

# Zheng He Remains in Africa: China's Belt and Road Initiative as an Anti-Imperialist Discourse

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## Abstract

In recent years, China has sought to extend its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) from Central Asia and Southeast Asia to Africa. This article argues that Chinese officials, aided by Chinese maritime archaeologists, journalists and researchers, have used discourses of heritage and history as a form of soft padding to justify China's infrastructure projects in Africa. Zheng He, a Ming dynasty admiral, who had allegedly visited East Africa in four of his seven famous voyages across the Indian Ocean, is particularly important in China's narrative of its historical relations with Africa. The details of Zheng He's engagement with Africa remain contested by historians, especially those in Western academia. The Chinese government thus supports 'sub-initiatives' of heritage and history construction, namely maritime archaeology, travel journalism and student fellowships, to substantiate the legacy of Zheng He in Africa. By suggesting that China and Africa also share the legacy of having been exploited, humiliated and victimized by European colonial powers, Chinese intellectuals have fashioned the BRI into an anti-imperialist discourse for acceptance by their African counterparts.

*Keywords:* Africa, anti-imperialism, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), colonialism, heritage, history, Zheng He

## Introduction

In September 2014, China launched the 'Silk Road Economic Belt' initiative, which involved massive Chinese-subsidized infrastructure projects in Central Asia that would integrate the region's national economies and create new opportunities for economic development. A month later, Chinese President Xi Jinping introduced the Southeast Asian version of the initiative, the 'Maritime Silk Road', which he suggested was inspired by Zheng He (1371–1433), a Ming dynasty admiral who led a 'Treasure Fleet' of approximately 300 ships manned by 27,000 men on seven voyages to the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. In November 2014, the Chinese government announced that it would form

the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB); it began operations in January 2016 and offers a potential alternative to the World Bank for the financing of construction of ports, railways, roads and industrial parks in Central Asia and Southeast Asia. As observers and analysts suggest, the realization of these initiatives, collectively known as 'One Belt One Road' or 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI), intend to transform China from a regional power into a major player in world affairs (Yu 2017: 353–368).

While some countries welcomed China's pledge to invest in their infrastructure and forge stronger economic links, others were less sanguine about the BRI. The substantial loans that governments might take from the AIIB and Chinese banks to build infrastructure would put their countries in debt and surrender national economies to Chinese control. Through the BRI and other forms of expansionism, journalist Howard W. French suggests, the ideals of *tianxia*, a Sinocentric concept that posits China's 'natural' dominion over everything under heaven, are being put into effect. According to French (2018: 56), this means

building up dependency on China among its smaller neighbours, the better to dominate them peacefully, as much as possible ... [in order to] elicit admiration, or even awe from China's neighbours, but also to generate a kind of fatalism or resignation about the futility of trying to defy it.

Following Xi Jinping's speeches, many bilateral projects between China and countries lying along the Belt and Road, pre-existing and otherwise, have been swept into China's BRI. If *tianxia* was about linking purportedly 'barbaric' peoples under the embrace and orbit of the Chinese civilization, then the BRI was about linking economically less-developed countries under the leadership of China, the most successful developing nation of today. Xi Jinping has declared that China should lead economic globalization. However, as political scientist William Case (2018) suggests, China promotes globalization on its own terms, which are based on economic outwardness, not openness. Tens of thousands of state-owned Chinese enterprises that control the major domestic industries such as banking, energy, finance, telecommunications and transport (especially high-speed rail) now aim, in mercantilist manner, to dominate these industries in the global economy. As Case (2018: 17–18) puts it, '[t]he Middle Kingdom seeks again to dominate all under heaven'. Anxious diplomats and politicians have regarded China's BRI as 'a master-plan aimed at turning Eurasian nations into tributary states, dependent on Chinese capital, crisscrossed with Chinese-owned railways, pipelines and roads, and increasingly bound by Chinese rules

governing everything from trade to cyber-security' (*The Economist* 2018). Eager to export their experience in transforming China through dams, roads and high-speed rail, Chinese firms have secured contracts with governments on the Belt and Road. Host or recipient governments have taken out destabilizing loans (many of which represent a substantial part of their national GDP and which charge commercial interest rates) from state-owned Chinese banks to pay these Chinese firms and their Chinese workers who staff the infrastructure projects.

It seems, then, that China is currently 'a nation on a civilizational march, one driven by its deep sense of its historical place in the world and the entitlement this brings it' (French 2018: 283). But the link between the BRI and China's past, especially its history of tributary relations with the polities of Southeast Asia and beyond, is usually implied rather than proven in the existing analyses of China's rise as a global power. Moreover, while it is easy for China to strike a sense of affinity with Central Asia and Southeast Asia by highlighting either the frequency of trade in the past or the existence of a huge Chinese diaspora in the present, it is difficult to do so with Africa, which barely appears in Chinese court annals and other extant writings.

This article examines China's attempts to establish a historical link with Africa through maritime archaeology and travel journalism in order to discursively extend the Maritime Silk Road to that continent. By excavating shipwrecks off East Asian coasts and tracing the footsteps of Zheng He in Africa, the Chinese government has mobilized archaeologists and journalists in highlighting what it perceives as continuities and similarities between Zheng He's voyages of the past and the extended Maritime Silk Road initiative of the present. Given a general but powerful backlash in developing countries regarding the cronyism, national debts, loss of local ownership and environmental ruin that have accompanied Chinese investments, China has required soft paddings such as history or historical precedents of friendship to justify its global initiatives as not being self-serving and to assure that they would, as its version of history tells us, benefit from Chinese benevolence and peaceful rise.

In the case of Africa and Southeast Asia, the Maritime Silk Road marks a return to China's tributary system of the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries, when its emperors offered largesse to their vassal kings and envoys. For China, it does not matter that African polities (specifically those in East Africa) paid tribute to the Chinese only in the early fifteenth century, at the sight and most likely coercion of Zheng He's armada

(in fact, after the voyages ceased, African missions terminated). What matters is that Zheng He was, in China's idealization, an ambassador of friendship who had connected Africans with the Chinese, who had not and never would abuse China's might to exploit or colonize Africa in the way Europeans did, as suggested by the 'historical' record.

A word is in order regarding the methodological approach to this article. Undoubtedly, qualitative interviews with Chinese researchers involved in substantiating the legacy of Zheng He in Africa and fashioning the BRI into an anti-imperialist discourse would be useful. But the article is primarily concerned with what kind of narratives were constructed rather than how they came to be, as well as with why they mattered in Sino-African relations. An analysis of empirical data such as books, newspaper articles and travel writings endorsed or sponsored for publication by the Chinese government can thus demonstrate adequately and explicitly that China's attempts to connect with Africa through Zheng He are part of its broader BRI strategy.

## **In Search of a Shipwreck**

As Don D. Fowler (1987) famously noted, archaeology has often been put to political use, particularly by nationalists. Why this is so and how it has been politically used depends on the context or nation, but basic reasons include the highly institutional or organizational structure of archaeological practice, which involves teams of diversely specialized personnel, and the discipline's scale of operations and hence its heavy reliance on the state's infrastructural bases of support, such as grants, museums and universities. Archaeology does not yield objects of commercial value. As 'national treasures' and properties of the state, items uncovered by archaeologists could not be auctioned or sold on the open market. Therefore, for archaeologists and their prohibitively expensive and extremely technical projects, state approval and sponsorship might be the only recourse.

Archaeology holds great allure for the nation-state. In China, archaeologists have been able to find the scientific proof political leaders need to determine the prehistory of their nation – the longer, the better – as with the Xia-Shang-Zhou Chronological Project, which has rejected scholarly consensus and controversially traced Chinese history back five thousand years (Shaughnessy 2009: 15–28). Artefacts and materials unearthed on archaeological sites have been exhibited at national and provincial museums, testifying to China's glorious past as a civiliza-

tion and alluding to the successful integration of cultures and peoples across China. Chinese archaeologists have secured funds from both state and regional agencies by accommodating the different agendas of their sponsors – the central government seeks political legitimacy by compiling the histories and archaeological findings of previous dynasties and regimes, while the provincial governments crave greater central patronage and seek to assuage local pride (von Falkenhauser 1995: 198–217).

Under the impetus of nationalism, as Bruce G. Trigger (1995: 269) explains, archaeology has thus 'abandoned a primary focus on evolution and concentrated on interpreting the archaeological record as the history of specific peoples', resulting in the development of what might be called 'culture-historical archaeology'. According to Trigger, cultural-historical archaeology usually takes the form of identifying a people with a succession of archaeological cultures leading into the remote past – whose existence, I would add, has been inadequately proven by textual evidence – and drawing attention to the achievements of these cultures. The Ming annals and the records by Zheng He's companion Ma Huan (c. 1380–1460) are China's strongest evidence of historical intercourse with Africa, but they do not reveal deep, more intimate exchanges between the peoples of Africa and China. Nevertheless, searching for shipwrecks (i.e., wrecks of ships that purportedly ferried goods and people between Africa and China) off the coast of East Africa was a part of China's 'succession of archaeological cultures'. China's interest in these shipwrecks and old artefacts stems from the wish for identification. While Chinese archaeologists might not know the names of the people of the past, they continue to regard them as 'Africans' or 'Chinese' and present their findings as indisputable truth, inventorying unearthed artefacts to connect them to the 'correct' textual information, to events and persons known from literary sources. Chinese archaeologists also seek to connect names to African sites and to localize history, 'embedding the narratives of the literary sources in the local landscape' (Eriksen 2014: 37). They do not challenge the official Chinese narratives of historical links between China and Africa. Rather, they work to confirm what the sanctioned Chinese 'histories' already tell. Their archaeological reconstruction aims to recover events, names and persons, not dispute them.

In August 2010, a team of Chinese archaeologists went to Kenya to search for an ancient sunken ship believed to have been part of Zheng He's fleets. Kenyans on Lamu Island of the Lamu Archipelago had reportedly discovered ceramic shards dated from the Ming dynasty

(1368–1644), which inspired the trip. The Chinese government secured the cooperation of Kenya and commenced a three-year sponsorship of the archaeological project, which had cost US\$3 million as of 2013 (Sina.com 2010). Under China's agreement with Kenya, Chinese archaeologists and scientists could cooperate with the National Museums of Kenya in surveying and excavating Kenya's seabed. The Chinese archaeological team also tested the DNA of Kenyans on Lamu Island, some of whom supposedly possessed Chinese features. The Chinese also conducted interviews and compiled oral histories to verify if they were descendants of Zheng He's followers who had swum ashore from the sinking ship and settled on the island (Sina.com 2010).

In December 2010, China's Ministry of Commerce sponsored a follow-up two-month mission by archaeologists of Peking University and relevant units in Fujian and Zhejiang Provinces, the south-eastern Chinese provinces which were most involved in the construction and launch of Zheng He's fleets. Together with the team that was already in Kenya, these archaeologists catalogued the existing Kenyan collections and newly excavated materials. They also helped Kenyan curators with the study of the Mombasa Wreck, a sunken seventeenth-century Portuguese frigate that carried porcelain, including Chinese pieces. Portuguese navigator Vasco da Gama (c. 1460–1524) had visited Mombasa on his way to India. At the turn of the sixteenth century, the Portuguese had built a fortress in Mombasa, which was successively overrun by Arab and British forces over the next centuries (Qin et al. 2014: 6–24; Underwater Archaeology Research Centre 2012: 89–99). It would be to China's credit to establish that Zheng He had operated in Mombasa's vicinity without the slightest intent to embroil it in wars and colonialism.

Although the Chinese archaeologists and palaeontologists admit that they have not discovered any material evidence to prove that the Chinese sailors in the East African shipwreck were the men of Zheng He's fleets, they believe that the 'Chinese' on Pate Island, the largest island of the Lamu Archipelago, are the descendants of Zheng He's crew, who married local women and formed a community of Chinese Africans. They have determined that the ship they are studying sank during the period of Zheng He's voyages (Rice 2010). In March 2013, American scientists discovered a Ming-dynasty coin on the Kenyan island of Manda, which strengthened the Chinese hypothesis that trade had existed between China and East Africa, at the very least through Arab or European intermediaries, decades before European explorers sailed to the Horn of Africa. The inscription *Yongle Tongbao* dates the



coin to the reign of the Yongle Emperor (1402–1424), who dispatched Zheng He on his voyages (Field Museum 2013).

Strong Sino-Kenyan interstate relations in recent years have made possible Chinese archaeological and palaeontological work, and this served as a confidence-building project before the construction of infrastructure intensified after 2013, when the incumbent Kenyan president Uhuru Kenyatta assumed office. StarTimes, a privately owned, Beijing-based media and communications firm that enjoys substantial backing from the Chinese government, has helped Kenya transit from analogue to digital television and stoked the improved networks with pro-China broadcasts – programmes that portray an urban, fast-developing and non-controversial China. Access to international channels that are inclined to depict China negatively costs more than most Kenyans can afford. But many Kenyans continue to view China with suspicion, worried that China's infrastructure projects are saddling Kenya with crippling debt (the projects often yield far less revenue than expenditure) and damaging Kenya's biodiverse national parks. Some are also outraged that the Chinese projects have hired more Chinese labourers, who enjoy preferential treatment at work, than local ones. Little transparency exists, critics allege, drawing accusations of corruption. China ultimately aims to connect Kenya, via railroad, with Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda and South Sudan and improve these countries' access to ports, which would in turn improve trade and open markets or, as sceptics say, expose a significant part of Africa to China's economic exploitation. In the end, the controversies are barely reported by Chinese news outlets in Kenya (Kaiman 2017).

As of mid-2018, China has displaced the World Bank to become Kenya's single largest foreign creditor. Kenyan observers worry that their government might surrender control of the nation's infrastructure and mineral wealth to China to settle its debt – the precedent of Sri Lanka's handing over its Hambantota Port to China looms. Even Uhuru Kenyatta admits that Kenya has a skewed trade relationship with China and has been asking the Chinese government to redress the balance (Masiga 2018). Kenyan journalists have referred to China as Shylock in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, demanding 'no less than a pound of flesh from any country that is unable to repay its debts' (Kilonzo 2018). The projects for which Kenya borrowed might not be able to finance its debt obligations to China, which has now become Kenya's 'biggest shareholder', accounting for 72 per cent of Kenya's bilateral debt by the end of March 2018 (Karugu 2018). But Chinese officials have maintained

that China is merely building up Kenya's capacity and transferring skills to Kenya's labour market (Kivuva 2018). For its part, Kenya plans to establish, with Chinese aid, a network of marine museums across the country to help boost tourism. The museums, which are to remain underwater due to the high cost of preserving archaeological artefacts on land, will be used to collect, preserve and display Kenya's underwater cultural heritage – the Chinese shipwreck, albeit heavily publicized, is only one of 30 wrecks discovered off the Kenyan coast in the Indian Ocean (Xinhuanet.com 2018).

For China, then, underwater cultural heritage is crucial to the BRI because it provides an emotive connection between China and East African nations such as Kenya, albeit one that is perhaps more advantageous to China. In 1987, China established its first underwater archaeology organization. In 1989, it promulgated the Regulations of the PRC Concerning the Administration of the Work for Protection of Underwater Cultural Relics. These regulations allow the Chinese government to claim ownership of all the cultural relics 'of Chinese origin' outside Chinese territorial waters (Guo 2017: 533; Jing 2019: 111–112).<sup>1</sup> The renewed significance of underwater cultural heritage vis-à-vis the BRI thus justifies the existing administrative mechanisms for protecting all forms of cultural heritage both within and outside China. It also bolsters the coordination between the central government and the provincial and county-level agencies in protecting underwater cultural heritage under Chinese jurisdiction.

Ultimately, the Chinese government seeks to promote understanding and cultural exchange with other countries through maritime archaeology – a scientific, 'objective' way to establish informal, friendly relations outside commercial realpolitik (Jing 2019: 756–764). In its pursuit of a strategy of underwater cultural heritage with Kenya, which has not enacted any form of legal authority over sunken relics or vessels in Kenyan territorial waters, China plays the role of cultural custodian, responsible for excavating artefacts from the sea and then preserving them in Kenyan museums. For China, the origins, rather than ownership, of these relics or vessels is crucial to its project of establishing a link between China and Africa through the legacy of Zheng He. But the approach of underwater cultural heritage is an added benefit, applicable to only a handful of East African nations such as Kenya. China has thus adopted a more dominant narrative as part of its BRI rhetoric – the dominance and humiliation of both China and especially Africa by European colonial powers.



## In Search of a Hero

As the historian Don J. Wyatt (2010) suggests, the Chinese knew of Africa only indirectly and largely through intermediaries such as the Arabs, who visited Africa's eastern coastline and offshore islands as early as the tenth century. According to extant textual evidence, 'we are truly challenged to find mention of any definite place on the African continent in a Chinese source prior to the mid-ninth century C.E.' (Wyatt 2010: 84). However, China, or Chinese culture, remains committed to the documentary description of its relations with Africa, as its maritime archaeological projects have made known. As there is no record of Chinese ships sailing to Africa prior to the fifteenth century, Zheng He becomes important in China's narrative of its premodern self in relation to Africa.

Born in modern-day Yunnan Province, Zheng He was an ethnic Muslim Hui who was captured by the Ming army during its conquest of the province. As the son of a leading member of the resistance against Ming forces, Zheng He was subjected to castration. He accepted his punishment without malice and remained loyal to the Ming court throughout his life. The Yongle Emperor recognized his talent for leadership and dispatched him on several military campaigns. Zheng He's victories earned him an imperially bestowed surname and the rank of director-in-chief of the Directorate of Palace Eunuchs. When the Yongle Emperor sanctioned the 'celestial voyages' of Treasure Fleets to demonstrate the capabilities of the realm over which he as the Chinese sovereign ruled, he chose Zheng He to command the expeditions – an ultimately 'inner-court' initiative outside the bureaucracy's intervention – because he believed that the eunuch's leadership could afford him maximum latitude over the setting of objectives and the allocation of resources. Zheng He was a devout Muslim who could speak fluent Arabic and deal adroitly with the predominantly Islamic polities that he was expected to visit during his voyages. Furthermore, as the Director of Palace Eunuchs, he was responsible for palace construction and was familiar with civil engineering and the manufacture of ships and weapons (Wyatt 2010: 93–97).

For contemporary China and the Chinese, Zheng He's encounter with 'Africa' was the first Chinese exposure to and therefore confirmation of sightings of 'Africans'. However, the elevation of Ming dynastic prestige among known tributary partners remained Zheng He's key objective; his exploration of unknown territories such as Africa was never a top priority. This is similar to the BRI, which, at least for the time being,

remains focused on Central Asia and Southeast Asia; Africa is a possible extension point for the BRI in the long run, subject to the success of the initiative on the Central and Southeast Asia fronts. Like the fables that emerged not long after Zheng He's voyages ceased, present-day official Chinese narratives continue to encourage readers to believe that the admiral was universally welcomed at every port of call – whether Zheng He visited Africa intentionally or fortuitously remains uncertain. These narratives dismiss the acts of violence committed by Zheng He as those against 'pirates' and 'recalcitrant' kings (Wade 2005: 37–58).

In support of official Chinese narratives, Chinese journalists have produced several travelogues and special reports documenting their encounters in Africa. Li Xinfeng, a journalist based in Africa for eight years for the Chinese government's organ *People's Daily* (*Renmin ribao*), is particularly famous for his extensive reportage on the continent. For his books on Sino-African relations and his own trips across Africa, he became a professor at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), a think tank affiliated with China's State Council. CASS has sponsored the translation of his books into English for sale in Africa, and Chinese dignitaries such as former premier Wen Jiabao have penned calligraphy or written prefaces for the books. Li Xinfeng has dedicated himself to the anthropological and ethnographical study of Africa, having conducted several year-long fieldtrips to 'trace the footsteps of Zheng He in Africa' (*Feizhou taxun Zheng He lu*) and, of particular interest to this article, to examine the relationship between 'Zheng He and Africa' (*Zheng He yu Feizhou*).

In *Zheng He yu Feizhou*, Li Xinfeng (2012) explains the historical significance of Zheng He's voyages to Africa. By suggesting that the first instance of Chinese migration to Africa occurred in modern-day Kenya, where some of Zheng He's crew settled after being shipwrecked, rather than Mauritius, where Chinese coolies began working in plantations in the eighteenth century, Li Xinfeng argues that the Chinese had 'discovered' Africa before the Europeans. Chinese sources, Li Xinfeng writes, recorded the events, persons and places of Africa, countering the Hegelian claim that the Africans have no history.<sup>2</sup> Li Xinfeng (2012: 377–378) has subscribed to the 'myth of continents' and somewhat teleologically presupposed the existence of fixed boundaries and categories such as 'Africa', 'China', 'Africans' and 'Chinese' – a live example of how cultural assumptions and national identity have reinforced the misconceived geographical divisions that govern the way people have perceived the world.<sup>3</sup>

Tracing the footsteps of Zheng He in Africa, Li Xinfeng continues, could provide a 'historical basis' (*lishi genju*) and 'theoretical support' (*lilun zhichi*) for Africa's 'Look East' policy. Li Xinfeng insists that China's maritime trade with Africa through Zheng He's voyages was conducted based on friendship and mutual benefit, several centuries before the European exploitation of African people and resources via imperialism. He posits that contemporary China's BRI sustains the tradition of Ming China's 'equal relationship' (*pingdeng guanxi*) with Africa (Li 2012: 378–380). As a Muslim accompanied by Arab interpreters, Li Xinfeng elaborates, Zheng He was sensitive to the cultures he encountered in Africa and the Middle East. That his crew could assimilate into African societies after being shipwrecked shows that the Chinese truly respect and value foreign cultures (Li 2012: 382–383). According to Li Xinfeng, during the Ming dynasty when Zheng He sailed across the Indian Ocean to Africa, China held a third of the world's wealth. But Zheng He's massive fleets did not colonize foreign lands or subdue foreign peoples. Neither did they enslave Africans nor threaten any polity with force. Rather, Zheng He cultivated friendships and expanded trade between China and other nations, differentiating China's approach from the reality of European imperialism in Africa. In Li Xinfeng's view, China's rise would not destroy cultures, nations and peoples, as Zheng He well exemplified (Li 2012: 383–385).

However, such a narrative has obscured not only Zheng He's instances of violence, but also Ming China's aggression towards Vietnam and Qing China's military expansion into northwestern and southwestern China, where economic exploitation, settler colonialism and massacres occurred.<sup>4</sup> If contemporary China were to inherit the territories previously held by Qing China, then it should acknowledge the atrocities that Qing armies committed in Guizhou, Sichuan, Tibet, Xinjiang and Yunnan.

Li Xinfeng also denies the existence of a 'China threat'. For him, China suffered more than a century of national humiliation at the hands of Western imperialism from the Opium War (1839–1842) to the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. China is thus able to understand the negative impact of Western imperialism on Africa. Li Xinfeng maintains that China's contracts and economic deals with African nations are 'open and transparent' (*gongkai touming*). Moreover, he continues, China imports less oil – one of Africa's most valuable exports – from Africa than Europe and the United States. The African leaders and politicians he has interviewed, he writes, agree that China has not coerced or exploited the continent. For Li Xinfeng, China's construction

of the Tanzania–Zambia Railway in the 1970s, which lifted landlocked Zambia's economic dependence on apartheid Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) and South Africa, was a clear example of China's unconditional assistance to developing countries and respect for other nations' sovereignty during the decolonization of Africa in the 1960s and 1970s.

Advocates of the 'China threat' narrative, many of whom are Americans and Europeans, are judging China's foreign aid and BRI based on their own historical experience of imperialism, Li Xinfeng argues. In fact, he elaborates, Western nations are alarmed at China's rise because China could eliminate Africa's reliance on the West for economic assistance and export markets and, hence, rescue the continent from Western neo-imperialism. By restricting and denying China an active and constructive role in African affairs, he suggests, Western nations are trying to protect their interests in Africa and maintain their dominance of the world (Li 2012: 387–392).

Li Xinfeng defends his thesis of China's 'peaceful diplomacy' (*heping waijiao*) by consulting the Ming annals and imperial pronouncements, which urged Zheng He to exercise restraint and not strive for unilateral advantage in his conduct of relations with foreign rulers. The descendants of Zheng He's crew in Kenya inherited his humility and respect for local societies. They thus helped lay the foundation for positive Sino-African relations to develop – a 'precious historical legacy' (*baogui de lishi yichan*) (Li 2012: 393–398). Unlike most historians, Li Xinfeng argues that Ming China prioritized its relations with African polities, as suggested by Zheng He's four personal visits to East Africa.<sup>5</sup>

To be sure, Li Xinfeng is not the first person to associate contemporary Sino-African relations with Zheng He's voyages. In 1964, when former Chinese premier Zhou Enlai (1898–1976) visited East Africa, he declared Zheng He a great explorer who had contributed substantially to Sino-African friendship. In the 2000s, Chinese leaders such as Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao made several references to Zheng He, and in 2005, the Chinese government celebrated the 600th anniversary of Zheng He's voyages. As former CASS President Wang Weiguang (2012: 4–5) suggests, Chinese leaders have in recent years funded the study of Africa and the publicity of Zheng He, seeing them as inseparable. State-sponsored research and publications on Africa have 'rediscovered' Zheng He as a pioneer of Sino-African relations.

## In Search of a Descendant

Li Xinfeng spent six years, from 1999 to 2005, tracing the footsteps of Zheng He in Africa, based on what he had gathered from extant Chinese sources. One of his unexpected 'discoveries' was a Kenyan girl named Mwamaka Sharifu from Lamu Island. In 1999, *New York Times* journalist Nicholas D. Kristof (2019) met several elderly men on the Kenyan island of Pate who told him that they were descendants of shipwrecked Chinese sailors. Hot on Kristof's heels, Li Xinfeng encountered many Kenyans who claimed ancestry from Zheng He's crew and had ancestral tombs that faced northeast, towards China.

But Sharifu's story attracted the most attention. In 2002, Chinese researchers ran a DNA test on Sharifu and her family, who were among the first Kenyans interviewed for their alleged links with Zheng He's crew. The researchers identified six people on Lamu (the island had 7,500 people) as Chinese descendants. One of them was Sharifu, who was highly publicized by Li Xinfeng's newspaper reports and became China's poster girl in its attempts to strengthen ties with Africa. Born to a poor fisherman, Sharifu could not afford a college education. In 2004, she wrote to the Chinese embassy in Kenya, expressing her strong desire to pursue higher education in China (*China Daily* 2005). In 2005, in conjunction with the celebrations of the voyages of Zheng He, the Chinese government invited Sharifu to visit China. By then nicknamed 'China Girl', Sharifu toured Taicang City in Jiangsu Province, where her ancestors supposedly came from. She also attended the commemorative events that marked Zheng He's travels. She was then offered a scholarship, awarded by the Chinese government, to study traditional Chinese medicine at the Nanjing University of Chinese Medicine (Ministry of Foreign Affairs [China]).

The Chinese government's sponsorship of Sharifu's education laid the foundation for its involvement in Kenya's 'Beyond Zero' initiative. Spearheaded by the First Lady Margaret Kenyatta, Beyond Zero aims at alleviating the health problems of mothers and children and improving the livelihood of women in Kenya. Having received a tertiary education in medicine, Sharifu provided an example of how China could assist the initiative. Since 2017, the Chinese government has pledged to support Kenya's initiative by offering bursaries and full scholarships to disadvantaged Kenyan girls to study medicine and other subjects at Chinese universities. Chinese officials have also trained a group of Kenyan women to operate or serve as attendants on the new standard-gauge

railway trains, which are one of China's many infrastructure projects in Kenya. (Executive Office of the President [Kenya]).

If the DNA tests were accurate, then Sharifu and the handful of Kenyans identified by Li Xinfeng and Chinese researchers as 'Chinese' had succeeded, with official Chinese and Kenyan endorsement, in creating for themselves a diasporic identity and a sense of historical continuity by linking 'ancestral' and 'actual' migrations, similar to what the Soninke people of the Gambia have done (Gaibazzi 2012: 30). If Li Xinfeng had traced the footsteps of Zheng He in Africa, then Sharifu had allowed Zheng He's story to come full circle by 'returning' to China. Unlike artefacts or relics uncovered by maritime archaeology, Sharifu was a living or organic testimony to China's claim that Africa's relationship with China was longer, friendlier and far more mutually advantageous than that with European powers, which had exploited, humiliated and victimized their African colonies for their own benefit.

## Conclusion

In late July 2018, Xi Jinping visited four African countries – Senegal, Rwanda, South Africa and Mauritius. He oversaw the signing of BRI cooperation agreements during his tour. With Senegal, which enjoys a 'unique geographical location', China's BRI expanded into West Africa. The BRI had focused more on East Africa, which, thanks to Zheng He's voyages, forms a more 'natural geographic link' with the Maritime Silk Road stretching from East Asia westward through the Indian Ocean (Tiezzi 2018). Without this link, China must seek other commonalities and explanations for its cooperation with West Africa; heritage and history are thus simply one of many discursive tools – albeit one that is preferred by Chinese officials – at its disposal. For them, a shared history in humiliation at the hands of Western imperialism 'organically' binds China with its African compatriots (Wang 2012).

The discourse of Chinese archaeologists, historians and journalists has reinforced the Chinese government's rhetoric that a peaceful and powerful China, as in the past, will contribute to Africa's prosperity and future economic growth. China's quest to extend its BRI into Africa has manifested itself in its maritime archaeological projects off the extensive East African coast, the sponsorship of research and publications on Africa and the search for descendants of Zheng He's crew in Kenya. China's 'discoveries' of Chinese shipwrecks, the legacy of Zheng He and the revelation of 'China Girl' historically justify its BRI in Africa; it



remains to be seen whether they can convince the African public that China's infrastructure projects, as suggested by the official Chinese narrative, are truly compatible with their nations' needs.

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## NOTES

1. The definition of 'of Chinese origin' is vague; it could mean 'China as its flag state', 'Chinese ports as its departing port', 'its cargoes of Chinese origin' or 'ship built in China'. See Guo (2017: 533).
2. Li Xinfeng's claim is exaggerated, however, because, as previously mentioned, Chinese accounts of Africa were sketchy, at least prior to the ninth century.
3. For more on the myth of continents, see Lewis and Wigen (1997).
4. The 'New Qing' histories are particularly relevant. See, for example, Hostetler (2001); Perdue (2005); Giersch (2006); and Dai (2009).
5. Whether Zheng He personally visited Africa remains contested by historians, as Li Xinfeng (2012: 399–400) himself has conceded.

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