—a coastal Austronesian indigenous group—and exported slaves to the trans-Asiatic trade networks, then the scenario we earlier encountered in *‘Ajā’ib al-Hind* could be deemed, sans a small amount of charming fantasy, a rather faithful reflection of what must have been a common reality in medieval maritime trade across the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea.

Neither Buddhism nor Islam, nor empires purportedly built on their spiritual appeal—whether Chinese, Perso-Arab, or Malay—acknowledged the often racialized exploitations they had imposed on the indigenous populations of maritime Southeast Asia and coastal East Africa. These groups were often described as being black or associated with black slaves in historical writings across languages. However, whether their origins could be traced to Africa is often unclear in the text, and this lack of attention to their origins is in stark contrast to the stress laid on the apparent features of their skin color. More recent projects, keen on reanimating medieval connectivities to feed contemporary imperialist ambitions—such as China’s Belt and Road Initiative—will likely replicate, if not exacerbate, analogous patterns of exploitation and inequity. Focusing on the fleeting yet insistent eruptions of B/black presence in the multilingual archive can help us reimagine an alternative Global Asia of the subaltern that unfolds as much along bustling coastlines as on billow-braving ships. When Black people are no longer one; when Africa is but one node in a vast network of local yet globally linked hubs where B/black sailors and slaves are recruited; and when current regimes of global imperialism bring ever more forcefully to the surface the extent of connectivity among apparently disparate structures of racial and economic inequity, are we thus on the cusp of excavating the long-buried histories of a subaltern transregionalism that could be drawn upon as inspiration to resist contemporary iterations of global empire? The challenge is daunting, and Asian Studies as a field will likely have much to reckon with.

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Notes

¹ While it is true that in medieval Persian works, the word *chīn* often refers to Central Asia and East Turkestan, while *mā chīn* (the greater China) is mostly used for what is now known as China, perhaps as in most such cases where historical toponyms are involved, it is not always clear which place is referred to by which term. For *chīn* and *mā chīn* as used by Ferdawsi in his *Shāhnāmeḥ*, see Jaʿfari and Pashazanus 1392.

² Ho 2017; 2006; Vink 2007; Worden 2017; Lambourn 2018; Jacob 2019; Prange 2018; Sood 2016; Schottenhammer 2008; 2019.

³ For example, Li 2019.

⁴ A few notable exceptions are worth mentioning here. The work of Don Waytt (2009) remains an essential reference, and Frank Dikötter’s foundational survey (1994), while not always accurate, is still extremely useful and informative. For a general overview of recent works published on China-Africa relations—some of these works treat race more squarely than others—see Siu and McGovern 2017.

⁵ Cf. Burton 2012; Menon 2014; Schueller 2003.

⁶ Schine 2021.

⁷ Ghosh and Chakrabarty 2002, 149.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁹ Erie 2016; Stroup 2022. Some examples to the contrary may be found in Chen 2014 and Hammond 2020.

¹⁰ Gilroy 1993.

¹¹ Two groundbreaking books in this direction are worth mentioning. Robbie Shilliam’s extraordinary *The Black Pacific* (2015) Pasifika and Pakeha activists incorporated the ideologies of the African diaspora into their struggle against colonial rule and racism, and their pursuit of social justice? This book challenges predominant understandings of the historical linkages that make up the (post- explores the Oceanic connections and the Indigenous-Black alliances in anti-colonial struggles; and Nitasha Tamar Sharma’s recently published *Hawai’i Is My Haven: Race and Indigeneity in the Black Pacific* (2021) offers another much-needed vision for linking the Pacific to the Atlantic in the study of both Blackness and blackness and for examining their complex historical interactions.

¹² The original text of the poem can be found in Al-Isfahani 2008, 22:213.

¹³ Diouf 1998, 4–48; Turner 2003, 11–46; GhaneaBassiri 2010, 9–58.

¹⁴ Tolmacheva 2017; Webb 2020.

¹⁵ Cf. Brown 2020.

¹⁶ A line from Nine Songs 九歌 contained in *Chuci* 楚辭, for instance, has 登崑崙兮四望心飛揚兮浩蕩. It is clear that the 崑崙 in later historical records, where it is associated almost exclusively with the color black, is derived from a completely different source—likely of a non-Chinese origin.

¹⁷ Translated from Xu 1985, 1:311. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Chinese, Arabic, and Persian texts in this article are my own.

¹⁸ Translated from Shi 1988, 81:1325.

¹⁹ Segal 2001, 4; Brown 2020, 128.

²⁰ Translation adapted from Chin 2004, with essential contribution from Benjamin Ridgway and Eric Schluessel.

²¹ *Songshi* 宋史, *liezhuan* 列傳 249, *waiguo* 外國 6. Accessed on Dec. 20, 2021, at <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=989027&remap=gb>.

²² See the last entry on *tāz* in the encyclopaedic Persian dictionary *Dehkhodā*. An online version is accessible at <https://dehkhoda.ut.ac.ir/fa/dictionary/81202/%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%B2>.

²³ Chong and Murphy 2017; Krahl 2010.

²⁴ al-Ḥarīrī 1978, 318.

²⁵ Al-Hariri 1898, 97.

²⁶ Original text where this excerpt is extracted is accessible at <https://ctext.org/taiping-guangji/420/taoxian/zh>.

²⁷ See, for instance, Zhu Yu's *Ping Zhou Ke Tan* 萍洲可談 (completed ca. 1119), vol. 2, no. 8. Accessed on Dec. 20, 2021, at <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=57805>.

²⁸ See Said 2011. Additional materials about Omar ibn Said is also available in the Omar ibn Said Collection held by the Library of Congress. For detail see <https://www.loc.gov/collections/omar-ibn-said-collection/about-this-collection/>.

²⁹ al-Rām Hormuzī 1908, 24–25.

³⁰ Here the terminological ambiguity indicates exactly where the proposed project may break new ground. While I draw attention to the conceptual distinction between Blackness and blackness in the introduction to this article, the boundary between the two is necessarily a fuzzy one: Blackness as associated with Africa and black as a color attributed to all people considered as darker than oneself cross into each other when, for instance, both African slaves and Oceanic sailors work on the same ship and serve the same masters. To what extent is Blackness in upper case useful here, or does it at times run into some conceptual gridlock that demonstrates precisely its limit in helping us explore the interconnection between the Black Atlantic and the Black Pacific?

³¹ O'Kane 2012, 49; Ettinghausen 1977, 123.

³² Hoogervorst 2017, 754.

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