Article

Exiting their Comfort Zone: Unpacking the Educational Experiences of Nigerian Students in China

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we highlighted the voices of six Nigerian students who lived and studied in China for four to seven years by investigating their educational experiences. We focused on the challenges encountered, the coping mechanisms employed and, ultimately, their post-China reflection, which was an attempt to understand the value of their study migration to China. To guide the study, a narrative inquiry approach was employed, and six themes emerged: feeling out of place; difficulty blending; teachers' support; language barriers; and learning to cope, in addition to exiting China's comfort zone (a post-China reflection). Other findings revealed the alignment between the participants' Chinese degrees and their present job/career and the value of meaningful connection, among other factors. Furthermore, the paper calls for further investigations into the aspects of mixed-classroom integration and learning experiences between international and host students.

Since the decline in Nigeria's standard of living, an increasing number of Nigerians have joined the "japa" bandwagon in their quest for a better life and quality education. This quest is a result of the perceived better standard of living and better level of education in the intended country (Abbott & Silles, 2015).

Originally, "japa" was a Nigerian Yoruba colloquial term for "to flee" or "to escape". It is used to describe Nigerian youth's psycho-social drive to 'escape' the borders of Nigeria, the ambition to export their skills and talents to the outside world (Okunade & Awosusi, 2023) for the sake of personal and all-round growth.

Over the past four decades, the migration flow of international students has significantly increased. Available statistics have shown a 186% increase in the number of students studying outside their home countries between 1998 and 2018 (Weber & Van Mol, 2023), with approximately 5.6 million in 2015 (OECD, 2018), a number that was estimated to increase by 7 million in 2020 (OECD, 2015). As the migration trend increases attracting international students from developing countries to developed countries (Altbach, 2007; Akanle, 2012), attention on the phenomenon of Nigerian youths' migration to different parts of the world in search of a better life, has also increased (Martyn, 2019; Nwosu et al., 2022; Okunade & Awosusi, 2023).

Since China's economic reform and rapid development in science and technology, it has provided increasingly attractive opportunities to international students, especially the Belt and Road initiative, which fosters Sino-African relationships (Akhtar et al., 2019; Bodomo, 2012), as well as educational projects such as the Confucius Institute, which fosters Chinese culture and education (Yang, 2010). Facilitated by these projects, China has thus been ranked at the top of the list of preferred destination countries for Nigerian students (Achu, 2019).

The increasing number of international students in China does not automatically imply that these students are satisfied with their experiences. In fact, a recent study revealed that as the number of international students in China increases, so do their emotional challenges (Li et al., 2021). For Nigerian students in China, challenges with cultural adaptability and language proficiency were also found to be a recurring theme (Achu, 2019), as research by (Ifekpolugo & Huang., 2021) stressed that Nigerians with a basic or low level of proficiency have a negative cross-cultural experience compared with those with an advanced level of proficiency.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Chinese higher education and international student experience

The internationalization of Chinese higher education, which is driven predominantly by English-medium of instruction (EMI), has attracted more international students to China while increasing the competitiveness of Chinese higher education with respect to the outside world (Wen & Hu, 2019; Liu & Ha, 2021). The emergence of the EMI program was said to have dismissed the importance of mastering Chinese language, as many international students have become less bothered about investing in Chinese learning since they can always receive extra help with English (Liu & Ha, 2021).

The quality of EMI programs has been criticized by international students who cited teachers' inability to communicate effectively in English (Botha, 2015). The course content has also been said to be delivered at a surface level,

unlike Chinese-medium programs, which are taught in depth (Xu, 2024). Aside from internationalizing Chinese higher education, China is also very much grounded in maintaining the sinicization of education, which refers to the promotion of the Chinese language and the use of Chinese-related materials in education.

Interestingly, with the exception of a few notable works (e.g., Liu & Ha, 2021; Xu, 2024) that researched Chinese-medium of instruction (CMI) programs and students' experiences, this area of research has received less attention. In the findings of Xu (2024), international students in CMI courses appeared to be well driven and to have a positive attitude toward their studies. They perceived CMI majors as an opportunity not only to master the subject content but also to polish their Chinese language proficiency, even though the linguistic demand in CMI classes can be overwhelming. Some of those demands include accessing learning resources in Chinese (Akhtar et al., 2019; Wan & Gao, 2019; Zou, 2015), learning new professional vocabularies, and being able to write Chinese characters for classes and exams (Xu, 2024).

While many studies address international students' cultural adaptation and acculturation in China (Chiang & Shiao-Yun, 2014; Zhang & Qi, 2021; Ifekpolugo & Huang, 2021), there appears to be a lack of research qualitatively investigating the educational experiences of a particular group, e.g., "Nigerian students in China", despite its importance in promoting cultural understanding and improving the educational experiences of international students in China.

The study was thus guided by one main research question: "What are the experiences of Nigerian students who studied in China?". We focused on the challenges experienced, the coping mechanisms employed, and insights drawn from experiences in general.

China as a Comfort Zone

China, as a 'japa' destination, has been appraised for its technology prowess, scientific innovations, scholarship provisions, safety and overall comfortability, particularly for international students from low to medium socioeconomic status (Liu & Ha, 2021), e.g., Africa. Most African students who choose China as a study destination do so not only because of the benefits of scholarships but also because it serves as a medium for attaining greater social mobility (Hodzi, 2020) and gaining international capital. Courtois and O'keefe (2024) defined "international capital" as a form of social/cultural capital acquired through international education, exposure to foreign language and culture, etc.

For Nigerians, there is a premigrant worrisome expectation and pressure to make the family proud and return home more successful (Akanle, 2012). According to Martyn (2019), Nigerian students in China are satisfied with being in a comfortable position to help their families back home. Living in China thus provides a comfortable, safe environment for them to improve their lives. In Nigerian households, it is often assumed that international mobility will lead to financial success, among other forms of capital, overlooking the reality that not all international mobility results in the acquisition of useful capital. As posited

by Courtois and O'keefe (2024), although international mobility is a significant process of capital accumulation, individuals without initial cultural capital may land themselves in precarious careers.

Time and context could also deprive one of utilizing acquired international capital upon returning home. From Courtois and O'keefe's (2024) point of view, migrants who experience delays in exiting the host country could temporarily be masked from reaching long-term prospects. In the submission of Hodzi (2020), many African students opt to stay back in China and joggle with English-teaching jobs rather than returning home to pursue their future prospects, whereas for others, China could be a means to an end. "End" refers to "long-term settlement" in countries that support permanent residency (Okunade & Awosusi, 2023).

Mobility As 'Becoming' More Advantaged

The theoretical underpinning of this paper sprouts from the insights drawn from Tran (2015) on their conceptualization of "mobility as becoming", a concept that mirrors international student mobility beyond the traditional focus on education and/or the physical movement from one place to another. This type of mobility is complex and multidimensional rather than merely physical or linear (Adey, 2009). It is a process of multiple transformations and a decision that leads to different fluid trajectories (Janssens, 2018). The concept of mobility as "becoming" was applied to better understand international students' study migration to China and the values achieved.

The term "international student" in this study refers to all non-Chinese nationals who are in China for the sole purpose of pursuing their academic qualifications. According to Tran (2015), this group of students perceives mobility as a 'resourceful vehicle' to reach their desired goals. According to Martyn (2019), Nigerians who choose China as a study destination do so because they perceive China's economic prowess as an avenue for broadening their horizons and transforming their cultural capital. As a result, they often imagine life in a prospective host environment as a way to achieve more than they could in their home country.

For the sake of clarity, this concept was not applied with the intent of discussing the participants' transformation stages as they moved from Nigeria to China; rather, it was applied to help put the participants' perceived value of their study migration to China and their post-China trajectories into a better perspective.

METHOD

The Rationale & Concept of Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry is a research methodology that emphasizes the power of storytelling as the best way to understand people's experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000). Presently, narrative inquiry as a research methodology has gained increasing attention and is widely used in educational studies (Craig et al.,

2019; Xu et al., 2024). It was considered the best method in this regard because it provided room for in-depth data collection and a chance to structure the experiences in a storied form. According to Polkinghorne (1995), narratives are an attempt to unravel an incomplete situation or gain certain clarification, and the participants' narratives in this study fall within this description.

By employing the narrative inquiry approach, this study described the lived experiences of six Nigerians who studied in China for a duration of four to seven years between 2016 and 2023. The inquiry helped the participants construct their lived experiences in China and helped to deconstruct deeper insights into what these experiences mean to them. We focused mostly on recurring narratives and the way they were narrated. In the interview excerpts presented below, some words are italicized to show the distinct choice of language, slang or vernacular, that is peculiar to the culture of the participants.

Participants

The participants were six Nigerian students who lived in China and whose ages ranged from 29--38 years. The duration of their stay ranged from four to seven years. The participants hail from the eastern part of Nigeria, the Igbo ethnic group, and are thus bound by distinct cultural similarities. All but one of them had learned Chinese language for two years and obtained the HSK level 5 certification, which allowed them to gain admission to China through Confucius Scholarship. At the end of their one-year Chinese language study in China, some proceeded to advance further in majors such as Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages (TCSOL), whereas others diverted to pursuing degree courses in their field of interest. Ultimately, the participants were three males and three females with pseudonyms: Betha, Mac, Sia, Flora, Sam and Ben.

Betha is a 29-year-old female Nigerian student who studied in Beijing, China, between 2016 and 2021. At the end of her one-year Chinese language advanced studies, Betha stayed in China and started her undergraduate education in international economics between 2017 and 2021. Upon graduation, she moved to the United States, where she pursued her career. At the time of her interview, Betha worked as a business analyst for a reputable company in the U.S.

Mac is a 38-year-old Nigerian male who arrived in China in 2016. He studied in Northeast China, where he obtained his first degree in Masters in Teaching Chinese as a Second Language (MTCSOL) and a second master's degree in geological engineering. Upon graduation, Mac returned to Nigeria to work. At the time of this study, he worked in the cybersecurity department as an IT assistant in a Chinese telecommunication company located in Lagos, Nigeria.

Sia is a 29-year-old female with an undergraduate education in French from Nigerian University. She migrated to China in 2016 and pursued a three-year master's degree in TCSOL between 2016 and 2020. Upon graduation, she enrolled for a second master's degree in education management and policy. However, the onset of COVID-19 made her abruptly end this course and return to Nigeria. In Nigeria, Sia pursued her career interest in languages by opening a Language Academy, where she recruited home and foreign teachers in teaching

foreign languages (such as Chinese, French, German, etc.) to language enthusiasts.

Flora is a 32-year-old female who studied education in China between 2018 and 2022. Flora described her study experience in China as a long journey, recounting her experience as the only international student in a class with 23 Chinese students. Upon graduation, Flora left China to Dubai, where her family lives. At the time of this study, Flora worked in Dubai as a Chinese–English interpreter. Upon further interaction with her, she revealed her plans of relocating to the United Kingdom to pursue a career in teaching.

Sam is a 32-year-old male who obtained a master's degree in TCSOL in Shanghai, China, between 2017 and 2021; this is because he extended the program for one year. Upon graduation, Sam applied for a work visa but declined, thus prompting him to return to Nigeria. At the time of this interview, Sam worked as a human resource person at a fintech company located in Abuja, Nigeria.

Ben is a 34-year-old male and the only participant with a slightly different profile from the others. He migrated to China in 2016 through independent enrollment, and he was the only participant without knowledge of the Chinese language. He received his bachelor's degree in environmental engineering in Tianjin, China. Unlike the others, Ben's major was taught in English. At the end of the program, he worked in China between 2020 and 2021, before moving to the U.S., where he worked as a climate specialist.

Data collection and procedure

Purposeful sampling was used to select participants who fit the criteria set for selection, which included nationality (Nigerians only), student status (must have graduated from China), current status (must be working) and last location (must have left China). They were recruited through WeChat and Instagram between the 2nd and the 25th of October 2023. The first contact was made directly by the researchers who had had prior encounters with the participants, and subsequent recruitment was through referrals by the other participants interviewed.

Efforts were made with respect to ethical issues to ensure that all potential participants fully understood the research implications, and an agreement that clarified their responsibility was also established. The interview guideline included an assurance of anonymity, confidentiality, avoidance of harm and feedback on the transcription. As per their availability, one-on-one semi-structured interviews were scheduled via Zoom and WeChat calls with the participants. The sessions were held between the 17th of November and the 11th of December, 2023, and each session lasted an average of 54 minutes.

Narrative analysis

The study was viewed via the narrative inquiry approach, where individual narratives are viewed as being shaped by the understanding of those who lived

it. A narrative inquiry emphasizes how the inquirer makes sense of the narrative context, language, and social interactions of the individuals involved (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). An inquirer's ability to arrive at an interpretation of those experiences where meanings are constructively created is referred to as "Verstehen", meaning "an understanding" (Schwandt, 1994). To achieve this goal, we paid attention to the participants' inward feelings of hope, anxiety, gratitude, regret, etc., and their outward feelings toward the external environment.

We opted to transcribe the audio verbatim because it was important to observe the uniqueness of each individual's story, considering the similar cultural attributes they share. However, the extracts used in the study were intelligently revised in terms of punctuation and tenses to ensure ease of reading. The transcribed documents were sent to each of the participants to confirm their responses. None of them requested corrections to be made upon receiving their feedback, and coding commenced right after. In the end, several themes emerged, highlighting the participants' educational experiences and reflections.

RESULTS

Six themes emerged from the data describing the participants' lived experiences and reflections. The themes include feeling out of place, difficulty blending, teachers' support, language barriers, learning to cope and, finally, exiting China—their comfort zone (a post-China reflection). The themes are presented below not in chronological order of how they were told but according to the most recurring themes that emerged from the data. However, an attempt was made to structure them in a logical flow: from their initial feelings toward the new environment, to their educational experiences, and finally, to their reflections upon leaving the environment.

Feeling Out of Place

To understand the participants' level of cultural awareness and adjustment in the host country, the participants were asked to recall specific instances where they felt culturally different, comfortable or uncomfortable. The majority of them noted the uncomfortable feeling of being stared at aliens during their initial stay in China.

Ben, who was the only participant without prior knowledge of the Chinese language, described this feeling as something that made him feel uncomfortable and unprepared for the journey ahead:

I came to China in August 2016. I just came in as this very naive person who hadn't traveled out before. If there is one thing that messed with my head when I first arrived, it is the perceived aggressiveness, the weird way they would stare at me when I am outside. That used to make me very uncomfortable.

In Ben's own interpretation, this feeling of discomfort was heightened by his inability to speak the Chinese language. He believed that the ability to speak and understand Mandarin would have helped to increase his sense of belonging. Ben recognized the limitation of not knowing the language as a major challenge. Mac, on the other hand, wished that he was not as proficient. He had this to say:

Sometimes I wished I did not understand the language, especially when in a public place. This way, I don't get to hear what they don't want me to hear, ha-ha. Say whatever you want to say, as long as I don't understand you, it's cool. However, it is sometimes difficult when you can actually hear what they say but pretend to not hear them.

Sam's account was not entirely different. He acknowledged that racial segregation and discrimination exist. However, he maintained that none affected him directly. According to him, cities such as Shanghai, where he lived, were highly concentrated with foreigners, and the local people were accustomed to seeing people of all colors:

Shanghai is slightly different from other cities. I would go to other cities and get all these stares, ehn...people looking at me or behaving weird when I am around them, stuff like that, but it wasn't truly that way in Shanghai. I didn't feel too different. Even when I started living outside the campus, I still did not have uncomfortable experiences.

Difficulty Blending

This theme is unique for participants who studied together with the Chinese locals in class. The participants focused on their relationships with their Chinese classmates and their challenges with blending. Flora was the only international student in a class of twenty-six. She had this to say:

I used to feel a bit shy walking into the classroom when everyone was already seated. Therefore, I always make sure I arrive in the class very early, earlier than everybody else. Because if I walk in when everyone was already seated, I would feel like they were all about to gossip about me.

She further reiterated on how she felt distant from relating to her classmates even when they extended a hand of friendship:

To be honest, I feel they were more forthcoming to get to know me than I was toward them. I could tell them were trying to make me feel among, but somehow, I was just withdrawn. I don't know sha. Like... I can also remember the day the girls invited me to their hostel... I didn't go. I would say it took me a while to kind of loosen up.

Mac felt that his relationships with Chinese in general were flawed, including his relationships with his classmates and supervisor. He described struggling with keeping up with the pace with his Chinese classmates and his disappointment at not receiving the support he needed:

I would watch them (i.e., Chinese classmates) doing a lot of things, and I would want to do the same, but I could not. You know all these machine learning methods and all, we didn't do it in Nigeria. Sometimes when I asked for help, they actually give me the impression of wanting to help. Like the day lăo shi (i.e., teacher) referred me to one guy in the class. Just there in lăo shi's presence, he agreed to help me. However, when I met him after class, he referred me to Baidu (i.e., a search engine).

Mac admitted that he did not particularly pursue building good relationships with his classmates, due to the preconceptions he had. He had thought that relationships with Chinese people were "transactional", something that has to benefit them to be initiated.

Teachers' Support

In terms of the institutional services that helped them settle better, teachers' support reoccurred several times in the narratives. The majority of the participants spoke highly of the friendly teacher–student relationships that exist in China, which is very different from their home country. For Betha, she highlighted an unexpected support that enhanced her study experience:

The first teacher that I met in my school was very kind. She helped me, a lot! I remember those days she would always reach out to ask how I was settling in. She understood that I wasn't on a full scholarship, and for some reasons, she was just so caring. She would text me, ask how I was faring, even took me to lunch with her daughter many times. On one of those occasions, she asked me if I could help tutor her daughter in English every weekend and if she would pay me. Oh! that was one of my happiest days in China.

Flora reported relationships with the teachers as something that made her feel loved:

In regard to school life, I had a very wonderful experience. The teachers were truly helpful. They took good care of me. Like some weeks to exam, they would contact me to see if I needed help, maybe like a make-up class or something...like you can randomly send the teacher a message, ask about anything and they will reply you, and assist you with whatever you need. However, in Nigeria, that was not necessarily always the case

However, Mac, on the other hand, expressed receiving inadequate support from his supervisor during his research journey:

I did not have a smooth ride with my supervisor. I had friends who would tell me how well they communicate with their supervisors and all of that but me, I didn't have such experience. It became worse when we had issues with publishing my article.

Language barriers

The participants who pursued professional degrees that were not in teaching Chinese as a second language (TCSOL) expressed the challenges they encountered during their studies. They suggested that their Chinese language level was sufficient for daily communication but inadequate for running a professional major because of the use of Chinese as a medium of instruction (CMI). Betha expressed her struggles with understanding vocabularies in their major:

Having to study 100% in Chinese for a major such as a mine, with all the calculations, was difficult. Prior to my bachelor's degree, I thought my Chinese was good enough. Then, I realized that even though I could speak it very well, I still needed to go the extra mile to be able to use it in class and in my exams. Like when they would say something like "suan zhi", I would be lost...when they could just be talking about "mining.

Similarly, for Flora:

I failed gāo děng shù xué (advanced mathematics) in my first year, second semester, I think. I cried after I saw that result. I have never failed any course in my life, in my entire life! I nearly gave up. There's another one called rén tǐ jiě pōu (human anatomy). That was in our first year, first semester so you can imagine. I kept wondering how education is related to anatomy. That course had lots of vocabulary for the human body, oh my God.

Flora's emphasis on "never...in my entire life" goes to show how badly it affected her grades. For Betha, who had previously deferred her undergraduate studies in Nigeria with the intention of studying a one-year Chinese course in China and then returned to complete the program. She interpreted the struggle with adapting to the language of instruction as something caused by not only the lack of language proficiency but also a lack of knowledge in the said program, as it is very different from the initial field in which she was studying in Nigeria.

Mac, on the other hand, expressed his dissatisfaction and struggled with having to switch between two languages during PowerPoint presentations:

I would not advise anyone to do a course taught in Chinese, especially for professional majors, because it hits differently. Do you think your Chinese is good? Wait until you start studying a degree with it. Have you presented a paper in Chinese before as a graduate student? I mean, the paper is originally in English, but you will prepare your presentation slides in Chinese and present them in Chinese? Well, I did.

For Betha, the climax of the challenge mounted when she started writing her thesis in Chinese:

Writing theses in Chinese was the toughest. I liked the topic that I picked, but writing it in Chinese limited my expression. I was not able to fully say what I wanted to say in a way that people would obtain exactly what I was trying to say. I had to find a Chinese who helped me to proofread and edit. I feel like in doing that, somethings that I wanted to express would have been sort of diluted.

Despite the challenges encountered, they appeared content in the realization that their language proficiency level was becoming more solid, which gave them a reason to persevere. Ben, received his classes in English. He believes that some course content was not well taught due to the teachers' level of English proficiency:

Some of my teachers will be teaching, but they couldn't truly explain it very well. I feel they address certain aspects on a shallow level, compared to if they had to teach the same content in Chinese. Even sometimes we ask a question; they are somehow lost because they don't understand. There were also teachers who would read their slides word for word.

Learning to Cope

The participants were asked how they handled the aforementioned challenges. For Flora, she had to "do like the Romans did" by switching to rote memorization as practiced by her Chinese colleagues. Rote memorization is a traditional Chinese method of learning. It is a process whereby students learn by repeating course content until it is firmly entrenched into their memory. Flora expressed that it is a common learning style used by her Chinese course mates. To do this, she had to translate the original course content into English, rephrase it and then translate it back to Chinese for easy memorization:

At first, I thought, well they (referring to the teachers) would understand. After all, I am not Chinese. However, then, my results were not getting any better, so I started learning to memorize like my Chinese mates. I will read the Chinese, translate it to English, rephrase it again in English and translate it back to Chinese ha-ha. Doing so helped me simplify the vocabulary in a way that I can easily understand and cram easily.

She reiterates:

You know how in Nigeria, the lecturers don't expect you to give them exactly what they taught you word for word. I mean yes, some do, but most times, they expect you to use your own words. I realized that in China, it was more like a flex being able to memorize stuffs word for word. That was a big challenge. Therefore, what I did was to translate to English, and once I understood the English very well, I would look for the simplest way to say it in Chinese.

Another way they coped was by utilizing easy access to the internet to seek more knowledge via English learning platforms. To solidify their perceived weak foundation in academic knowledge caused by insufficient language proficiency, Mac had to resort to the use of external resources. He explained:

People thought I was complaining too much because at a point, I thought I was going insane. Being able to manage that problem, for me, was due to some of the courses I took on Coursera, Udemy, and YouTube videos. That was in 2020, you know... COVID-19 occurred, and I used the opportunity to enroll in many online courses. Those were also certifications that I could add to my CV.

Similarly, Betha reported signing up for online courses that eventually aided in her quest for growth after China:

The internet is there, is good to use it and improve your skills, and there are so many courses one can do. For me, that was what truly helped me during those days. I was always on YouTube. I also did some courses on Udemy and got certificates, which all came in hand when I was applying to come here (i.e., the U.S.).

Exiting China—their Comfort Zone (A post China reflection)

Under this cluster, we sought to examine the participants' post-China reflections in an attempt to understand their perceptions of China and the insights gained from their experiences. As individuals who 'escaped' their home country to pursue a better life in China, the decision to leave was considered difficult. Sam expressed:

There's something about China. When you are there, you will feel like that is how everyone else is living. There's little to worry about. There is peace of mind, and security is top-notch. I mean everything is there! I would say that's why the thought of leaving scared us. I never wanted to leave, and when I did, a part of me was scared to. However, when the time was up, I knew it was up. There was nothing I could do.

After graduation, Ben obtained a teaching job in a Chinese high school in Tianjin city. However, he had to make the decision to forfeit the job and consider other countries where he can pursue his professional life:

I started questioning my stay in China after graduation; I was constantly assessing my situation, like is teaching what I should be doing? What does it add to my life? Yes, it is giving me money. However, professionally, I felt stagnant.

Ben further expressed:

I would advise anybody who cares to listen to not be afraid to leave when they are through. You will never know what the outside looks like if you do not at

least try to see it. If there's one thing China taught me, it is the fact that I can do anything I set my mind to do. That good life you didn't have, you can at least get it for your children. Now that I am here (i.e., US), I feel like I have gotten to where I can achieve that.

For Mac, who graduated and left to Nigeria:

Nigeria is hard yes, I am not where I wish to be, yes, but I am happy to have come back. If I were still in China, I probably would still be moving from school to school, taking fine pictures and living in the moment. Believe me, China will make you feel too relaxed...too relaxed, when you actually have a lot to worry about. When I came back, I realized how much time had gone by. My age mates are now established, and I am trying to stand on my feet. Thank God for the IT skills I learned in China, such as cybersecurity, Python, and R programming. These are things that made me stand out, because even Chinese translation jobs in Nigeria are saturated now.

In Sia's own words, living in China feels like living in a bubble:

Living in China feels like living in a bubble. You are almost doing the same thing year after year. It is like you are recycling old experiences. Nothing new! And you will not truly be too bothered because you have all the basic things you need.

Now, looking back as someone who left the "bubble", Sia wished she had lived a more social life:

In as much as you are there to study, also try to grow as a person, try and get a rounded experience. I say this because some of the progress I have made post China is due to some connections I formed while in China. Be intentional about forming meaningful connections.

Sia further noted her relationship with Xixi, a Chinese colleague currently working in her language academy, as one of the meaningful connections she made in China. Flora also noted that the first translation job she did outside of China was a recommendation that came from a connection formed in China.

As is common with human experiences, people may feel regretful over certain decisions they made or things they wished they had done differently. Mac, in his post-China reflection, wished that he had gone to China with a more open mind:

To be honest, I wish I had gone there with an open mind. I probably would have related more with them (the Chinese). Now when I think of it, I think I was biased.... It affected how I related with them, especially my supervisor. That time, I felt that he just wanted to frustrate me.

DISCUSSION

Feeling Out of Place

The findings concerning feelings out of place stem from the participants' challenges adapting to China as a new cultural environment. Studies have shown that international students struggle with integrating into a new country as an experience caused by cultural differences, language barriers, feelings of being different, etc. (Jean-Francois, 2019). Ben's narrative of his feeling of discomfort when "aggressively" stared in the public revealed his vulnerability to feeling socially awkward. Consistent with Ding (2016), the "Asian gaze" is a feeling of discomfort that makes international students feel like outgroup members. Exposure to an unfamiliar cultural environment could place international students in a vulnerable state, thus causing social exclusion (Bierwiaczonek & Waldzus, 2016).

Our findings further revealed that although having good knowledge of the Chinese language helps improve social connectedness, especially between international students and locals; however, this knowledge may, in some situations, result in negative feelings, especially when what the students hear, challenges their well-being. This feeling could encourage international students to spend more time with their countrymates. Evidence was observed in Mac's narrative, which hinted at a certain uncomfortable scenario in which he wished that he did not understand Chinese.

Difficulty Blending & Receiving Teachers' Support

The findings on difficulty blending highlighted the students' struggle with integrating into a typical Chinese classroom, with the majority being Chinese students. Although Chinese universities may be able to provide international students with services that can enrich their experiences, the rapport between them and host students is still somewhat stretched (Marangell, 2018). For Flora, who consciously isolated herself and avoided close relationships with the local class mates, we perceived this to be due to a lack of confidence in welcoming social interactions. While the reason behind such avoidance is not clear, Mac, on the other hand, seemed to have had a clear interpretation of his own integration issue as something caused by certain preconceptions that he had formed prior to moving to China.

In facilitating classroom integration, teachers' support was highlighted as instrumental in helping them adjust to the Chinese higher education system, although there is a need for improvement, especially with respect to supervisor–student relationships. It is important that host institutions understand the needs of their international students and make interventions to enhance their learning experiences (Cena et al., 2021). Ultimately, this finding accords with other researchers' submission that there is insufficient literature on international and host students' intercultural friendships and mixed-classroom experiences in China (Tang & Zhang, 2023).

Language barriers

As evident in the data, the major academic challenge narrated by the participants was the use of Chinese language in teaching and learning. As individuals study using a second language, the challenge of comprehending the course content and keeping up with the teaching pace affects their academics. The results of this study show that international students in a mixed-classroom environment with host students might find themselves struggling with catching up with their host colleagues. Inability to catch up could hamper their self-confidence, thereby affecting their academic experiences.

The study highlights the need for international students who are looking to venture into professional courses in Chinese higher education to achieve adequate preparedness prior to taking up the program. This is because when international students are faced with academic challenges, cultural integration into the new environment becomes secondary, and their academic preparedness is questioned (Seow, 2005).

Learning To Cope

The students' readiness to devise coping mechanisms shows their tenacity to cope with difficult situations. One of the racial stereotypes of Nigerian students abroad is their passion for success. Rosie Bell, in a BBC correspondence [https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20210124-nigeria--the-country--that-loves-to-overachieve], linked Nigerian youth's ambition to succeed as something born out of their high spirit of optimism, a cultural trait that enables them to succeed. The findings revealed two critical points: the willingness to adapt to the Chinese style, i.e., rote memorization. The second is the ability to make good decisions, i.e., by resorting to external learning resources to bridge the knowledge gap caused by language insufficiency. Both aspects show that the participants had positive mindsets toward their studies and that they exhibited a certain level of persistence to continue. The end-point of this learning process, which involves international exposure, knowledge, skills and insights, contributed to their professional outlook post China. This idea aligns with the significance of international education and exposure as a ladder to international students journeying to 'becoming' better (Tran, 2015).

Exiting China—their Comfort Zone

The participants' post-China reflection portrayed their feelings toward China as an environment. They acknowledged the environment to have provided them with a safe, comfortable life different from the life they were eager to "escape" from. Their decision to leave China was considered a "bold step" because of their internalized fear of leaving the comfortable zone and facing a life they seemed unprepared for. This, Sia described as "living in a bubble". Gaggiotti et al. (2023)

described the meaning of a "bubble" as something that can shield those living within the sphere, even though as a fragile entity, it is prone to burst at any moment.

Upon leaving China, the participants reflected on the knowledge and insights gained from the experience, and three significant key points were noted aside their academic degrees: the value of meaningful connection, a more grounded knowledge of Chinese language, and exposure to the IT world. Like Courtois and O'keefe's (2024) perspective on the intricacies of international mobility, we view some of these gains as participants' acquisition of international capital, which helps to enrich their professional outlook.

In terms of meaningful connections, they noted some relationships that extended beyond China and aided in their quest for a better life. In this context, meaningful relationships are viewed as a form of capital that can be interchanged for monetary gains (Bourdieu, 1986). In a similar light, they perceived their acquisition of Chinese language as a valuable "commodity" that could be bartered with to earn a decent living, a linguistic capital, which provided them with a ticket to jobs related to the Chinese market (Lee, 2019). The convertibility rate of this form of capital has great value in Nigeria and other Sino-African economies (Mulvey, 2021). This was evident in the data, as some of the participants were working in a Chinese job market.

Implications

The researchers recognized an imbalance in the participants' narratives presented, especially with respect to English-led majors. More effort should have been made to double the number of participants who studied in English. Having only Ben in this study, against five others who studied in a Chinese language environment, tilted the balance of the narratives. In addition, the study did not make room for exclusivity to involve Nigerian students from other ethnic groups.

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

By drawing on the voices of six Nigerian students who studied in China, this study investigates their lived experiences and reflections upon leaving China. Unlike several studies about Nigerian students in China that focused on cultural adaptation (Ifekpolugo & Huang, 2021), intercultural communication (Achu, 2019) and the decision to migrate to China (Martyn, 2019), the present study took a different direction by inquiring into their educational narratives.

In line with other studies (Wan & Gao, 2019; Akhtar, et al., 2019; Zou, 2015), this study highlighted the challenges that international students encountered while studying their majors with CMI, which were primarily due to their level of Chinese proficiency in sustaining professional course demands. To manage these challenges, the participants resorted to rote memorization, critical translation between both languages, and the utilization of external English platforms to "recharge" for more knowledge. These strategies were thus a means for them to solidify their academic knowledge in their various fields. In terms of EMI, one of

the participants highlighted the inability of some teachers to effectively express themselves in class due to their level of English proficiency (Botha, 2015).

The participants' post-China reflection revealed their general perceptions of China and the insights gained from their experiences. Consistent with Liu and Ha (2021), we noted their perception of China as a comfortable, safe and technologically vibrant environment. They recounted their personal gains and insights to include more solid Chinese proficiency, exposure to IT knowledge and skills, awareness of the value of meaningful connection, and, of course, their acquisition of higher education degrees in China. However, some of the participants raised concerns about the lack of opportunity for international students to readily transition into the job market in China. Additionally, China, as an environment, was described as "a bubble", a description that elicits the uncertainty of their future prospects in China and their reluctance to leave the "desired comfort".

Interestingly, we noted some significant alignment between the participants' field of studies in China and their present job/career, as presented in their demographic profiles. Those who studied TCSOL (e.g., Sia, Sam), including Mac, with second masters in geological engineering, relocated to Nigeria and are currently working in the Chinese job market, whereas Betha, Ben and Flora, who studied their bachelor's degrees in China, migrated to different countries for professional growth. However, Flora's current job as a Chinese translator was seen as a deviation from her bachelor's degree in education.

While there is not enough evidence to explore the reasons behind the aforementioned points, we recommend that future studies consider investigating the implications of Chinese international degrees for international students' career trajectories. Nonetheless, the mixed-classroom experience between international and host students in China needs to be further explored, especially for international students whose majors use Chinese as a medium of instruction.

Ultimately, this paper presents Nigerian students' study migration to China as a path to "becoming" better and advantaged in the job market. The "journey" enabled them to gain educational experiences that transformed their lives for the better.

Acknowledgment

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