

Will Experiences of Doctoral Study in China influence African Academic Practice?

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In 2001, the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) was established to promote China’s economic, political, and developmental engagement with Africa. A key tool of Chinese soft power in Africa, the ministerial summits, held every three years, are used to announce major bilateral agreements and policy initiatives covering trade, finance, health, security, development, and education. Increasingly, China’s focus has been on “people-to-people” exchanges, with educational exchange and training opportunities for African students and professionals at every level.

The 2018 FOCAC summit promised 50,000 training opportunities and 50,000 scholarships to African countries between 2019 and 2021. In the same year, the total number of African students in China was approximately 80,000, of whom 8,000 were PhD students, more than 2,000 fully funded by the Chinese government. In 2020, the *Financial Times* announced that China was offering more university scholarships to African students than all the leading Western governments combined.

This South–East academic mobility and migration represents a growing proportion of African PhD registrations. In 2018, for example, 800 Ghanaians were registered for PhD study in China, compared to 2,200 Ghanaians registered for a PhD in Ghana. We spoke to one Ghanaian academic who reported that three out of 10 of his departmental colleagues had PhDs from China. For some, China was the only option after other applications failed; for others, the offer of a bursary was transformative.

The decision to pursue doctoral education in China—sometimes leaving behind spouses and children—reflects the shortage of funding and supervision capacity in many African universities. The policy concern to strengthen the research qualifications of university academics has prompted growing doctoral enrollments. Lecturers need to “upgrade” to

Abstract

In the five years leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of African doctoral researchers training in China doubled to 8,000, often on scholarships funded by the Chinese government. Many plan to return to posts in African universities. Will these experiences influence African university research cultures, doctoral supervision, and publishing practices?

qualify for promotion to senior lecturer. A lack of domestic scholarships or institutional funding means that many study part-time while continuing to teach, and in countries such as Tanzania, there is a shortage of qualified supervisors for this growing cohort of PhD candidates. In contrast, the doctoral bursaries, dedicated time, and well-equipped research infrastructure on offer in Chinese universities are attractive.

Africa–China Publishing Collaborations

Will experiences of Chinese research training influence cultures of research training and publishing in Africa? We identified three countries—Ethiopia, Ghana, and Tanzania—that have historic ties to China and receive large numbers of Chinese scholarships. Using snow-ball sampling and social media, we interviewed online 10 Ethiopians, 10 Ghanaians, and 6 Tanzanians, who were either enrolled at, or recently graduated from, Chinese universities. Of the 26, some held university posts in their home countries and were hoping to “upgrade” to be promoted, others had left lectureships, and a minority had never held an academic position. Most were doing research in life and material sciences, or were in education and management. None were based in humanities departments.

A range of themes emerged. Several had taken up the opportunity to study in China after several failed scholarship applications to European or American universities. Once they arrived, most were impressed by Chinese research training and supervision practices. Compared to their home institutions, supervisors were supportive and approachable. Professors formed cohesive research teams, which would meet weekly to share progress and discuss problems. One outcome of such collaborations were large numbers of co-authored papers. As one interviewee recalled, his peers in the team “were very enthusiastic, because most want to have their names on publications.”

Some universities made publications in journals indexed in the elite Science Citation Index (SCI) a requirement for graduation. Many told stories of students who had finished their doctoral research without managing to publish their work in the “right” journal, and left China without graduating. The number of required SCI publications varied, and some claimed that their supervisors shifted the goalposts for talented students to “squeeze out” more publications. On the other hand, some struggled with supervisors who spoke little English, while others spent a year or more learning Mandarin. One university reportedly announced that international students were offered scholarships partly to increase their production of English-language publications.

The pressure to publish in order to graduate took its toll. One participant admitted to sending the same article simultaneously to multiple journals; he could not afford to wait for a rejection. Another participant accused his supervisor of stealing his research. African PhD students also recounted instances of racism, mostly from the broader community, but sometimes from the university itself. Despite these challenges, almost none of our interviewees regretted studying in China. They had graduated with PhDs and a set of publications, making them attractive candidates for academic jobs if, or when, they returned.

Many researchers valued the collaborative—if high pressure—research cultures that they encountered.

Shaping the Future of Research and Academic Publishing in Africa

Our interviewees described how their attitudes toward research and publishing had changed as a result of their experiences in China. Aware of the value of SCI-indexed publications, these were seen as “worth the wait” that the accompanying peer-review entailed. In contrast, one participant complained that colleagues trained in Ghana could not distinguish so-called “predatory” journals from “quality” journals. He hoped to change this through his own supervision practice, and by insisting that his Ghanaian supervisees publish in SCI journals before graduating. He had learned that by copublishing with his Chinese supervisor, you “make time for supporting younger researchers without jeopardising your own research outputs.”

Many researchers valued the collaborative—if high pressure—research cultures that they encountered. Rebecca had recently returned to Ghana from her PhD study in China and was developing a research strategy for her department. “We are proposing weekly seminars, we are proposing research cliques, and we are encouraging collaboration—both internal and external.” Afework had similar ambitions for “when I go back to my

country,” describing a vision for “a research centre that has influence not only in Ethiopia but across Africa: This initiative is coming after I came to China and saw a lot of things.”

The future of this scholarship program is now in question. China’s zero-COVID policy has made it virtually impossible for international students to travel to China. Those who returned to Africa during the pandemic have been stuck in an unfunded limbo; their PhD scholarships do not pay living expenses when they are not residing in China. Those still in China spoke about growing restrictions on movement. The 2021 FOCAC communiqué reflects this uncertainty: Although “training” is mentioned several times, there is no commitment to further PhD scholarships. Meanwhile, the current cohort of Chinese-trained researchers is prefiguring the future of African academic practice. ▲

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