12 Futures Elsewhere

African Student Migrants in China

Elaine Lynn-Ee Ho

Commenting on the relationship between subjects and cities, geographer Anna Secor[1] observes that it is less distance or proximity that defines such relationships but the topology of power that places certain possibilities within or out of reach. Shifting senses of the past and its collision with the present or possibilities of the future lead migrants to chart personal projects that are achieved by moving from one place to another. When such social navigations[2] persist and are evinced at a collective level, they materialize as a migration culture[3] that draws together imaginings of the past, present and future in order to chart journeys abroad. Countries in North America and Europe were once the key destinations that African migrants chose when making a decision to move abroad. Increasingly more are choosing China which they see as a country that has successfully accelerated urbanization and development.

Migrating to China offers both economic and educational opportunities. A range of Chinese cities appeal to African migrants. African migrants can purchase cheap goods in cities that thrive on trade, such as Guangzhou, and export those goods to their home countries for resale at higher prices.[4] Other Chinese cities such as Wuhan offer the opportunity for keen learners to study in Chinese universities, learn the Chinese language and immerse themselves in Chinese cultural learning (Figure 12.1). Just as important are the prior social networks that the African migrants have in cities, which influences the destination site they choose eventually. Other than serving a trade function, Guangzhou also has prestigious universities and a metropolitan culture that is attractive to African youths. As a fast growing city,

Wuhan is also attractive to African students for its university options and urban experience. Compared to Guangzhou, it is less expensive to study and live in Wuhan. The African student migrants, whom this research focused on, were likely to combine both trading and educational purposes during their stay in China.

The research was conducted in Guangzhou and Wuhan, which have become popular destinations for African student migrants. Alongside carrying out ethnographic observations on student life in China, forty-two African student migrants were interviewed in total across the two research sites. They come from a range of countries in the African continent, attesting to the reach of China attained through both diplomatic maneuvering and economic investments. In 2015 there were officially 49,792 Africans studying in China, of 397,635 international students in total (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 14 April 2016).[5] The label "African" might gloss over the heterogeneous characteristics (e.g., Anglophone or Francophone, religious affiliations and socio-economic status) of the migrant population represented in China, but the paper uses this referent to contextualise international student migration in geopolitical and geo-economic discourses of China-Africa relations.[6]

12.1   African students in Wuhan socialising after classes.

Guangzhou and Wuhan are both recognised as sites of several highly ranked Chinese universities but the former has the added reputation as a hub for China-Africa trade and business. The African student migrants based in Guangzhou were likely to engage in such business activities alongside managing their studies. Even those in Wuhan said they would travel to Guangzhou during their vacation to work part-time as translators or trading intermediaries so as to earn extra income and also to widen their potential business networks. Amir who is an undergraduate from Somalia (male, Guangzhou; fieldwork interview, June 2014) said:

> Students come [here] to [kill two birds with one stone]… When you go back to Africa, [you have] two opportunities. As long as Africa and China [have] relations, there are a lot of investors [and business opportunities] with Chinese companies back in Africa … for [those] who can speak Chinese … and know about China—Chinese culture. Of course it is more welcoming than [for] a person who [has] never [gone] to China …. If I apply to a Chinese company, later on [compared to] another person who [went to] another [country], the reason [such companies] will take me is because I know the [Chinese] language, I know [Chinese] culture, I at least understand it, you know? Yeah. It's like my status.

In explaining their decisions to study in China, the African student migrants would often refer first to the earlier decision they had made *not* to go to Europe or North America (i.e., the "West"). They thought it would be difficult to successfully apply for a visa to study in Western countries, which have become more restrictive towards applicants from developing countries. Many had considered going to a European destination because of the longstanding ties that African countries have with European countries such as France or the United Kingdom as a result of historical colonial relations. Although the young African migrants had not experienced Western colonialization personally, the political, societal, and educational systems in their home countries have been shaped through Western colonization. Decolonization processes in African countries have sought to put some distance between the pasts of colonialism and the futures of those countries, but the influence of Western countries remains in place such as through political ties, foreign investment, and the development aid that Western powers continue to channel to African countries.

Over the last decade China has emerged as a new global player in the African continent. Not only did China revive efforts to build friendly diplomatic relations with African governments, Chinese state-directed and private investment has also been driving development processes in African countries.[7] As China's reputation grew in the African continent, it also became recognised as an alternative educational destination for African student migrants. These African youths and their families regard China as a development model that has set itself apart from Western experiences of development. China had succeeded economically to become a middle-income country within a shorter time frame than Western countries despite eschewing models of Western liberal democracy which has been said to be a linchpin of modernisation. As a result of investments in the African continent, Chinese firms have also built transportation and other infrastructure in those countries where they have established a presence. To the African student migrants, the positive experience of China represents a glimpse of what the future of their own countries could be like.

The Chinese government has sponsored more than 18,000 scholarships to African students since 2013 so as to strengthen bilateral relations with African countries. Such scholarships enhanced knowledge exchanges between China and African governments which sent public servants to study in China and learn about its public administration, urbanisation experience and economic policies. But African parents and youths are also mindful that a stint in China can improve their social mobility in two ways: first, by pursuing business opportunities afforded to them in China, and second, by acquiring qualifications from a Chinese university. For example, African families that have business dealings in China send a young person to be educated there so as to learn the Chinese language and culture. This allows a member of the family to gainfully apply for a student visa that would allow him or her to remain in China and help manage the business operations there. Guangzhou is an ideal work and study destination for African youths in such family situations. Those who do not have family members running businesses in China would still capitalise upon their time there to work part-time as translators and trading intermediaries, or look out for business opportunities they might develop once they have completed their studies.

The African student migrants interviewed in this study also said that they were drawn to China because of the impression that they can benefit from the Chinese educational system while experiencing what living in modern Chinese cities are like. Cities such as Guangzhou and Wuhan, which offer a metropolitan experience and demonstrate signs of continued urban development, appeal to such African student migrants. They study in

disciplines as diverse as engineering, computing, international economics, business, public administration, politics, law, architecture, urban design and medicine. Besides the personal and familial migration motivations underlying their move to China, also at stake were the futures that the African student migrants imagined for themselves and their countries of origin in Africa. Samuel (male undergraduate in Wuhan; fieldwork interview, June 2013) who left Benin to pursue a postgraduate degree at a Chinese university in Wuhan said, "I hope it's not my imagination but [I see how] my city [can] improve in terms of [its] level of development … I think that if I didn't come [to China] I could not have seen how other cities have developed". Even though some students sought to use their time in China to work for personal or family incomes, they articulated their hopes that people in the African countries they come from may also benefit from the economic platforms they can help to build to create employment opportunities for their fellow nationals or to facilitate people's access to goods that can improve their quality of life. Others had loftier aspirations to work in government service after they have graduated and influence political and economic decisions subsequently. By gaining proficiency in the Chinese language and knowledge of Chinese practices they believe they can negotiate for better conditions when working with Chinese firms or for their countries during negotiations with the Chinese government. Their narratives articulate a desire to balance personal and familial projects with collective national projects.

Inasmuch as moving to China had helped them to get a step closer to those aspirations, life in China has been disappointing for them in other ways. Although they were quick to affirm that the Chinese universities they chose are highly ranked within the country, the African students interviewed also acknowledged that their educational experience in China did not align fully with their expectations of what migrating to China could have offered them. Abdul from Togo who completed an earlier degree in France (male, undergraduate in Guangzhou; fieldwork interview, June 2014) said:

> [The] teaching style is not critical. It's like—that's what I teach you, that's what—you have to stick [to] it. If I ask you a question for the exam, you have to stick [to the prescribed information]. But you know … when I went to college [in France] my teachers said no [answer] is right [or] wrong. Everything you say depends on how you—which kind of argument you give. If your argument is right, okay, we can accept it. But here, no, you have to stick [to the prescribed information]. That's the problem.

Apart from formal learning, the African students also shared the view that their Chinese teachers assume Africans are less studious than other foreigners and the Chinese students. They worry that they will get lower grades as a result of such social prejudice. They also opined that the universities have not done enough to address their concerns about the lack of internship and employment opportunities for foreign students, the visa difficulties that foreign students face, and other matters. The top-down nature of decision-making in China (including in Chinese universities) and African students' temporary visa status deters them from advocating for changes in case it jeopardizes their ability to remain in the country to complete their degrees.

In other areas, their experiences of living in Chinese cities have allowed them to compare in more informed ways what they think African cities can learn from China. The African students commended the urban infrastructure in Chinese cities but they did not speak as highly about the cleanliness of the cities or the conviviality of the Chinese people. In particular, they felt that as Africans in China they are treated poorly not only because of their skin colour but also because the Chinese consider African countries developing nations that are sub-par to modern China. They express nostalgia for semblances of Western modernity that connote civility in everyday life and a respect for human social relations. To Abdul, the contrast is exemplified through the service standards in China. He said:

> [If you] go to [a] restaurant, you see [Chinese] people's behavior, it doesn't give you that appetite to eat… You know, in Western [countries] when [some]one serves you, you [make polite conversation]… You feel passion. [Referring to the server] It's like, I like, I really like what I'm doing. [So] when you eat there, you feel good. But here it's like, "what do you want?" when [the server] brings [your food] to you [interviewee bangs the table hard to connote poor service], it's … like if [I] give [you] food, you give me money.

Nonetheless, they acknowledged that such behaviour is changing in Chinese cities as urban residents become more accustomed to "foreignness" and knowledge of ways of social interaction in other parts of the world. But as Chinese cities change to become more metropolitan, they also found that Chinese cities have also become more like the West such as how urban development has followed the aesthetics of Western cities and the Western attire preferred by Chinese people instead of dressing in Chinese style. The

African students felt that China should retain what is unique to its history and traditions even as it modernizes, just as they hope the same for the African countries that they call home. The uncomfortable collision of Western colonial pasts, the present as lived in China and experienced when they were in Africa, and their aspirations for the future are difficult to "[stitch] together in a single temporal plane"[8]. This has follow-on implications for their onward spatial journeys.

Visa restrictions and the reluctance of Chinese employers to hire Africans for professional positions made the African students aware that their chances of remaining to work in China were slim, even though many of them would like to stay to acquire professional experience in their areas of training. To aspiring young professionals, the metropolitan cities of Beijing, Shanghai and, to an extent, Shenzhen are the most ideal destinations in China for work and life. Since they had lived in Guangzhou or Wuhan already, many of the students desire to enhance their cosmopolitan exposure by re-migrating to one of those Chinese cities. Although Shenzhen's global image is not of the same ranking as Beijing or Shanghai, its location in the Pearl River Delta and proximity to Hong Kong and Guangzhou is appealing enough to the African youths who want jobs in trading, manufacturing, or high tech industries. Compared to Guangzhou, the city of Shenzhen also seems more orderly and modern because urban planners had developed the city systematically and comprehensively, even to the extent of adopting a *tabula rasa* approach in large swathes of the city (see chapter 21, this volume). At the time of fieldwork, none of the African student migrants based in Wuhan said they intend to remain there. It was seen as less metropolitan than the cities mentioned above, despite its modern urban amenities. The opinions of future African students in Wuhan may change, however, as Wuhan invests in developing its high tech sector (known as the Silicon Valley of China), urban infrastructure, and city branding.

The African students who said they plan to return to Africa were motivated by factors such as scholarship obligations or a strong desire to be reunited with left behind family members and contribute to the development of their countries. But more of the African students interviewed expressed a desire to continue their postgraduate education or find employment in another country, preferably one that is more open towards cultural diversity and which would allow them to acquire the critical thinking or knowledge application skills that they felt they had not developed fully under the educational system in China. Inasmuch as a stint in China and Chinese cities had allowed them to accrue new cultural competencies and experience another way of life, their desires for the future cannot be accom-

modated within the present societal structures. Assessing the possibility of achieving better futures elsewhere, they adjust their strategies and navigate yet one more spatial journey to another destination that might afford another chance for them to change their futures.[9]

The migration patterns described in this chapter highlight shifts in the destinations where people envision better futures in the context of the changing global geographies of power in the world today. The imaginaries of African youths locate China and Chinese cities as a model for how their own countries and cities might develop in the future, as well as a site of migration where they can pursue better futures for themselves and their families. But as the close of this chapter indicates, the site of futurity is itself always in relocation such as when the African student migrations reorientate their decisions toward onward re-migration journeys so as to go to other places where they might fulfil those desires that remain unmet despite the time they had spent in China.

Notes

1   Anna Secor, "2012 Urban Geography Plenary Lecture Topological City" *Urban Geography* 34 (2013) 430–44.

2   Henrik Vigh, "Motion Squared: A Second Look at the Concept of Social Navigation" *Anthropological Theory* 9 (2009) 419–38.

3   Syed Ali, "Going and Coming and Going Again: Second-Generation Migrants in Dubai" *Mobilities* 6 (2011) 553–68.

4   Other Chinese cities that draw African trading migrants are Foshan and Shenzhen in Guangdong province, and Yiwu in Zhejiang province. For educational purposes, many of the African student migrants said they would have liked to go to Beijing or Shanghai but studying in these cities would be costly and entrance into the universities more competitive. With these factors in mind, African student migrants go to a range of other cities, usually depending on prior social networks that they or their family members have in those cities.

5   Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, "*2015 nian quanguo laihua liuxuesheng shuju fabu*" (Statistical report on the number of international students in China 2015). 14 April 2016. http://www.moe.edu.cn/jyb_xwfb/gzdt_gzdt/s5987/201604/t20160414_238263.html/. Last accessed 3 January 2017.

6   Elaine Lynn-Ee Ho, "The Geo-Social and Global Geographies of Power: Urban Aspirations of 'Worlding' African Students in China" *Geopolitics* 22 (2017) 15–33.

7   Marcus Power and Giles Mohan, "Towards a Critical Geopolitics of China's Engagement with African Development" *Geopolitics* 15 (2010) 462–95.

8   See Secor, "2012 Plenary Lecture", 439.

9   See Vigh, 2009; and Tim Bunnell, Jamie Gillen and Elaine Lynn-Ee Ho, "The Prospect of Elsewhere: Engaging the Future through Aspirations in Asia" *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 108, 1 (2018) 35–51.