

# Africans in China: The Experiences from Education and Training

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# Africans in China: The Experiences from Education and Training

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## **Abstract**

In this talk, I review a Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) plan of action to increase the number of Africans studying in China with Chinese government support. This commitment from the Chinese government has led to a conspicuous presence of Africans in Chinese universities. I outline the issues and challenges that African students, especially newly-arrived ones, face – from problems in using Chinese as a language of instruction to cross-cultural challenges in cuisine and other aspects of the Chinese society. The data derive mainly from questionnaire surveys and interviews in Chongqing in 2009, where in that year alone over 50 Africans arrived to study science, engineering, and other courses in one of the universities in that city. The experiences of these students both strengthen and challenge a cross-cultural

bridge theory that I have proposed to account for another study of African traders in Guangzhou. These experiences and those of other students in recent surveys and participant observations also challenge discourses about soft power and other aspects of cultural diplomacy. I suggest that both the African and Chinese governments should better facilitate the transition from Africa to China if these students are to serve as agents of soft power and as “bricks for building future bridges” for Africa-China relations.

## **1 Introduction**

One of the most important platforms for Africa-China cooperation in the 21st Century is the Forum for Africa China Cooperation (FOCAC), a top-level governmental forum at which African and Chinese leaders gather every three years in either Beijing or an African capital. The first FOCAC event took place in Beijing in 2000. This was followed by FOCAC2003 in Ethiopia, FOCAC2006 in Beijing, FOCAC2009 in Egypt, FOCAC2012 in Beijing, with the next edition, FOCAC2015, slated for South Africa. At these fora various programmes of cooperation at the political, economic, and cultural levels are often finalized and some contracts and memoranda of understanding signed. One of the main foci of the triennial FOCAC meetings is education and training, and it is the object of this paper to look closely at this area, with particular reference to funding of Africans to study and train at various educational institutions in China.

Towards theoretically understanding and practically evaluating the pres-

ence of Africans in China for educational and training purposes, a number of research questions need to be addressed. These include the following: what are the main features of FOCAC with respect to education? How can we understand the presence of African students in China from this context? What methods are available to us? How can we theorize about African students in China vis-à-vis the general African presence in China?

These and related questions will be addressed in various sections of the paper, whose empirical data come mainly from a survey of African students in Chongqing, southwestern China. Before doing a literature review to put the topic in its theoretical perspective, we will outline a background the research site.

Chongqing, in southwestern China, is a huge metropolis of over 30 million people. It is one of four municipalities that are directly administered at the State level rather than at Provincial level. The other three are Beijing, Shanghai, and Tianjin. The Chongqing municipality was carved out of the Sichuan Province. The photos below illustrate different facets of the Chongqing municipality, including a map of the Municipality, its view at night and a picturesque landscape showing the city situated on the Yangze River and against mountain ranges<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup>Sources: [http://pic7.nipic.com/20100424/2572038\\_103357081464\\_2.jpg](http://pic7.nipic.com/20100424/2572038_103357081464_2.jpg) (Image 1); <http://liuliuzu.net/dt/2006629191131.gif> (Image 2); <http://www.517sc.com/bbs/attachments/dvbbs/2007-2/200722815282631972.jpg> (Image 3).



Views of Chongqing

There are many universities in Chongqing, with most of them receiving students from Africa, but the main focus of our research was the University of Chongqing, where in the year 2009 alone more than 50 students arrived for the first time to begin their studies, adding to already existing students making the number of African students at that university to be more than 100, with most of them studying science and engineering subjects.

## **2 Literature review and FOCAC socio-political contextualization**

Much research work has been done on people studying in countries other than their own under various designations such as foreign students, international students, exchange students, migrant students or even the very Hong Kong term “non-local students”, which is meant to distinguish between two types of students “foreign” to Hong Kong: mainland Chinese and outright foreigners who do not hold Chinese citizenship. Many studies have focused on foreign students in many places around the world, including: the US (Storm and Gable 1961; Barber, Morgan, and Torstrick 1987; Ying and Liese

1994; Sciolla, Ziajko, and Salguero 2010), the EU/Western Europe (Cami-ciottoli 2010), Russia (Dorozhkin and Mazitova 2008), Poland (Bednarek 1991), Japan (Wu 1990), North Korea (David-West and Choi 2010), Brazil (Dams, Pagola and Ieee 2007), and more generally on issues such as student health and safety (Hountras 1956; Strain, Koenig, Hays, Spindt, and Willard 1957; Nyland, Forbes-Mewett, and Marginson 2010).

In the particular case of Africa and China, while there are hardly any studies on Chinese students in Africa, there is now an increasing number of studies on African students in China. Some of the earliest studies are autobiographical, such as Hevi (1964), a book-length work that details the author's life as a Ghanaian student in China in the early 1960s. Since African countries and China established diplomatic relations right after the Bandung Africa-Asia conference in 1955, there has been a continuous stream of Africans into China to study, especially during the Cold War era in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Sandra Guillespin's (2001) work is one of the few book-length research studies that chronicles African student experiences in China in the context of South-South transfer. There are also quite a number of articles that have reported on sociopolitical issues (e.g. Sullivan 1994), and even on stress and health issues (e.g. Hashim and Yang 2003) involving African students in China.

However, since the turn of the Millennium when China renewed its commitments to engage Africa, especially in search of raw materials to fuel its growing economy, more and more students from Africa began to arrive in China on Chinese government scholarships. This 21<sup>st</sup> Century situation with a clear socio-political context within the aegis of a clearer framework

of Africa-China relations is quite different from what was obtained earlier and this deserves a fresh study. Pioneering works including Bodomo (2009, 2012), Haugen (2013), and King (2013) are beginning to lay the foundation for theoretically understanding African students in China and for practically evaluating the policies and programmes that lead to the presence of students of African origins in the country. This process of African students coming to China became more formalized and institutionalized with the formation of FOCAC, whose first meeting took place in 2000 in Beijing, as mentioned above. It is within the situational contextualization of FOCAC that the analysis of African students in this paper is framed. We delve here into some early excerpts, especially from the landmark FOCAC2006 in Beijing where a more elaborate programme to educate and train Africans was out-dooed to the world.

## **2.1 The FOCAC2006 programme on education and training**

The following quotation from the FOCAC 2006 declaration is at the core of what we discuss in this paper:

“The Chinese Government decided to:

- Help African countries set up 100 rural schools in the next three years;
- Increase the number of Chinese government scholarships to African students from the current 2,000 per year to 4,000 per year by 2009;

- Provide annual training for a number of educational officials as well as heads and leading teachers of universities, primary, secondary and vocational schools in Africa;
- Establish Confucius Institutes in African countries to meet their needs in the teaching of the Chinese language and encourage the teaching of African languages in relevant Chinese universities and colleges.’

(FOCAC 2006 Beijing Action Plan, pages 14-15)

As can be clearly seen, this commitment (and subsequent ones which are more or less variations of this first major commitment) includes the provision of up to 4000 scholarships annually between 2007 and 2009.

## **2.2 The FOCAC2009 declaration on education**

During FOCAC 2009, which was held in Sharm el Sheikh, Egypt, the same principles and commitments were evoked and China again pledged to increase the number of yearly scholarships from 4000 to 5500 annually, as contained in the following excerpt in the Plan of Action:

“The two sides expressed satisfaction with the continued progress in China-Africa education cooperation in recent years. The two sides stressed that better education is the basis of and holds the key to social stability and economic development, and the two sides will build on the existing achievements to further enhance their cooperation. The Chinese Government offered to:



- Help African countries to build 50 China-Africa friendship schools in the next three years.
- Propose implementation of the 20+20 Cooperation Plan for Chinese and African Institutions of Higher Education to establish a new type of one-to-one inter-institutional cooperation model between 20 Chinese universities (or vocational colleges) and 20 African universities (or vocational colleges).
- Admit 200 middle and high level African administrative personnel to MPA programs in China in the next three years.
- Continue to raise the number of Chinese governmental scholarships and increase the number of scholarships offered to Africa to 5,500 by 2012.
- Intensify efforts to train teachers for primary, secondary, and vocational schools in Africa, and help African countries train 1,500 school headmasters and teachers over the next three years.
- Continue to promote the development of Confucius institutes, increase the number of scholarships offered to Chinese language teachers to help them study in China, and double efforts to raise capacity of local African teachers to teach the Chinese language.”

More than 30 Confucius Institutes had been started up or were slated for start-up in Africa by the time of this declaration.

At FOCAC 2012, more elaborate programmes were instituted and this included an emphasis on not just postgraduate education but also postdoctoral training of Africans at Chinese universities. This also included various types of refresher, fellowship and other attachment programmes where African citizens already working in the public and private sectors in Africa would come to China on a short term basis for training.

But to what extent has this aspect of the educational commitment to bring African students to China been met by the Chinese government? Where are we in terms of implementation? Currently we do not have full answers. We do not even have up to date figures showing the gradual change in student numbers that this commitment would entail. The Chinese Ministry of Education website and the Chinese Central People's Government website list the number of African students in China as 3737 in 2006, and 12436 in 2009. Estimates from 2010 to 2012 are not available, but if these figures are up-to-date, it means the Chinese government is delivering on its FOCAC commitments, at least quantity-wise. Estimating further based on the FOCAC targets, between 2009 and 2012 we should have had 16500 students. The number of African students in China between 2007 and 2011 would then be about 28500. In 2013, again the Ministry estimated the number to be around 35000<sup>2</sup> and could rise to more than 40000 since many students also come to study in China with their own family or private funds and/or funds from governmental and international organizations. But in terms of

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<sup>2</sup>The numbers for 2013 are taken from an article which interestingly shows that China has trained approximately 2900 students from Ghana alone since diplomatic relations were established in 1960: <http://graphic.com.gh/news/education/23401-china-grants-503-scholarships-to-ghanaian-students.html>

implementation, we need to go beyond numbers! Before returning to issues of policy proposals and attendant suggestions in order to improve the programme, we do a case study to address the theoretical and empirical issues that underpinned the research questions outlined in the introduction.

### **3 Case of students in Chongqing: methodology**

In 2009 the author made several field trips to Chongqing either alone or sometimes with research assistants, as shown in the photo below.



In Chongqing (2009)

The first few trips were to ascertain the research area, talking to students informally and, based on that, preparing a questionnaire meant for informal and semi-structured interviews with students, as well as formal questionnaire surveys. This combination ensured that we did a mixture of quantitative and qualitative research methods. In all a compact five-page questionnaire containing 17 questions was administered and follow-up interviews were done

with selected interviewees who were willing to sit down with us for more in-depth discussions.

In the following paragraphs I now present and briefly discuss the results of the questionnaire survey, followed by some in-depth face-to-face interviews with students, six of which are presented here. A total of 41 questionnaires were distributed, but only 32 were validly completed. We are aware that 32 students are relatively few for statistical generalizations but one may note that this was about  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the estimated number of students at that university; so interviewing one out of every three students is quite representative of the research population.

### **3.1 Questionnaire surveys**

As may be seen in the statistical tabulations below with regards to demographic information such as age, gender, levels of schooling, and occupation, our questionnaire survey has allowed us to get a clearer picture of the African student population in Chongqing University at the time of our field research. We see that we are dealing with a relatively young population of people mostly between the ages of 20 and 30; only one is below 20 years old and only two are 31 years old and above (four people, mostly females, withheld information about their age). This is exactly what we found in another survey at several universities in Wuhan (whose data is yet to be analyzed) and we expect that this demographic range of preponderantly 20 to 30 years olds would be the norm throughout the African student population in China.

Table 1: Demographic information: age

<b>Age group</b>	<b>No. of Respondents</b>
<20	1
21-24	6
25-30	15
31-34	2
35-40	3
41-44	1

In terms of gender, the population is predominantly male, with 24 males and only eight females completing our questionnaires. Informal conversation with the students by the author/PI indicated that this gender imbalance in our questionnaire survey reflects the gender imbalance in the African student population throughout the universities in Chongqing. Again, we believe this to be the case on other campuses throughout China. Indeed a similar gender imbalance is found among African traders in Guangzhou (Bodomo 2012). This issue of gender imbalance must be seriously projected and addressed in the next set of FOCAC discussions.

Table 2: Demographic information: gender

<b>Gender</b>	<b>No. of Respondents</b>
Female	3
Male	24

Information about levels of schooling tells us that the FOCAC programme seems to be prioritizing postgraduate education over undergraduate education. As many as 23 postgraduates filled our questionnaires compared to only 9 undergraduates. Again we believe this to be a trend throughout other universities in China; the finding would therefore trigger a debate as to the merits or otherwise of giving African students more opportunity to do postgraduate rather than undergraduate education. This may be related to a rather implicit focus on training people to go back into their jobs such as lectureships at universities and research officers at government corporations back home in Africa.

Table 3: Demographic information: level of schooling

<b>Level of schooling</b>	<b>No. of Respondents</b>
University/College	9
Postgraduate	23

Four people who filled out our questionnaires withheld information about their occupation, but the responses from the others as seen below indicates that as many as seven were working (as engineers, government official, journalist, lecturer, teacher, and tutorial assistant before coming to China). This leaves 20 others who either came directly into school from being students at various institutions or maybe not in any permanent employment before getting the chance to study in China and now just refer to themselves as students. It is probably the case that people who held various professional positions before coming insisted on referring to themselves as such even though

everybody is technically now a student in Chongqing.

Table 4: Demographic information: occupation

<b>Occupation</b>	<b>No. of Respondents</b>
Student	20
Engineer	1
Government official	1
Journalist	1
Lecturer	1
Teacher	1
Tutorial assistant	1

In terms of student distribution across Africa, the respondents are of various nationalities. There are totally 22 different nationalities with four Kenyans and four Tanzanians forming the two biggest groups, as well as others with two each coming from Nigeria, Senegal, Togo and Lesotho, and one each from Benin, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Cote d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Ghana, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Sudan, and Uganda. This list indicates a wide distribution of student admissions from across the continent, but with a focus in East Africa.

Linguistically, this is a very multilingual group both in terms of the traditional African languages but also in terms of the former colonial languages. There are totally 21 different native languages spoken by the respondents. The most common one is Swahili, which is spoken by five respondents, fol-

lowed by three each for Arabic and English and two each for Ewe, French, Hausa, Sotho, and Wolof. Note that some Africans tend to confuse the designations “native language” and “official language”, and thus some interviewees refer to the former colonial languages and now official languages, English and French, as their native languages. In addition to their “native language”, most respondents (25 out of 32) can also speak English, and 12 out of 32 respondents can also speak French.

One of the crucial questions we asked was their reasons for choosing China and Chongqing as their study and training destination. Many of them responded that they did not choose Chongqing University as their study destination by themselves; they came to China simply because they got a scholarship. However, upon further face-to-face interviews with them, as shown below in section 3.2, we find a more diverse set of reasons.

We also wanted to know how long they had lived in China/Chongqing. Most of the respondents are newcomers studying at the University for just about three months or more (25 of them) with only five of them who have either been studying at the university for more than one year, as shown in the table below. It was important to interview these students in their first year because the experience of the author who was himself a foreign student many years ago in Europe shows that it is often in the first year that many of the problems crop and need to be addressed. It was of course also important to interview more senior students hence the research ensured that this group of students was also represented (five of them).



Table 5: Demographic information: duration of stay

<b>Duration of stay</b>	<b>No. of Respondents</b>
> 1-3 months	25
> 3-6 months	2
> 1-3 years	5

It was also important to note the type of courses the students were pursuing in China. The result, as shown below, indicates that almost all of them (29 out of 32) were studying Engineering at Chongqing University. Only one student was studying Arts and Humanities and two of them fall into the ‘others’ group. This case study seems to reflect a general trend in the choice of courses by Africans coming to study in China (as is emerging from another study currently underway in Wuhan by the author).

Another important set of questions focused on the issues of lingua franca, medium of instruction, and levels of proficiency in the Chinese language. The import of this set of questions was to investigate the nature of communication challenges, if any, for these students in a completely different sociolinguistic and sociocultural background.

As shown in the tables below, many students indicated that they had poor levels of Chinese proficiency, with as many as 20 indicating that they had below average levels of the language. Only one, the student studying Arts and Humanities, claimed excellent Chinese language skills, with only six claiming good Chinese language skills.

Table 6: Demographic information: proficiency in Chinese

<b>Proficiency level</b>	<b>No. of Respondents</b>
Excellent	1
Good	6
Average	5
Below average	5
Poor	14
None	1

On the contrary, as found in a study of African traders in Guangzhou (Bodomo 2012), Africans in China claimed rather high levels of English language proficiency. Most of them claimed to speak good English (16) or even excellent English (12), whereas only two claimed to speak English at an average level, while one considered their English to be below average, and another even considered that he or she has a poor level of English. As will be seen in section 4 of the paper, under theoretical discussions, not knowing enough Chinese and English at the same time was one of the most difficult educational, cross-linguistic, and cross-cultural bridging problems for these students from Africa, especially those from French speaking countries.

Table 7: Demographic information: proficiency in English

<b>Proficiency level</b>	<b>No. of Respondents</b>
Excellent	12
Good	16
Average	2
Below average	1
Poor	1

Since most of these students were admitted straight into English-as-a-medium-of-instruction postgraduate programmes, apparently one of the most common assumptions within the FOCAC programme of bringing students to pursue postgraduate courses in English is that most students are comfortable with English. So we wanted to gauge their perceptions about how widespread English was used in their study environment. Most of the respondents, 23 out of 32, claim that English is not a common language at Chongqing University and even among themselves (this point is important for language of instruction issues). And most of them, 28 out of 32, naturally identify Chinese as the most common language besides English, though some had issues with that – saying that the local rather than standard Chinese was the most common language. This leads to the way they answer the question on communication problems.

Given the language proficiency profiles as tabulated and described above, it seems therefore that the perfect environment was created for these students to experience a myriad of communication problems. As seen in the table

below, most of the students (26 in all) sometimes, often or always experienced communication problems. In fact, these linguistic issues were often the most recurrent problems enumerated by the students both in their questionnaire responses and during face-to-face interviews with them by the research group members.

Table 8: Demographic information: frequency of communication problems

<b>Frequency</b>	<b>No. of Respondents</b>
Always	6
Often	9
Sometimes	11
Seldom	5
Never	1

These linguistic and communication problems led to a feeling of disconnect between the students and the local community both within the University and beyond in the larger Chongqing city. As can be seen below, to the question “to what extent are you connected to the larger Chongqing society”, most of them (22 of them) indicated that they were connected, at least, to a very small extent. Only six indicated that they were connected, at least, to large extent. This usually involves those who have found lovers and other close friends among the Chinese. This scenario of a near disconnect therefore poses a challenge to the theory of bridge building and soft power enhancement to be further discussed in section 4.

Table 9: Demographic information: connectedness to Chongqing/China

<b>Opinion</b>	<b>No. of Respondents</b>
To a very large extent	2
To a large extent	4
Neutral	4
To a small extent	10
To a very small extent	6
None	6

The next set of questions tried to gauge to what extent the relatively young students were feeling homesick and missing their familiar environments back home in Africa due to the different lifestyles in a foreign land. The question of feeling homesick due to lifestyle differences in much of the literature on foreign students as enumerated in the literature review section (e.g. Hevi 1964) is quite a familiar one, and this was not different in this study. As many as 23 of the students claimed that life was different in Chongqing than in their home countries to a large extent while only seven asserted that the difference was only to a small extent.

Table 10: Demographic information: extent of lifestyle differences

<b>Opinion</b>	<b>No. of Respondents</b>
To a very large extent	11
To a large extent	12
Neutral	2
To a small extent	6
To a very small extent	0
None	1

Since food and culinary culture is often one of the most important challenges that foreign students and indeed most immigrants face in their host countries, we wanted to know how students at Chongqing University were experiencing this aspect of life in China. The next set of tables indicates results to questions about consumption of African and Chinese food. As can be seen, many of them often or always eat Chinese food and very few of them often eat food from their home countries. As later face-to-face interviews indicated, there are a lot of complaints among this group of students about issues of food. It is not that they prefer Chinese to African food, but they have no opportunity to cook or buy African food in Chongqing.

Table 11: Demographic information: consumption of Chinese food

<b>Frequency</b>	<b>No. of Respondents</b>
Always	13
Often	10
Sometimes	7
Seldom	1
Never	1

Table 12: Demographic information: consumption of African food

<b>Frequency</b>	<b>No. of Respondents</b>
Always	1
Often	3
Sometimes	5
Seldom	7
Never	16

The last set of questions wanted to gauge the plans of the students upon graduation. As seen in the table below, the vast majority of them (22 in all) indicated that they will go back home and work in their home countries, while five of them indicated that they will stay back and work in China. Seven of them had other plans, mostly comprising going to study or work in a third country. This kind of data constitutes potentially positive implications for theories and discourse about cross-cultural bridging and soft power politics.

Table 13: Demographic information: plans after graduation

Plan	No. of Respondents
Go back to home country for work	22
Stay in China for work	5
Further studies or work in a third country	6
Other	1

Finally, the questionnaire left an open space for the respondents to make free comments about life in Chongqing and about this research topic. The respondents had different comments about their life. Some think that life at Chongqing University is good and some think that it is cheap. Some mentioned the language problems they face. Some are concerned with healthcare. To get more details about these comments and other issues, let us turn next to six extensive individual interviews.

### 3.2 In-depth interviews

Whereas quantitative data are very important in making informed generalizations about demographic categories such as age group, gender, and nationality, it was also important for us to sit down and listen to individual stories from these African students about their China experiences. The following is a summary of six lengthy conversations we had with selected participants who gave interesting and relevant answers during the questionnaire administration.



### **In-depth interview 1**

Mr. C is a postgraduate student from Togo who mainly speaks French. Mr. C is in China to study Business and this is his first year. Because his programme is taught in Chinese, he needs to first spend one year learning the Chinese language. Like most of the African students at Chongqing University, Mr. C has come here on a FOCAC scholarship. He actually studies here for free and also gets a sum of money every month for living expenses (very coy on telling us how much). He says the amount of money he gets is not enough for his living expenses, such as entertainment and medical expenses (he needs to pay  $\frac{2}{3}$  of the medical expenses every time he gets sick). To make up for this shortfall, he has found a part-time, private teaching job as a French teacher. Every Saturday and Sunday, he teaches French. On the whole, he quite enjoys his life at Chongqing University.

### **In-depth interview 2**

Mr. T is a Malian postgraduate student studying Engineering. He is the only Malian at Chongqing University. Besides his mother tongue which is Bambara, the only other language he speaks is French. He originally thought that his programme would be taught in Chinese. Since this would be an opportunity for him to learn Chinese, he chose China as his study destination. However, it turns out that his programme is taught in English. When he realized this, he felt frustrated. On the one hand, he does not know English, so this would be a challenge for him; on the other hand, he is worried about whether his programme can really be taught in good English. As some other

African students have said, the lecturers usually are only able to read their lecture notes in English but are not good at communicating in English. So, this would pose a problem even after Mr. T has finally learned English. Now Mr. T is actually learning both English and Chinese and has attained a certain level of proficiency in both languages. It seems that he is not worrying about the language problem as much as he did on arrival.

### **In-depth interview 3**

Mr. N is an Engineering postgraduate student from Nigeria. He chose China as his study destination because of China's fast growing economy and because he wants to experience a different way of life. For Mr. N, the most challenging thing is the language barrier. Even though the workload at Chongqing University is not as much as in his own country, language problems would make everything difficult; he finds that the Chinese language is very difficult to learn. Although his programme is taught in English, he still comes across a lot of communication problems. His professor/supervisor is not good at communicating in English, so whenever he wants to consult his professor, he always needs to come along with someone – usually an African who has lived in China longer – to translate for them. In spite of a lot of communication problems he faces, Mr. N is satisfied with his study here in China. Here, he is exposed to more up-to-date knowledge and technology in his field which, according to him, is very important for a student studying engineering.

#### **In-depth interview 4**

Mr. A is a postgraduate student from Malawi studying Environmental Engineering. He is a student here but he is also a lecturer in his country, so he considered his experiences here as not just studying for a degree but also as training for him to go back into his lectureship position back home in his country. Before studying at Chongqing University, Mr. A was in other places in China such as Beijing and Guangzhou. “As long as you stay inside Chongqing University everything would be fine for you. But if you go outside this is not the case”, said Mr. A. What is so bad about going outside for him is that no one would try to communicate with him, and his Chinese is not good enough to initiate a conversation. It is difficult for Mr. A to learn Chinese well because he only has one Chinese lesson each week. Since his programme is taught in English, there are no extra resources allocated for him to learn Chinese. However, this would not affect his study as he has come here simply to study but not for other purposes.

#### **In-depth interview 5**

Mr. M is a postgraduate student from Tanzania studying Environmental Engineering. Since he only knows little Chinese, he is facing serious language problems. On one occasion he missed an important seminar because the notice was written in Chinese. He reported the problem to the university and after that, there was some improvement: English titles are added to every notice now. But he still needs someone to read the content for him if there is a relevant notice. Another language problem he faces is that the

course selection website system is in Chinese, so he always needs someone who knows Chinese to help him with the matter. For him, the above problems show that the University is not fully ready to receive international students who clearly face a lot of language and communication problems.

### **In-depth interview 6**

Mrs. I was the only female willing to sit down with the research group and talk about her experiences. She is from Tanzania and studies Engineering. Since Mrs. I is a Muslim, she cannot eat pork and any meat not slaughtered in the name of God by a Muslim – i.e. she only eats halal food. She has to cook by herself. However, the problem is that there is no place for her to cook since she is living in a student hostel and cooking is prohibited in her room. Since Mrs. I has her own family (husband and children) back in Tanzania, another problem she faces is that she misses her family but she has no money to travel to her country every year to visit her family. That means she would stay away from her family for four years, which makes her life really difficult. She chose China as her study destination because it was quite easy and relatively straight-forward to apply for the scholarship. However, she found that the scholarship is not enough for her study as she only gets RMB 300 per year as her book allowance which she thinks is really not enough. Although Mrs. I faces a lot of problems, she is happy with her life at Chongqing University because she feels that people are very helpful.

### **3.3 Summary**

From these six face-to-face interviews, we see that more issues and puzzles encountered in the questionnaire survey are further clarified. For instance, the puzzle about why the Africans tend to eat more Chinese food than African food is made clear; it is not that these African students prefer Chinese food to African food, but as Mrs. I from Tanzania clarifies, students are largely unable to cook African food by themselves because it is prohibited to cook food in their student rooms within the hostels. The language problems are also better projected by the individual stories; as Mr. T from Mali indicates, as a francophone, he hasn't even mastered English well, yet he is expected to pursue a postgraduate programme using English as a medium of instruction. Mr. N from Nigeria has an interesting story about how he communicates with his professor during supervisory sessions; even though the programme is taught in English he finds it necessary to take along another African student as a Chinese-to-English interpreter when he goes to his professor for supervisory sessions. Each of the six personal stories, however concise they are, is in-depth in the sense that together they reveal some puzzle that we encountered during the questionnaire results interpretation. This illustrates the idea that a mixed set of methodologies is necessary to gain deeper insights into a research population.

## **4 Theoretical discussions and conclusions**

In the foregoing section we have, through a mixture of research methods – both quantitative and qualitative – adduced some facts about the African

students we encountered in Chongqing and elsewhere. We believe that most of these facts from this case study can be generalized onto the general student population in China. How then can we explain these student experiences?

We will do this from the framework of a theory of cross-cultural experiences (in terms of their educational experiences and in terms of their general experiences with Chinese society). We will also briefly address the issue of whether the presence of African students in China can be embedded into the discussion about soft power theory (Nye 2004; Bodomo 2009). We first explain each of these two theories and see what challenges and supporting evidence there are for them.

#### **4.1 A cross-cultural bridge theory of migrant-indigene relations**

A migrant or transnational population is a function of its source and host communities. The core claim of this cross-cultural theory of migrant-indigene relations in many works on Africans in China (e.g. Bodomo 2010, 2012) is that the migrant group (i.e. the target community) serves as a link, a contact, and indeed a bridge connecting its place of origin (its source community) with its place of domicile (its host community). This is potentially amenable to many study areas in an era of globalization, e.g. comparative and contact linguistics, cross-cultural and urban anthropology, and maybe even comparative and international education.

In several studies (e.g. Bodomo 2010, 2012; Bodomo and Ma 2010) we found African traders of Guangzhou and Yiwu to be acting as bridges (i.e.

mediating agents) between Africans and Chinese on many respects: socio-economically, socio-culturally, and socio-politically. Can we use this theoretical framework to discuss and understand the African students we have met in Chongqing?

A major challenge to extending the bridge theory of migrant-indigene relations used on African traders to African students is that, unlike the traders who are in constant touch with the Chinese society, the students we have seen are often more isolated from the larger Chinese society than the African traders who have to interact daily with their fellow traders, as we see from the responses the African students in Chongqing gave us. So seen this way, it is hard to think of them as bridging the African and Chinese societies at this stage of their Chinese sojourn, even though research on the African traders indicates that many of the Africans who are now traders were first students in China.

However, seen another way, African students in China can be seen as “bricks for future bridges” connecting Africa to China. The students, even in their first year, are already bridging the educational systems of Africa and China: they are constantly questioning and comparing the two systems, even if implicitly and unintentionally. They are questioning the medium of instruction, comparing the workload, the levels of technological sophistication within African and Chinese educational infrastructures, questioning their professors’ ability to communicate with them, as well as questioning whether Chinese universities are at all prepared to receive foreign students, among many other issues.

Moreover, an overwhelming majority of the students, 22 out of 34, have

expressed their intention to go back to Africa and put their education to use in Africa. These students would be in the best position to explain the Chinese educational system and other aspects of Chinese society to Africans once back home in Africa.

Even those who intend to stay in China – five out of 34 – they could play a role as bricks for future cross-cultural bridges between Africa and China. Indeed, as mentioned above, evidence from Bodomo (2010, 2012) shows that many of the leaders among the African trader populations who are in the vanguard of their community’s political, economic, and cultural relations with the Chinese authorities in Guangzhou and beyond were themselves students who speak fluent Chinese and are highly educated about many aspects of the Chinese society.

## **4.2 South-South symmetric relations or soft power asymmetric relations?**

Some scholars have framed international education in terms of world systems theory (e.g. Altbach 1980; Arnove 1980) or in terms of the World order models project (MOMP) – insisting on positive action to global inequalities of knowledge flow (e.g. Galtung 1975; Mazrui 1975). Specifically, previous studies about African students in China (Gillespie 2001; Hevi 1964, etc.) have framed the phenomenon of international educational transactions between Africa and China in terms of South-South relations (within a general world systems theory “in which educational phenomena in different countries can be understood in their relation to the international political system”



(Gillespie 2001:32, in reference to Altbach 1980, Arnove 1980, and Hayhoe 1986). While agreeing, in large part, with the general framework of global systems and dependency theory and MOMP, I signal that the use of the term “South-South” in describing relations between Africa and China is already problematic; it is quite obsolete already, with China being the second largest economy in the world. Whether in terms of technology or educational infrastructure, the differences between African students in China and African students in the North are narrowing.

Rather than emphasize a presumably symmetrical South-South deal in terms of world systems theory, perhaps a more revealing way to frame things is in terms of China using the flow of African students to China and back home as a conduit for promoting soft power or cultural diplomacy. There are many definitions and conceptualizations of soft power (Nye 1990, 2004; Bodomo 2009) but in this study I conceptualise soft power or cultural diplomacy as being the gamut of positive socio-political and socio-cultural influences a polity and its citizens have on another polity and its citizens without the threat of gun-boat diplomacy or even outright violence. This definition captures the core idea of soft power as a mostly asymmetrical system in which polities use alternative means other than traditional balance of power politics – as regulated mainly by military superiority – to positively influence other polities. Can China use the education and training of Africans as a means to increase its soft power, to attain greater socio-political and socio-cultural influence in Africa? My approach to this issue in this paper is that we must be a bit nuanced here. I argue here that it is a double-edged sword situation. If the education and training are better done, the graduates can contribute

to promoting a good image of China both within China and especially once back home in Africa. If, however, this is not well carried out, we would have a situation in which students would go back as critics of the Chinese system. This is exactly what happened in the case of Emmanuel Hevi of Ghana. In what is a mainly autobiographical account of his student days in China in the 1960s, Hevi (1966) is an acerbic criticism of communism and the Chinese society mainly with regards to its racist attitude towards African students, and incidentally also a criticism of Kwame Nkrumah's pro-Beijing policies of the 1960s. Indeed, he wrote this book while residing in the West, largely comparing the Chinese system to that of the West in an unfavorable manner. It cannot therefore be said that educating Emmanuel Hevi of Ghana in China contributed to increasing China's soft power in Africa.

On the flip side of the double-edged sword, however, is the fact that there are far more positive experiences by thousands of African students today than Emmanuel Hevis in the 1960s. Already the vast majority of the students in our survey have made positive comments about the Chinese society, especially the education and training they are receiving, and since many are committed to going back home, it is most likely that they will function to promote Chinese soft power in Africa.

## **5 Conclusion**

In conclusion, we have tried to address the questions we started out with as follows: What are the main features of FOCAC with respect to education and training? How can we understand the presence of African students in China

from this context? What methods are available to us? How can we theorize about African student experiences in China vis-à-vis the general African and experiences in China?

We have presented some pointers to addressing these research questions. However, we reckon that while the case study may be quite representative, as we are beginning to see in our field surveys of other campuses we are currently involved in, a case study might not completely represent and thus predict the patterns, issues, and profiles of African students on other campuses.

To address this apparent research limitation and indeed as a suggestion of a research agenda, more studies of Africans in Chongqing and elsewhere in China in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century are needed to get deeper and more updated answers to these and other related questions.

For now, however, for the purpose to evaluating the current education and training programme for African students in China, with a view to reviewing and making proposals for drawing up an action programme at FOCAC2015 in South Africa, one may conclude that quantity-wise, FOCAC is on track; quality-wise, more needs to be done. These and many more are answers that can be put at the disposal of both the African and Chinese governments towards reviewing FOCAC commitments to make it a successful flagship programme in Africa-China educational relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

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