

Kunlun and Kuronbo: The Image of Blacks in East Asia

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Abstract

The discussion about black people as “the other” in Western art has reached fruitful achievements in academia. However, how the image of black people, including darker-skinned people, was shaped in East Asia still leaves much room for exploration. Instead of being based on scant literature with its limitations, this paper observes research materials through an open perspective of East Asian seas. The discussion begins with the black man labeled Kuronbo in Nagasaki prints, traces the history of the related figure of Kunlun man in Chinese literature, and analyzes the characteristics of black people as written about in China and Japan. The second part begins when the Portuguese sailed to East Asia in the 16th century. The discussion reveals images of blacks appearing in both Chinese and Japanese documents throughout the ages. Finally, this paper analyzes the relationships of pictorial forms and explains the development of imagery of blacks in East Asia. The conclusion offers a comprehensive understanding of blacks that differs from those of scholarly research, which mainly explores Japanese and Chinese perspectives separately. The texts and images of blacks in East Asia are inter-referenced regularly but separately to show historical links. All in all, this paper not only provides an alternative way to appreciate Nagasaki prints but also unveils a network of texts and images composed by blacks in East Asia that has been largely ignored.

Keywords: black people, Kuronbo, Kunlun, black “barbarian”, black slave, the other, Nagasaki prints