

**The geo-social and global geographies of power:
Urban aspirations of ‘worlding’ African students in China**

Elaine Lynn-Ee Ho

National University of Singapore

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Abstract:

This paper conceptualises the geosocial by examining the transnational connections of African student migrants and their educational experiences in Chinese cities. While there is now an established scholarship on Chinese migration to Africa, new research on the concurrent flow of African migration to China is emerging. Recent publications on African migrants in China tend to focus on the experiences of African traders, drawing out issues of illegality, ‘low-end’ globalisation and their impacts on Chinese trading cities. In comparison, this paper shifts the analytical lens to African educational migration in Chinese cities, foregrounding how global householding patterns reflect and leverage on the geopolitical and geo-economic dimensions of China-Africa relations. The paper shows that individual and family goals are negotiated through educational migration that, on the one hand, is concerned with accumulating human and cultural capital through a learning stint in Chinese cities, and on the other hand, is framed by perceptions of China-Africa relations. The paper argues that through educational migration, transnational social reproduction links Africa with China, but the social differentiation and everyday sociality that the African students experience in Chinese cities reinforce racial coding and development asymmetries. In so doing, the paper draws out how the geosocial reflects and constitutes the geopolitical and geo-economic dimensions of transnationalism.

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Introduction

In an essay published in *Geopolitics*, Marcus Power and Giles Mohan¹ persuasively argue that geo-economics, or how geopolitics is calibrated by market logics, 'is crucial to any interpretation of contemporary China-Africa engagement and to our understanding of the spatial reconfiguration of contemporary political geographies that results from this engagement'. Scholars of China-Africa relations highlight similarly that China's diplomatic engagement with African countries is led by its domestic economic agendas to do with energy or production needs and new consumer markets.² Such international relations and trade precipitate migration exchanges between Africa and China. However, the attention paid to the geo-economic and geopolitical aspects of capital, goods and people occludes the geo-social dimensions of transnationalism and development that are crucial in constituting the economic and political aspects of geo-strategic agendas. This paper examines the educational migration of African young adults to Chinese cities for educational purposes and argues that accompanying the globalisation of trade between China and Africa is the globalisation of households, or what Mike Douglass³ refers to as 'global householding'. Along with trade migration, spatially connecting China and Africa are the 'worlding' orientations⁴ that drive African households to undertake transnational education projects in which a young adult migrates to be schooled in universities at Chinese cities.

The emerging literature on African migration to China mainly considers the experiences of African traders, drawing out issues of illegality and the impact of 'low-end' globalisation on Chinese trading cities.⁵ This paper adopts a different approach to suggest that China is becoming an emerging educational destination for African students because of its growing geostrategic influence. Chinese cities, such as Beijing, Guangzhou, Nanjing, Shanghai and Wuhan amongst others, function as key destinations for African students seeking higher educational opportunities in China. Prior to migration they perceived such cities as emblems of Chinese modernity and China as a model for African development. Yet day-to-day social encounters in those cities constitute new power geometries that impact their impression of China and perceptions of China-Africa relations.

The paper situates this study in the literature on transnationalism and global householding and synthesises it with the scholarship on educational migration. This enables the paper to conceptualise the geo-social as evinced through the intertwining of transnational social reproduction with global trade and politics. The paper incorporates perspectives from feminist geopolitics to foreground the significance of everyday and embodied experiences that reflect racialisation processes contributing to global power asymmetries. Bringing together these sets of literature illuminates how studying the geo-social draws out the social relations that extend across space to sustain families, economies and national or global power. Through studying African student migration to China, the paper also demonstrate that analyses of the geo-social, understood as the constitution of subjects in transnational space, directs attention to the geopolitical significance of education and concomitant power geometries populating the transnational circulation of knowledge.

To recap, the paper aims to first, examine how social reproduction through the transnational education of African students in China reflects and serves geo-strategic agendas. Second, the paper considers the everyday social relations that shape the

subjectivities of African students in China, highlighting, in particular, racialised encounters borne out of ‘coding habits from the past’.⁶ The next section conceptualises the geosocial by signposting the significance of social reproduction, everyday social relations and educational subjectivities for geo-economic and geopolitical debates. Following the research methodology discussion, the paper shows how African educational migration to Chinese cities reflects global householding patterns and serves transnational social reproduction projects that are intertwined with geostrategic agendas. Next, the paper shows that despite such macro desires, the African students experience racial prejudice in the spaces of everyday life in Chinese cities. But they articulate their subjectivities in ways that creatively juxtapose ‘Western’ and ‘Chinese’ modernity to destabilise the hegemony of both power structures. The conclusion reflects on the power geometries perceptible in transnational knowledge circulation brought forth through the international exchanges between China and Africa.

The geosocial and global geographies of power

The ‘geographies of power’,⁷ or global balance of power, is being recalibrated through the geostrategic agendas advanced by China in the Global South, including countries in the African continent. Much of the discussion referring to China’s ‘rise’ pays attention to its foreign aid, trade and investment priorities, energy needs and diplomatic activity in African states.⁸ Emma Mawdsley⁹ notes that such initiatives in Africa are not new. Tracing the shifts in Chinese policy, she argues that China sought to develop alliances with Africa when Mao Zedong promoted anti-imperialism ideologies (1949-1976), but the ideological dalliance shifted to economic pragmatism under Deng Xiaoping who prioritised the modernisation of China (1978-1989). Suisheng Zhao¹⁰ describes this as the ‘decade of neglect’ in China-Africa relations as the former shifted its foreign policy priority towards Western industrialised countries. But Chinese priorities changed again during the post-Tiananmen period (after 1989). China’s repression of domestic pro-democracy forces sparked reprisals from liberal democratic Western nations, which led it to seek political allies in authoritarian African countries. The contemporary period is characterised by deepening economic exchanges and diplomatic relations with a wide range of African countries. The dominant narrative of China-Africa relations is characterised by both geo-economic and geopolitical logic and activity. Aspects of social reproduction and everyday social relations that shape China-Africa interactions are generally relegated to the background despite being an integral part of the global geographies of power.¹¹

Commenting more than a decade ago on the parochial framing of the world cities literature which narrowly focuses attention on transnational capital circulation, Abdou Maliq Simone¹² advocated paying attention to the ‘worlding’ of African cities instead, which he explains ‘involves the production of orientations to, and sensibilities about, the urban that seemed to posit that the salient features of urban life and its accomplishments *were always also taking place somewhere else besides the particular city occupied*’ (emphasis mine). Separately, Tim Bunnell and Peter Marolt¹³ urge researchers to consider the interface of places and flows, particularly the way the capacity to aspire (in their case for social mobilisation) is inspired or realised by not only localised conditions but also the routes through which international exchange and learning take place.¹⁴

Educational migration allows us to further conceptualise notions of worlding and routes, in this case connecting the urban aspirations of African youths to the Chinese cities where they migrate for educational purposes. The African student migrants in this paper are not the same as the 'urban poor' that Simone¹⁵ highlighted in his conceptualisation of 'worlding'; rather the student migrants can be described as 'middling transnationals'¹⁶ who come from middle and upper-middle class families in African cities. But they similarly engage in 'worlding' practices of journeying abroad to realise personal goals and improve family life chances. As middling transnationals, their migration trajectories are mediated by both the emigration and immigration contexts as they navigate transnational journeys across the life course.¹⁷ Transnationalism scholarship also signals the fluidity of the 'spatial and temporal imaginaries'¹⁸ contained within and shaping such migration circuits when migrants engage in circular or onward migration.

Migrating for education is part of global householding strategies directed at optimising family welfare through transnational social reproduction,¹⁹ which Breda Gray²⁰ explains as 'biological and social activities and relationships that create and maintain people on a daily basis and inter-generationally such that the ongoing livelihoods of individuals, families and communities are ensured'. Debates on social reproduction are relevant to this paper in two ways. First, feminist scholars have long argued against the demarcation of production and reproduction (or work/non-work) as a false dichotomy that should be troubled.²¹ Second, in transnationalism scholarship Bourdieu's definition of social reproduction has been invoked to analyse how class and status positions are regenerated in East Asian middle-class families through familial projects that entail sending their children for an overseas education in 'Western' countries.²² The situation of the African students discussed in this paper usefully brings together both sets of literature and further draws attention to how China is emerging as an alternative study destination for international students.

The African students move to China not only for acquiring Chinese educational credentials, but also to enhance the household's economic prospects by leveraging on growing geopolitical and geo-economic ties between China and Africa. They seek to accumulate cultural capital derived from the Chinese urban experience that together with a Chinese university degree would make oneself stand out in the country of origin or if they develop careers in a third country.²³ Such transnational education projects lend to the reproduction of social difference and class stratification.²⁴ But a number of them are also sent by families back in Africa to oversee and participate in running family businesses that have a base in China to facilitate procurement and trading activities. In other words, the student identity is not the only one that international students like them embody.²⁵

The decision of a growing number of African students to embark on an overseas education in China is revealing of changing tailwinds partially decentring the hegemony of Western educational institutions as sites of modern education. The study destinations of international students are influenced by their perception of the geostrategic influence of a country. Destination countries also provide scholarships for international students so as to advance bilateral awareness. Educational institutions reflect the national image that a country wishes to project through branding that serves ideological and socialisation purposes.²⁶ Yet the experiences of students in educational institutions and their social interactions with the host society

may counter the projected national image of the study destination. The lives of the African students in Chinese cities entail quotidian interactions with Mainland Chinese students, traders and wider society in urban spaces such as hostels, schools, work places and recreation sites. The nature of such everyday sociality is easy to overlook. But it reveals ‘the daily practices sustaining larger places, structures and processes’, and further ‘draws attention to the ubiquity of the entanglements between various realms of life’.²⁷ This includes how the geosocial is intertwined with the geo-economic and geopolitical aspects of transnationalism and development agendas.

Feminist geopolitics has also flagged up the significance of the everyday and embodied realms of life that contribute to the discursive and material relations through which global political processes are reproduced or challenged across sites and different scales of analyses.²⁸ Seemingly non-geopolitical concerns expressed in the spaces of everyday life are integral to the operations of global power too. Studying student migrants draws attention to educational institutions as mundane sites where people make meaning of the different global contexts in which they operate, including processes of racialisation that contribute to the way young people negotiate geopolitical change.²⁹

In turn the mobility of students contributes to the circulation of knowledge that is always ‘embedded within complex power dynamics at a variety of spatial scales’.³⁰ Such circulation of knowledge can be found in the everyday interactions of African students as they engage one another, their Chinese peers, teachers and other members of society; through these social interactions a lineage of racism and contemporary racialisation emerges to constitute not only their student identities but also their perceptions of the global political context in which they are embedded. Madge et al.³¹ urge for a postcolonial analysis of educational migration since it is ‘a site where legacies of colonialism and the contemporary processes of globalisation intersect’.³² Their critique is rooted in the inequalities of Eurocentrism, while the case of African educational migration in China discussed here draws out transversal power dynamics that define the global geographies of power today.

Methodology

Chinese cities such as Guangzhou and Wuhan, where this study was conducted, appeal to African students because of the urban experiences they offer. Guangzhou, in coastal China, is the capital of Guangdong province with a population of 14 million people. International and internal migrants flock to Guangzhou for trading and educational opportunities. Wuhan is located in inland China and the capital city of Hubei province; its population stands at 10 million people. Compared to metropolitan Guangzhou, the city of Wuhan might be considered provincial but it serves as an educational hub for several prestigious universities (particularly the science and technology sector). Wuhan is fast internationalising as it develops urban amenities such as international shopping districts and cafes targeting the consumption power of Chinese and foreign students and professionals. To African students both cities present a concentration of prior social ties, as African business contacts or family members and friends are likely to have studied in the universities found in these two cities.

My fieldwork was conducted from 2012-2015. In the study I recruited 42 students through the snowballing technique across two field sites. Initial contact was made

through the personal networks of Chinese students and also by getting in touch with the international student society. The study carried out 78 formal and informal interviews in total (including repeat interviews). Two-thirds of the respondents were male and one third female. The study sample was not delimited by nationality, so as to capture the diversity of African students represented in China.³³ While I recognise the contested aspects of the label, 'African', the paper uses this referent to contextualise international student migration in geopolitical and geo-economic discourses of 'China-Africa' relations. The interviews signal that inasmuch as the students identify as nationals of a country they also negotiate a wider African identity through their migration experiences in China. On one level, this is in response to essentialising racialised stereotypes that are projected onto them by the Chinese who refer to them as 'black people' (*heiren*), which they reframe as 'African' instead. On another level, it is also an expression of how their migration and identities have been shaped in the wider context of China's actual or perceived growing presence across the African continent.

Less than one-quarter of the African students who participated in the study are scholarship students and the majority are self-funded. At the time of research, the respondents were enrolled in undergraduate or postgraduate programs in Chinese universities, and have lived in China for at least a year. The areas of specialisation popular amongst African students are in international business and economics, politics and law, computer science, engineering and medicine. Usually the students arrive a year prior to the start of their degree program so as to attend basic Chinese language classes first. Some courses that have large foreign student enrolment, such as business degrees, deliver classes in English.

The interviews were conducted in English or Mandarin depending on whether the African student interviewed is Anglophone or Francophone. Francophone students who lived in China for several years have usually learned to speak Mandarin fluently. A handful of Francophone respondents felt less confident carrying out an interview fully in Mandarin and in such cases they would bring along a trusted friend to help translate parts of the conversation into English or Mandarin. Apart from the interviews, ethnographic observations contributed to the analyses in this paper. I spent time with the African students as they carried out their daily lives in schools, hostels, workplaces and student leisure spaces, which helped contextualise their interview narratives and deepen understanding of their experiences studying and living in Chinese cities.

African educational pursuits as 'worlding' and global householding

The worlding orientations of African students drive them to pursue international educational opportunities. Although the academic literature tends to focus on African students who migrate to Western countries for higher education,³⁴ anecdotal evidence suggests that a parallel flow has opted for the Middle East, other African countries (e.g. South Africa), and socialist regimes such as China and Cuba.³⁵ The choice of study destination has to do with bilateral relations, religious affinity, affordability, or prior social ties in the destination country. The migration of African students to China is not new, but their numbers are surging compared to the past. This section argues that their transnational education journeys are entangled with the political economy of trade and international relations.

Why do African students choose China and how are their transnational educational journeys intertwined with the international political economy? Compared to Western universities, it is less expensive to study in China (tuition fees and living expenses can cost as little as US\$8000 per annum in lower tier Chinese cities) and the students said that they are more likely to succeed in applying for a visa to study in China than if they applied to study in Europe or North America. For African students, postcolonial ties with the United Kingdom or France means studying in these countries would have provided greater familiarity because the language and educational systems are similar to their countries of origin. But the students interviewed believe that it is difficult for African students to successfully apply for study visas in those countries whereas the Chinese government encourages China-Africa educational links and has disbursed more than 18 000 scholarships to African students as of 2013.

Scholarships offered by the Chinese government to African students can be traced back to the 1950s, when China sought to secure alliances with African countries against Western imperialism. Rhetoric of past and present solidarity regularly characterise the speeches of Chinese officials to African audiences. As Zhao³⁶ notes, 'education is regarded as a "long term investment to win the hearts and minds of Africa's future leaders"'.³⁷ Opportunities to study in China are paved through sponsorship offers for the select few chosen by their home governments or universities that administer the Chinese scholarships. More often it is family fortunes that facilitate a Chinese educational stint. Since only wealthy class families can afford to send their children for studies in China,³⁸ overseas exposure to educational opportunities might be considered a private good.

Many of the African students have family members that run businesses importing Chinese goods to Africa (e.g. textiles, fashion accessories, electronics and other consumer goods). Their educational goals include learning the Chinese language in order to facilitate family businesses. Guangzhou is a popular choice amongst such families. For those studying in Guangzhou, the ability to remain in China on a student visa enables them to help their family members keep an eye on the functioning of the family business. A student from Ivory Coast explained that his father encouraged him to go to China for this reason:

My father was like, 'Wow, you know what? China is growing so fast... if you go to China, it will benefit not only my business, but also you... Because language is a barrier [for us], go there and study Chinese'.

Juggling classes and homework with business activity is demanding on the African students. Occasionally students may notify lecturers that they have to arrive late or leave in the middle of class because of a business transaction. An undergraduate from Tanzania rationalised the overlap between her business and student life by explaining, 'without doing business we may not be able to pay our tuition fees'. Several expressed feeling under family pressure to succeed in their studies alongside business activities. Another undergraduate from Tanzania said that relatives and friends grill her about her education and business activities when she returns home during the summer vacation, while her father is watchful over how she spends her time in China because he wants her to acquire business skills for personal growth and to improve the social status of the family through her educational stint abroad.

The migration trajectories of African students are shaped by family priorities that lead to global householding patterns where one or more children remain in China while the parent returns to Africa and travels regularly to ensure the smooth operation of the business in China and possibly elsewhere in the world. Alongside the family business, the African students may extend their translation and transaction services to extended family members or friendship networks back in Africa.

For students studying in Wuhan, which is further from the thriving trading hubs of Guangzhou and Yiwu (in Zhejiang province), daily participation in business activities is constrained by physical distance. But during the study break, they travel to trading cities and stay to work temporarily as translators or trading intermediaries. To them, it presents an opportunity to gain working experience, build professional contacts, and earn extra income. One of the students from Egypt had studied Mandarin in Beijing before moving to Wuhan to enrol in a postgraduate degree. He said that during the summer holidays he goes to Guangzhou to work as a translator in a trading firm run by his *gemen'er* (or 'brother' which in Mandarin refers to a good friend). He explained:

There are many opportunities for Arabic translators like me to *dagong* (work) in Guangzhou and it is more pleasant to spend summer there than in Wuhan [where the temperature in summer is higher].

Although the interview was conducted in English, the respondent peppered his answers with Chinese colloquialisms like '*dagong*' and '*gemen'er*' to signal his familiarity with the Chinese language and culture. The way he negotiates his studies and work life highlights the entanglement of social reproduction and production evinced in African student migration to China as the students integrate education and trade-related activities. As capitalist production, distribution and consumption globalises, so has education as social reproduction.

For the African students based in Wuhan, the city's location and industrial base (even though the service sector is gaining importance) restricts their trading activities to the vacation period, but the students there mentioned that not being in Guangzhou enables them to focus on their studies. An undergraduate from Burkina Faso who is studying in Wuhan reflected, 'some of my friends went to Guangzhou but they did not graduate because they became distracted with doing business'. Despite being less internationally prominent than Guangzhou, Wuhan still offers African students the opportunity to realise their educational goals and experience Chinese urbanism, which they aspire for African urban development (e.g. emblems of modernisation such as skyscrapers, transport infrastructure, international shopping malls and urban amenities).

Nonetheless, they express that African cities should adopt selective aspects of Chinese urbanism only. Compared to the African cities in which they have lived, the student migrants opined that Chinese urban inhabitants embody poorer hygiene habits and are less convivial, especially towards foreigners like them. For example, a female undergraduate from Zimbabwe complained:

I don't like the fact that Chinese people spit everywhere on the floor... Everywhere, even like food markets, shopping malls, everywhere they just spit on the ground. It is shocking to see that.

Her friend from Congo-Brazzaville added, '[the Chinese] are shocked to see foreign and black people... they take pictures without asking [and] it is rude.' Unpleasant encounters in Chinese cities lead such African students to chart alternative urban aspirations for the cities and countries they come from, which this paper discusses in the next section. Whether it is Guangzhou or Wuhan, Chinese cities provide a means for African student migrants to realise their urban aspirations by being part of the spectacular urban growth of China, which they had only read or heard about previously, and accrue the higher educational qualifications that will enable them to contribute to the development of their home countries. Alongside this, they engage in trading related activities through their stay in Chinese cities to supplement personal and family incomes.

The growth of China-Africa trading relationships has simultaneously raised the reputation of the Chinese political and economic system, which ranks favourably in the eyes of the African students and their parents. China represents to them an economic giant that is outstripping the growth rate of Western economies. Learning the Chinese language and mastering social-cultural interactions through a stint in China is considered advantageous to job prospects in African countries, such as working for companies doing business with Chinese partners, in the diplomatic sector or government positions, and even at international agencies like the United Nations or World Bank. Current studies of international students have highlighted the cultural and potential economic value of learning the English language to explain why destinations countries such as the UK, US, Australia and New Zealand are popular with international students.³⁹ Given the colonial histories of African countries, the African students in China are often already competent in English or French, so Mandarin functions as a third language to give them additional advantage in the light of China's growing geopolitical and geo-economic presence in African countries and internationally. A postgraduate from Mauritius told me that since he speaks French and English fluently, he decided to learn Mandarin in China so that with the additional language competency he would be considered better qualified to apply for jobs at the United Nations eventually.

Laurie et al.⁴⁰ argue that obtaining professional status forms the basis of individual social ambitions and influences family and generational economic strategies. They add that education is also linked to particular visions of development and modernisation, described as the 'whitening effect' of racist nation building and development agendas. For the African students studying in China, the Sino-centric approach towards modernisation offers an alternative model of development to Westernisation. They desire to learn more about how China succeeded internationally, and this type of learning cannot be captured if they remain in African universities or go to another part of the world. However, as the next section discusses, their educational experiences in China and everyday social lives in Chinese cities reflect and reinforce asymmetrical relations in the global balance of power.

De/re-centring the global geographies of power?

The stretching of social reproduction through educational pursuits in China presents a twist to the existing literature on educational migration to Western countries.⁴¹ Countering conventional perceptions that foreign students in China register mainly in short-term language learning or cultural immersion schemes, the number of foreign students enrolling for longer-term Chinese degree programs is growing but there is a

paucity of research critically reflecting on their motivations and experiences. Acquiring a Chinese degree qualification means social advancement and cultural prestige for nationals from less economically well-off countries. The African student migrants interviewed express quiet confidence that the ability to speak Mandarin and brandishing a Chinese degree certificate will improve their employment prospects, such as in government or with companies doing Africa-China investment and trade, and even create entrepreneurial opportunities. Several believe that Chinese educational degrees can facilitate their pathways to postgraduate degrees or professional employment in Australia, New Zealand, UK, Canada, US or European countries. The 'worlding' trajectory that led them to develop their urban aspirations in Chinese cities gives rise to follow-on routes to pursue their ambitions in another city at a third country 'somewhere else'. However, immigration research has shown that Mainland Chinese graduates and professionals face difficulty qualifying for professional employment in those same countries because of language or systematic barriers in the labour market arising out of racism and the devaluation of Chinese university degrees.⁴²

How does an educational experience in China constitute the subjectivities of these African students, and in what ways does this allow us to conceptualise the geosocial? Even though the African students I met in China belong to a relatively privileged socio-economic spectrum of the African countries they left, they believe they have to go somewhere else in the world in order to advance their life prospects. The African student migrants interviewed also expressed that their learning experiences in Chinese universities have not encouraged the critical or creative learning they desire. One of the African students who is studying for an engineering degree shared his experience of classroom learning:

The Chinese students do not ask questions... When I asked a question the first time, the lecturer responded. When I asked another time, he ignored me. Later he pulled me aside and said 'if you have a question, ask me after class'. But to me, maybe the other students don't understand too! I don't ask questions now. In my country, the lecturer draws from a variety of sources and not a textbook, and we can experiment during practicals. Here my Chinese teacher says, 'you cannot do this, you cannot touch that'. When the Chinese universities advertise in my country, it sounds like they have great facilities and teaching, but now I know it is a shell.

Of the African student migrants who expressed such sentiments strongly, several had completed diploma or tertiary training in their home institutions or abroad (e.g. South Africa, France or the UK) before going to China. They compared their educational environment in Chinese universities with prior experiences of studying elsewhere, and felt the substance of the Chinese educational experience did not live up to the international branding projected by those institutions abroad.

Outside of the classroom where informal learning takes place, the African student migrants interviewed want to develop their Chinese language skills and cultural competencies as part of the skills set they hope to acquire from their time in China. They felt it would be useful to engage in social interactions with the Chinese students and society. But they signalled the barriers they encountered on campus because hostel arrangements separate foreign students from local Chinese students. The African student migrants inform me that university administrators justify the separation of foreign students from Chinese students by saying that foreign student

hostels are equipped with better living facilities. For example, fewer foreign students share a room, and in one university hostel that I visited, the single rooms contained en-suite toilets. Conversations with local Chinese students suggest these conditions are far better than their hostels. But unofficially, the foreign students understand that university administrators are concerned about the ‘moral degradation’ of Chinese students if they shared living spaces with foreign students.

In contemporary China, there remains racial prejudice found in university spaces that parallel the tensions in social relations directed at African students during the post-Mao era, which culminated in violent demonstrations on university campuses during 1988-1989.⁴³ The ‘remainders of race’, or what Amin⁴⁴ explains as ‘coding habits from the past [that are] deeply etched into institutional and social consciousness’, continue to materialise spatially through segregated living and socialising spaces for Africans in Chinese cities. Some African student migrants observe that their Chinese classmates are not interested to socialise with them or those who do mainly want to use the opportunity to improve their personal English language skills. As a respondent from Burkina Faso puts it:

If you call your Chinese friends to go out, they tell you, ‘Oh, I don't have time’ or ‘I have to do something’. Or if you call your Chinese friend today, they might say, ‘we will meet tomorrow’. Tomorrow your friend tells you, ‘Oh, I have some problems’. It's always like this... Most of the Chinese students who come out with you just want to speak English, not Chinese. If you want to speak Chinese, the Chinese people don't want to speak [with you]. They want to speak English with you’.

Other African student migrants suggest that the Chinese have different leisure preferences that deter social mixing. To them, African students socialise over drinks or in clubs,⁴⁵ whereas the Chinese students prefer to socialise over Chinese meals or in karaoke bars where they croon Chinese language songs that are unfamiliar to their African peers. Initially both parties try to engage one another but the frequency of interactions reduce as cultural habits set in.

The Chinese students come from a range of socio-economic backgrounds too. Some are rural migrants and many are not as wealthy as the African students who have higher consumption power due to family support or the side income they earn from business activity. The African students saw themselves as more urbane or modern than their Chinese counterparts. This is reflected in food or fashion preferences. When I asked African female students about their leisure activities they often say they would shop in places different from the Chinese students or buy their clothes online. Probing further, they explained to me that it boils down to fashion sense. As a female undergraduate from Zimbabwe studying in Wuhan puts it: ‘If you go outside for shopping, mostly they are Chinese clothes, but if you want to buy something good [to wear], maybe online [because] you can find European shops’. On a separate occasion, she elaborated, ‘we dress differently from the Chinese students. We like international brands such as those at *Hanjie* (a pedestrian mall lined with boutique shops). We don't buy clothes that the Chinese girls like... [points to a passer-by wearing a dress with delicate lace and embroidery]’.

Another student from Tanzania studying in Guangzhou suggested that African students prefer ‘Western’ food to Chinese food. Granted, the above are generalisations made of cultural tastes in both contexts. But the key point is seemingly mundane choices over food, fashion and socialising habits flag the

differences found in everyday sociality, while allowing the African student migrants to assert alternative views of modernity and urbanity. They refuse to be drawn fully into Chinese framings of these cultural categorisations. Yet, one might also argue that the African students negotiate a social-cultural space where they are reinforcing forms of ‘Western’ modernity even as they seek an educational experience in China to correct the developmental asymmetries forged by Western hegemony in the first place.

Most of the African interviewees desire to remain after graduation and work in Chinese cities such as Beijing or Shanghai. They hope to be employed professionally in their field of expertise, defying the ‘traders’ identity attached to African migrants who come to China. But visa restrictions in China limit their opportunities to gain working experience in their areas of specialisation or remain in the country for the longer term. Transiency characterising the African presence in China is a recurring theme in the literature on African migrants in China.⁴⁶ The African students are pessimistic about their employment prospects in Chinese companies. As a male respondent from Ivory Coast puts it, ‘there are many unemployed Chinese people in China so why would Chinese employers hire a foreigner like us?’ Limited post-graduation options in China means they are likely to take up jobs related to trading if they opt to remain in China. A female student from Burkina Faso said that she came to China because she thought that China’s growing geostrategic clout means:

The Chinese language will be like English, [an] international language. If you speak the Chinese language [and] English, it will be better [...] than people who don't know how to speak Chinese.

But the daily realities of racial prejudice in Chinese cities eroded her optimism and she says: ‘the Chinese people look at [Africans] like an animal... [Taxi drivers] don’t want to take you because you are African’. After completing her studies in China she plans to re-migrate to Canada, a country that she considers more welcoming both for its immigration regulations and attitudes towards cultural diversity. Research on young people’s emotional negotiation of geopolitical events argues that what happens at the global political scale has material impacts on their everyday lives too⁴⁷. In the case of the African youths, the wider geopolitical context of China-Africa relations had influenced their decisions to pursue a Chinese degree, but material experiences of racialisation in Chinese cities and employment barriers prompt onward migration intentions.

On hindsight or learning from the experiences of other Africans they meet in China, the African students feel simultaneously hopeful yet regretful about their decisions to study in Chinese universities. They anticipate the paper qualifications from China will put them in good stead if they return to Africa or move to other countries. Yet those who have been in China for several years express that they could have learned more professionally and socially if they had gone to study in a ‘Western’ institution. Belatedly, their experiences of studying in China and life in Chinese cities give rise to follow-on aspirations to be realised through onward migration to another city elsewhere in the world.

The above discussion signals how perceptions of the geopolitical clout and geo-economic reach of China influences the migration decisions of African students who go to Chinese cities for an educational stint. Their transnational journeys are part of global householding patterns to optimise transnational social reproduction and

production opportunities for themselves and the family. However, systemic structural barriers and their everyday encounters in Chinese cities are saturated with racial prejudices that entrench cultural domination through past colonial *and* new neo-colonial structures of power. The way such discourses are articulated and performed in educational institutions, the workplace and the everyday urban spaces of Chinese cities helps us make sense of how these discourses contribute to subjectification.⁴⁸ This, in turn, shapes the urban aspirations of the African students in China as well as China-Africa relations in the wider context of the global geographies of power.

Conclusion

This paper shows how educational migration is motivated and accelerated by the spread, frequency and density of geo-economic and geopolitical relationships tying China with African countries. But equally, educational migration shapes the reproduction of such relationships too. As evinced from the narratives of the African students, their experiences in Chinese cities and China translate into urban aspirations for how they would like African cities and their countries to develop. Pursuing an overseas education in China is framed by the African students as arising out of a desire to correct development asymmetries and access to political space. Several of the African students interviewed expressed that only by mastering the conduct of Chinese business and politics can African countries negotiate effectively with China. Education serves not only the purpose of social reproduction but is also tied to political subjectivities and economic ambitions. Yet their experiences of living in Chinese cities and studying in Chinese universities only reproduce racist geographies and development asymmetries.

The knowledge circulation represented by the mobility of African students *and* the situatedness of their learning in China are experienced through precognitive racial classification and development hierarchies that place them as abject inhabitants of Chinese urban space.⁴⁹ They share their racialized experiences of studying in Chinese universities, comparing the pros and cons by setting it into the context of their earlier education in African institutions, many of which have been shaped by ‘Western’ colonialism and globalisation. Nonetheless, they also undermine the development asymmetries that characterise their everyday sociality in China by asserting alternative views of modernity and urbanity, comparing their knowledge of Chinese society with what they know of ‘Western’ culture through colonial legacies and globalisation. These African students are discerning subjects of the higher education they receive in China, how it is constituted through the global geographies of power and its implications for China-Africa relations. Madge et al.⁵⁰ remind us that ‘the to-ing and fro-ing of knowledge from mobile students [...] continues to form, a contribution in shifting boundaries of what constitutes contemporary geographical knowledge... But these circulations are not neutral processes [since] the global terrain is uneven and the contributions of knowledge agents are not valued equally’.

Even as growing China-Africa relations seem to signal shifts in the global geographies of power to counterbalance ‘Western’ framings of modernisation and development, we need to recognise as well that China is complicit in producing its own circuits of hegemonic knowledge through institutional setups at home and abroad. Knowledge transfer from China to Africa takes place through higher educational institutions, medical centres, business practices, diplomacy and more. Chinese interactions with these countries entail the categorisations of ‘race’ and ethnicity,

cultural imaginations of ‘self’ and ‘other’, or hegemony and power. As China’s global influence expands, more countries in the Global South and Global North will be roped into national portrayals of ‘Chinese models’ of development and their attendant knowledge circuits.⁵¹ Bringing the geosocial to the fore troubles the hegemonic bases of knowledge by sensitising us to the particularities of the social spaces in which knowledge is produced and practiced, their interconnections across global space, and the multiple scales in which such knowledges transverse one another.

Notes

- ¹ M. Power and G. Mohan, 'Towards a Critical Geopolitics of China's Engagement with African Development', *Geopolitics* 15/3 (2010) p. 487.
- ² For example, a recent special issue published in the influential *Journal of Contemporary China* focuses on the geo-strategic aspects of economic and political initiatives of China in African states; *Journal of Contemporary China* 23/90 (2014)
- ³ M. Douglass, 'Global Householding in Pacific Asia', *International Development Planning Review* 28/4 (2006) pp. 421–446.
- ⁴ A. M. Simone, 'On the Worlding of African Cities', *African Studies Review* 44/2 (2001) p. 17
- ⁵ For instance, S. Lan, 'State Regulation of Undocumented African Migrants in China: A Multi-Scalar Analysis', *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 50/3 (2015) pp. 289–304; G. Mathews and Y. Yang, 'How Africans Pursue Low-End Globalisation in Hong Kong and Mainland China', *Journal of Chinese Current Affairs* 41/2 (2012) pp. 95–120.
- ⁶ A. Amin, *Land of Strangers* (Cambridge: Polity Press 2012).
- ⁷ E. Mawdsley, 'China and Africa: Emerging Challenges to the Geographies of Power', *Geography Compass* 1/3 (2007) pp. 405–421.
- ⁸ For example, Power and Mohan (note 1); S. B. Cáceres and S. Ear, 'The Geopolitics of China's Global Resources Quest', *Geopolitics* 17/1 (2012) pp. 47–79; S. Zhao, 'A Neo-Colonialist Predator or Development Partner? China's Engagement and Rebalance in Africa', *Journal of Contemporary China* 23/90 (2014) pp. 1033–1052.
- ⁹ Mawdsley (note 10).
- ¹⁰ Zhao (note 11) p. 3.
- ¹¹ For exceptions, see G. Mohan and B. Lampert, 'Negotiating China: Reinserting African Agency into China–Africa Relations', *African Affairs* 112/446 (2013) pp. 92–110; F. L. Wang and E. A. Elliot, 'China in Africa: Presence, Perceptions and Prospects', *Journal of Contemporary China* 23/90 (2014) pp. 1012–1032.
- ¹² Simone (note 4).
- ¹³ T. Bunnell and P. Marolt, 'Cities and Their Grassroutes', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 32/3 (2014) pp. 381–385.
- ¹⁴ A. Appadurai, 'The Capacity to Aspire: Culture and the Terms of Recognition', in V. Rao and M. Walton (eds.), *Culture and Public Action* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2004) pp. 59–84; J. Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1997).
- ¹⁵ Simone (note 4).
- ¹⁶ E.L.E. Ho, 'Migration Trajectories of "Highly Skilled" Middling Transnationals: Singaporean Transmigrants in London', *Population, Space and Place* 17 (2011) pp. 116–129.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ R.M. Giralt, R.M., Bailey, A.J., 'Transnational Familyhood and the Liquid Life Paths of South Americans in the UK', *Global Networks* 10 (2010), pp. 383–400.
- ¹⁹ Douglass (note 3).
- ²⁰ B. Gray, "'Generation Emigration": The Politics of (Trans)National Social Reproduction in Twenty-First-Century Ireland', *Irish Studies Review* 21/1 (2013) pp. 23.
- ²¹ K. Mitchell, S.A. Marston, C. Katz, C., *Life's Work: Geographies of Social Reproduction* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell 2004).
- ²² J. L. Waters, 'Transnational Geographies of Academic Distinction: The Role of Social Capital in the Recognition and Evaluation of 'Overseas' Credentials', *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 7/2 (2009) pp. 113–129; N. Abelmann and J. Kang, 'A Fraught Exchange? U.S. Media on Chinese International Undergraduates and the American University', *Journal of Studies in International Education* 18/4 (2014) pp. 382–397.

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- ²⁴ A. M. Findlay, R. King, F. M. Smith, A. Geddes and R. Skeldon, 'World Class? An Investigation of Globalisation, Difference and International Student Mobility', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 37/1 (2012) pp. 118–131.
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- ²⁶ K. Mitchell, 'Education for Democratic Citizenship: Transnationalism, Multiculturalism, and the Limits of Liberalism', *Harvard Educational Review* 71/1 (2001) pp. 51–79; R. K. Sidhu and G. Dall'Alba, 'International Education and (Dis)Embodied Cosmopolitanisms', *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 44/4 (2012) pp. 413–431.
- ²⁷ E.L.E. Ho and M.E. Hatfield née Dobson, 'Migration and Everyday Matters: Sociality and Materiality', *Population, Space and Place* 17 (2011), pp. 707–713; page 708.
- ²⁸ For instance, L. Dowler and J. Sharp, 'A Feminist Geopolitics?', *Space and Polity* 5/3 (2001) pp. 165–176; J. Hyndman, 'Towards a Feminist Geopolitics', *The Canadian Geographer* 45 (2001) pp. 210–222; V. A. Massaro and J. Williams, 'Feminist Geopolitics: Redefining the Geopolitical, Complicating (In)Security', *Geography Compass* 7/8 (2013) pp. 567–577.
- ²⁹ P. Hopkins, 'Young Muslim men's experiences of local landscapes after 11 September 2001; in C. Aitchison, P. Hopkins, M. Kwan (eds.), *Geographies of Muslim Identities: Diaspora, Gender and Belonging, Re-materialising Cultural Geography* (Aldershot, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate 2007, pp. 189–200; R. Pain, R. Panelli, S. Kindon, J. Little, 'Moments in Everyday/Distant Geopolitics: Young People's Fears and Hopes, *Geoforum* 41 (2010) pp. 972–982.
- ³⁰ C. Madge, P. Raghuram and P. Noxolo, 'Conceptualizing International Education: From International Student to International Study', *Progress in Human Geography* (2014) p. 9.
- ³¹ C. Madge, P. Raghuram and P. Noxolo, 'Engaged Pedagogy and Responsibility: A Postcolonial Analysis of International Students', *Geoforum* 40/1 (2009) p. 37.
- ³² F. Rizvi, B. Lingard and J. Lavia, 'Postcolonialism and Education: An Introduction to a Contested Terrain', *Pedagogy, Culture and Society* 14/3 (2006) pp. 249–262.
- ³³ The countries the students are from include Benin, Congo-Brazzaville, Egypt, Ethiopia, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Madagascar, Mauritius, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, Seychelles, Somalia, Sudan, Tanzania, Togo and Zimbabwe.
- ³⁴ For example, T. Maundeni, 'The Role of Social Networks in the Adjustment of African Students to British Society: Students' Perceptions', *Race Ethnicity and Education* 4/3 (2001) pp. 253–276; F. Maringe and S. Carter, 'International Students' Motivations for Studying in UK HE: Insights into the Choice and Decision Making of African Students', *International Journal of Educational Management* 21/6 (2007) pp. 459–475.
- ³⁵ Also see E. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 'Education, Migration and Internationalism: Situating Muslim Middle Eastern and North African Students in Cuba', *The Journal of North African Studies* 15/2 (2010) pp. 137–155.
- ³⁶ Zhao (note 11) p. 5.
- ³⁷ J. Kaiman, 'Africa's Future Leaders Benefit from Beijing's Desire to Win Hearts and Minds', *The Guardian*, 29 April 2013, available at <<http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2013/apr/29/africa-future-leaders-china-aid-programme>>, accessed 25 August 2015.
- ³⁸ Anecdotal evidence from the respondents suggests that the wealthiest African families still prefer to have their children educated in 'Western' countries.

³⁹ Madge et al. (note 34); J. L. Waters, 'Geographies of Cultural Capital: Education, International Migration and Family Strategies Between Hong Kong and Canada', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 31/2 (2006) pp. 179–192.

⁴⁰ N. Laurie, R. Andolina and S. Radcliffe, 'Indigenous Professionalization: Transnational Social Reproduction in the Andes', *Antipode* 35/3 (2003) p. 465.

⁴¹ For instance, J. L. Waters, 'Flexible Citizens? Transnationalism and Citizenship Amongst Economic Immigrants in Vancouver', *The Canadian Geographer* 47/3 (2003) pp. 219–234; J. Kang and N. Abelmann, 'The Domestication of South Korean Pre-College Study Abroad in the First Decade of the Millennium', *Asian and Pacific Studies* 16/1 (2011) pp. 89–118.

⁴² For example, H. Bauder, 'Brain Abuse', or the Devaluation of Immigrant Labour in Canada', *Antipode* 35/4 (2003) pp. 699–717; P. Li, 'Immigration from China to Canada in the Age of Globalization: Issues of Brain Gain and Brain Loss', *Pacific Affairs* 81/2 (2008) pp. 217–239.

⁴³ B. Sautman, 'Anti-Black Racism in Post-Mao China', *The China Quarterly* 138 (1994) pp. 413–437.

⁴⁴ Amin (note 9) p. 83.

⁴⁵ African students that have strong religious beliefs state that they avoid such socialising spaces and habits. However, their religious restrictions also mean they are unable to socialise with their Chinese classmates through food and drink. Within the category referred to as 'Africans', there are distinct social circles to do with religious preferences, language abilities (e.g. English or French speaking Africans) and other identity affiliations.

⁴⁶ See T. Bork-Hüffer and Y. Yuan-Ihle, 'The Management of Foreigners in China: Changes to the Migration Law and Regulations During the Late Hu-Wen and Early Xi-Li Eras and their Potential Effects', *International Journal of China Studies* 5/3 (2014) pp. 571–597; R. Castillo, 'Homing' Guangzhou: Emplacement, Belonging and Precarity Among Africans in China', *International Journal of Cultural Studies* (2015) pp. 1–20.

⁴⁷ Pain et al (note 33)

⁴⁸ Dowler and Sharp (note 32).

⁴⁹ Amin (note 9); N. Laurie, R. Andolina, S. Radcliffe, 'Indigenous Professionalization: Transnational Social Reproduction in the Andes', *Antipode* 35/3 (2003) pp. 463–491.

⁵⁰ Madge et al. (note 34) pp. 10–11.

⁵¹ For a critique of Chinese exceptionalism, see W. A. Callahan, 'Chinese Visions of World Order: Post-Hegemonic or a New Hegemony?', *International Studies Review* 10/4 (2008) pp. 749–761.