



African students in China

An exploration of increasing numbers and their motivations
in Beijing

Hannane Ferdjani

September 2012



**CENTRE FOR
CHINESE
STUDIES**

STELLENBOSCH · SOUTH AFRICA

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This work was supported [in part] by a grant from the **Open Society Foundations**.



Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	5
2. EDUCATION AS A KEY TOOL IN SINO-AFRICAN CONNECTIONS	8
2.1 Understanding the dynamics of the African students' migration into China	8
2.2.1 <i>A holistic perspective on the migratory pattern – methodological remarks</i>	8
2.2 The new schemes of African students and immigration.....	9
2.2.1 <i>A rapid growth of the African student population in China in the past years</i>	9
2.2.2 <i>China as a welcoming land for African students</i>	11
2.2.3 <i>Education as a catalyst for international relations?</i>	13
3. THE PERCEPTION OF AFRICAN STUDENTS - SHAPING THE SINO-AFRICAN PARTNERSHIP. 15	
3.1 Understanding mindsets of African students in China – The methodology	15
3.2 Beijing: a centre for mass and elite training	17
3.2.1 <i>Beijing as a centre for high-level academic training – the C-9 League</i>	17
3.2.2 <i>Students' motivation: Learning in – and from – China</i>	20
3.2.3 <i>African student associations: implementing Sino-African relations on a local scale</i>	23
3.2.4 <i>Challenges of Chinese scholarship and study programmes</i>	27
4. Conclusions	29

List of Tables, Diagrams and Boxes

Table 1: <i>Number of African students in France in 2005 and 2009</i>	10
Table 2: <i>Number of African students in China from 2003 to 2009</i>	10
Box 1: <i>FOCAC III Beijing Action Plan; commitments in education</i>	11
Box 2: <i>FOCAC V Beijing Action Plan</i>	12
Diagram 1: <i>Types of education funding</i>	14
Table 3: <i>Universities of China's C9 League excel in select fields</i>	18
Diagram 2: <i>Fields of study</i>	21
Box 3: <i>Statistical details for a sub-sample of West African students</i>	22
Box 4: <i>Young African Professionals and Students (YAPS) – aims and aspirations</i>	25

Preface

This research report is the result of a scholarship at the Centre for Chinese Studies in our programme *Phandulwazi nge China* (Xhosa for *Knowledge about China*). The scholarships offer opportunities for African researchers to spend research time at the Centre for Chinese Studies (CCS) in order to advance mutual learning and a better exchange on interpretations of political, economic or environmental impact of Chinese engagement in Africa.

The *Phandulwazi nge China* scholarship targets citizens of African states from academia or the broader civil society with a proven research interest in China-Africa relations. The programme particularly addresses African scholars who are preparing for a stay in China or are returning from a longer stay in China. With the scholarship, African citizens are supported to continue working on China and China-Africa relations and to deepen their analytical work.

This piece of research is the result of Hannane Ferdjani's work at the CCS between May and July 2012. She conducted fieldwork in Beijing in June that year and was, while in Beijing, graciously supported by the Center for African Studies at Peking University. Thanks namely go to our colleague Liu Haifang for her logistical and intellectual support as well as to Zhou Leilei for her research assistance.

This study does not necessarily reflect the views of Open Society Foundation or the Centre for Chinese Studies, but is solely an expression of the author's view.

1. Introduction

China, as an emerging nation, has produced a record two-digit growth rate of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) every year. China has become the second economic power after the United States, mutating from a regional heavyweight to a world leader on the economic front. Being within the club of emerging, newly industrialized and developing economies alongside India, Brazil, Russia and South Africa (BRICS), China has come a long way since it became the People's Republic in 1949.

In the 1980's, with the expansion of globalization indirectly imposing that all ostracized countries operate a turnover, China began its "open door" policy and started attracting more foreign investments (coming with foreign investors, i.e. small numbers of foreigners). No longer an isolated nation since then, China has developed a multitude of strong diplomatic ties with other states, thus becoming an important player on the international scene. It notably joined the World Trade Organization in 2001, and kept on nurturing its commercial partnerships, which Chinese officials call "win-win" relations.

The most often referred to manifestation of this type of relationship is the one China and Africa. Only fifteen years ago, political scientist Gerard Segal wrongfully predicted that Africa would be "the least important region for China" (Segal; 1992).

There are reportedly over 2000 Chinese companies operating in over 50 African countries in all economic sectors ranging from manufacturing to natural and raw resources exploitation, and services¹.

As of 2009, China has surpassed the United States as Africa's largest trade partner (Alessi & Hanson; 2012)². While the media and the international civil society have only become aware of Sino-African relations this past decade, the linkage goes back to the 10th century. Indeed, relics of the Sung Dynasty (970-1279) were discovered in the semi-autonomous state of Zanzibar in East Africa (Marson; 2008: 11)³. These relations, however, were at much smaller scale than current exchanges, and were interrupted for a long period of isolation of imperial China.

After World War II, China had to find its place in the new bipolar system, aspiring to counterweigh the forces of the two "superpowers" – the US and the USSR – since its rupture with the Soviet Union in 1959. The modern engagement of China in Africa is, at least partially, an effect of this political positioning; it has since, however, become more dominated by economic aspects. Since the founding of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000, the trade volume between both sides rose from 10 billion U.S. dollars in 2001 to 130 billion in 2010. The Chinese engagement in Africa takes a variety of forms: commercial exchange, medical assistance and aid, technical expertise, engineering projects, diplomacy, and educational exchanges.

China's aid and other engagements in Africa have been relatively on the rise and the Middle Kingdom has emphasized that it has a different ideology than most Western countries regarding its foreign policy. The official political discourse of the Chinese government is that it wishes to establish equal-to-equal relations with other countries and avoid any traits of 'imperialism' (i.e. foreign domination) towards another nation. China has therefore promoted the idea of a mutual beneficial partnership with Africa, in which both parties gain from the relationship. This "win-win" link between China and Africa - albeit being highly questioned by Western media, academia, and governments - does appeal to African leaders and to many Africans.

The growth of higher-education exchanges in Sino-African cooperation

Besides the field of commercial activities *per se*, education has become a great component of the Sino-African framework. From a Chinese perspective, the “China-Africa Education Cooperation” is often divided into three phases. The initial phase was triggered with the first diplomatic relations that China started with Kenya, Egypt, Uganda and Cameroon in 1956. At the time, 24 exchange students traveled to the other side. The second phase consisted of a period of implementation: from the 1970’s to the 1980’s the number of exchange students increased and an official document of the Chinese government recorded that 4,570 Africans had studies in China by the end of 1996. Moreover, during this phase, China began to provide educational equipment and to build research laboratories all over the continent. Finally, by the turn of the Millennium, phase three started with the “Declaration of 2000”: it was a programme for China-Africa cooperation in Economic and Social Development which included human resources development and education. China then set up a list of measures regarding African personnel training, academic cooperation projects (such as joint laboratories and research institutes) and scholarship opportunities⁴ (Kaiyu; 2012). “Beyond this, here was the continuation of the scholarship mechanism for longer-term training, mostly at the degree level, and there was also the sending of teachers to Africa to facilitate channels of communication between universities of both sides. Also at the time of this first FOCAC meeting in 2000 there was agreement that the two parties should work out ‘country specific training plans’”(King ; 2006: 4)⁵.

The consequence of this long-term partnership is the designing of a landscape of thousands of African students that can access fully-funded higher education degrees, hence, maximize their technical skills and career prospects – potentially beyond the social strata that usually studies abroad. Each year, hundreds of scholarships are given to African students to study in China in a bid to step up youth exchanges and to lay a foundation for future China-Africa ties. One typical occasion at which commitments in the area were made was in April 2011 when Li Changchun, a senior official of the Communist Party of China (CPC) went on a diplomatic visit to Kenya. He made a pledge while addressing students and teachers at the University of Nairobi, to increase, substantially, the number of government scholarships to African students (Xinhuanet; 2011). Another occasion is the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), the latest of which took place in Beijing in July 2012. At FOCAC V, the proactive trend in education commitments was reaffirmed in principle (see Box 2: *FOCAC V Beijing Action Plan 6.2.5*).

The phenomenon of African students migrating to Asia dates back to the independence decade, notably triggered by the 1955 Conference of Bandung, which gathered leaders of African and Asian “non-aligned” states. Yet, the massive progression of this migration influx finds its ground in the beginning of the 2000’s. During the first FOCAC meeting that was held in Beijing in 2001, the principle of China-Africa Education Cooperation was asserted by the Chinese officials and delegates who expressed China’s will to deepen the exchange of students from both sides, to implement the training of African teachers and professors, and to build schools all over the continent.

While Europe and the United States have in the past few years become increasingly restrictive with regards to immigration policy, it appears that China has turned into a hospitable land for migrants from under-developed countries. It is becoming more difficult for African students to obtain a visa to study in the United Kingdom as one of the classical education destination. As for France, which used to be the most welcoming country for African students in Europe, the election announcement in 2012 was that it would reduce its foreign student immigration influx.

Irrespective of whether policy becomes as tightly implemented as discussed, the very debate illustrates that the historical remains of the “France-Africa” relations due to the colonization do no longer prevail. New schemes are being designed in the 21st century and they are no longer based on colonial factors.

The birth of a new generation of Sino-African ‘ambassadors’?

Already, African governments praise Chinese engagement when it comes to investing and developing businesses. In exchange, China offers means of development; such as buildings and constructions, health assistance - and education improvement measures. Education is arguably the question of utmost importance at the economic and diplomatic level.

The trend of educational migration has accelerated and been institutionalized since the turn of the millennium, which emphasizes the need for up-to-date research⁶ (Bodomo; 2009). The migration influx of students from Africa in cities like Beijing, Guangzhou, Wuhan and Shenyang suggests the birth of a whole new generation of qualified professionals, having learned from the “savoir-faire”, language, culture and ways of the Middle Kingdom. The growing influx of African students in China, which is set to become an increasingly important destination for African youth, allows one to assume that it will play an important part in the deepening of Sino-African relations in the future.

The questions that will be raised in this report are the following:

- Is education a key tool in the Sino-African relationship? Is it also the telltale of the decreasing historical connection between Africa and Europe/North America at the benefit of a connection between China and Africa?
- On a more motivational level, we ask if the fields students mostly choose are those promoted by the governments. Is there awareness among African youth for skills they acquire by studying in China in addition to knowledge in engineering, finance or business paths? Do they aspire to play a part in Sino-African relation in the future?
- And finally, in what measure is the China-Africa higher-education cooperation, and the Chinese incentive policies in that field, beneficial and a positive experience for Africans? In other words, what are the advantages and the drawbacks of the system as it is today from the perspective of the African student population of China?

These questions allowed for two postulates to emerge and structure the research at the same time. The analysis of both would provide a specific perspective on the issue of educational cooperation, also impacting on the methodology chosen:

The first one (Hypothesis I) focuses on the growing phenomenon of African students migrating to China for their studies from a holistic and quantitative point of view. In order to explore the hypothesis stating that the African higher education schemes are today based on the economical criteria (subjected to a “win-win” link), a quantitative methodology was used.

The second one (Hypothesis II), on the other hand, deals predominantly with perceptions. African students in China can be expected to become important players of the future of Sino-African relations. Our basic assumption here is that this current generation of students is likely to perpetuate the partnership between both parties as it is made of qualified ‘ambassadors’, mastering the language requirements and the cultural knowledge to engage with the Chinese in different areas. This aspect was explored from a more sociological and individualistic approach. In other words, methodology changed to a more qualitative approach.

For practical purposes, the project focused on the case study of Beijing. Indeed, Beijing appears to be the most attractive pole for foreign students, including African students. As a historical student focus, Beijing concentrates the biggest and broadest African student population in China in its different universities. Beyond the purely practical considerations, it also concentrates two of the top ranked higher education centers in the country (classified as “National key universities”, members of the C9 league): Peking University and Tsinghua University. Such a fact allows wondering if the elitist training that the city offers through those universities shapes the immigration patterns of some African students⁷.

For that reason, a three-week fieldtrip was conducted in June. The results of this fieldwork were then compiled and added to other scientific and statistical data resulting in the following analysis.

2. EDUCATION AS A KEY TOOL IN SINO-AFRICAN CONNECTIONS

2.1 Understanding the dynamics of the African students' migration into China

2.1.1 A holistic perspective on the migratory pattern – methodological remarks

In order to measure the numerical growth of African students' migration to China, it is first essential to use a quantitative methodology. Indeed, this approach looks at the phenomenon as a whole from a macro perspective. It consists in establishing a panel of statistics assessing the extent of the trend of the African student migration in China, notably as a result of the exchange policy instigated by the Chinese government in the context of the FOCAC.

Statistic reports were used to measure the magnitude of the African students population in China, as well as the progression of the migration patterns of African mobile students. Initially, the idea was to gather the main data from the Institute for Statistics of the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (notably from the Global Education Annual report), the Ministry of Education of China, the China Scholarship Council (CSC). However, as the research and the fieldwork evolved, it was essential to multiply the statistic sources in order to obtain a more comprehensive database.

Secondly, during the field trip in Beijing, a sample of African students based in the municipality was gathered in order to construct a tangible analysis of their profiles and motivations, leading us towards qualitative approaches to complement the numerical aspects. The main intention was to gain insights in their backgrounds (origins and previous experience) and studies paths choices.

It was essential to select students from diverse countries of origins to depict the diversity of the African student body of Beijing. Therefore, the content of the sample was divided into five main areas of the continent; a typology which was based on both geographical and cultural criteria:

- Northern Africa: Mauritania, Western Sahara, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt and Sudan (Khartoum).
- Western Africa: Senegal, Cape Verde, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Benin, Togo, Burkina-Faso, Mali, and Niger, Nigeria, Sao Tomé and Príncipe and the Islands of the Atlantic Ocean, and Equatorial Guinea.
- Central Africa: Chad, Central African Republic, Cameroon, Gabon, Congo and Democratic Republic of Congo.

- Eastern Africa: South Sudan, Eritrea, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Somalia, Kenya, Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda and Tanzania.
- Southern Africa: Angola, Zambia, Malawi, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Lesotho, Swaziland, South Africa and the islands of the Indian Ocean (Comoros, Mayotte, Seychelles, Madagascar and Mauritius).

The sample was compiled through contacting the international student offices of the different universities and institutions that were visited, as well as gathering data via student associations, and by building on personal contacts.

Using Beijing as a study case and a reference point for the research, a group of a hundred students representing the diversity of the African student body of the city was collected. Ranging from age 18 to age 30, regardless of the gender, twenty students of each African region (see previous typology: *1.1.b. the use of a sampling survey*) filled out the survey.

The questionnaires consisted in closed-ended questions regarding the following topics: the type of curriculum (short or long studies), the means of studies' funding (scholarship or personal means), the reason(s) for choosing China as a destination for studies (funding, career prospects, etc.), the reason(s) for choosing the particular university/institution, the origin of field choice (personal choice or external constraint), the language of studies (Mandarin or English) and the Level of Mandarin practice ("*Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi*" or Chinese proficiency test results).

2.2 The new schemes of African students and immigration

The phenomenon of higher-education migration is relatively common, widely spread and highly developed in Africa when personal means allow the youth to do so. Since the 1960s, the era of independence, African students have favoured commencing a higher-education curriculum outside of their own country, mostly because of the shortage in terms of quality of academic training that was falling behind compared to the rest of the world. Moreover, with European countries attracting immigrants in the purpose of building a sustainable workforce for development and urbanization in the 1980s, migrating there was all the more appealing and possible.

To this day, Africans are the most mobile students worldwide. The institute for Statistics of the UNESCO published a report in 2006 stating that 1 African student out of 16 studies abroad (6.25%)⁸. Europe has been the main destination for their studies and it remains the predilection host of African students today. The main causes of this long-lasting pattern are the deep ties that most African countries and some European countries share due to the colonial history, and consequently common language and cultural aspects, including close similarities in the educational systems.

However, the general migratory patterns of African students have evolved and changed substantially towards the end of the 21st Century. Thus, the trend of their geographical movement is not as clearly unidirectional as it used to be.

2.2.1 A rapid growth of the African student population in China in the past years

The aim of this study is to understand to what extent the migration schemes of African students have changed, or even turned over in the past decade towards Asian countries and mainly China. Europe, the United States and Canada are not necessarily always the first choice for Africans who wish to study abroad; those countries are only a part of the numerous options that students have today. Therefore, a panel of statistics from those countries' Ministry of Education

and Immigration, and research institutes were also collected, to compare the evolution of the migration influx through the years.

France has been the main host of the African student body (mainly from former French colonies) since the 1960s. The same phenomenon is observed with England (concentrating a majority of Nigerians and Kenyans), Portugal (main destination country for Mozambicans, Cape Verdeans and Angolans notably) and Spain (Equatorial Guineans). Hence for Sub-Saharan Africa, the first destination is Western Europe: France (21%), United Kingdom (12%), Germany (6%) and Portugal (5%)⁹.

Generally speaking, France was the third most favoured host country for international mobile students until 2009, after the United States and the United Kingdom. It is now ranked fourth in the world. Plus, its departure mobility has increased at a faster pace (7.7%) than its arrival mobility (5.1%) since 2009¹⁰. Consequently, France is welcoming less students each year.

However, the number of African students in Western countries, mostly coming from Sub-Saharan countries, is dropping slowly yet surely every year (see tables 1 and 2 in the appendix).

Table 1 below represents the number of African students in France in 2005 and 2009:

YEAR	2005	2009
NUMBER OF AFRICAN STUDENTS	107,707	105,766
DECREASE RATE (%)	1.80	

Source: (Campus France; 2011)

France saw its African student population decrease from 107,707 in 2005 to 105,766 in 2009 (-1.80%). On the other hand, Canada went up from 6,768 to 9,598 between 2005 and 2009, which amounts to a growth of 41.81% (see tables 1 and 2 in the appendix). While still much smaller in overall number, the trend is exceptional, and caused by Canada's opening of its borders in the last decade, notably encouraging science-oriented students' arrivals.

On the other hand, the overall number of African students moving abroad has increased substantially from 284,762 in 2005 to 326,597 in 2009 (+14.69%), due to demographic growth and improvements in levels of education in Africa. The general patterns of African students are indeed shifting as they become aware of new migration options¹¹.

Since 2003, the number of African students coming to study in China increased by 20% every year. However, in 2005, Chinese universities hosted 2,757 African students and in 2006, this number reached 3,737, which represents an increase rate of 40%. Finally, in 2009, The Ministry of Education reported that there were 12,436 African students in the country.

Table 2 below presents the number of African students in China from 2003 to 2009 (the figures for years 2007 and 2008 are missing):

YEAR	2003	2004	2005	2006	2009
NUMBER OF AFRICAN STUDENTS			2,757	3,737	12,436
INCREASE RATE (%)		20	20	40	

Source: (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China; 2006)

2.2.2 China as a welcoming land for African students

The incentive scholarship policy factor

While African students have been migrating to China since the establishment of diplomatic relations with African countries following the Bandung Conference of non-aligned states in the mid-1950s, a clear boost was given to the phenomenon by the incentive policies instigated by the Chinese government from FOCAC I (held in Beijing in 2000).

“This process of African students coming to China became more formalized and institutionalized with the formation of FOCAC whose first meeting took place in 2000 in Beijing” (Bodomo; 2009)¹².

Yet, even though the theoretical framework for “China-Africa Education Cooperation” was set in 2000, the Chinese government mostly vouched for important practical measures during FOCAC III (held in Beijing in 2006).

Box 1: FOCAC III Beijing Action Plan; commitments in education

“The Chinese Government decided to:

- Help African countries set up 100 rural schools in the next three years;
- Increase the number of Chinese government scholarships to African students from the current 2,000 per year to 4,000 per year by 2009;
- Provide annual training for a number of educational officials as well as heads and leading teachers of universities, primary, secondary and vocational schools in Africa;
- Establish Confucius Institutes in African countries to meet their needs in the teaching of the Chinese language and encourage the teaching of African languages in relevant Chinese universities and colleges.”

Source: (Forum on China-Africa Cooperation; 2006)

As one can see in the abstract of the *FOCAC III Beijing Action Plan* (see Box 1: *FOCAC III Beijing Action Plan; commitments in education*), one of the measures the Chinese officials vowed for was the increase of the number of Chinese government scholarships to Africans students. Beijing actually pledged to double the number by the next FOCAC meeting (in 2009). FOCAC III has set the trend, and China has further extended its scholarship policy since then. In 2006 already, 21.90% of the total of Chinese government scholarships were allocated to Africa¹³.

The Chinese scholarship incentive is of key importance in the growth of a large African student population in China. Commitments in the respective FOCAC meetings illustrate the government intended growth of African student numbers in China:

- FOCAC III (2006)→ Chinese annual scholarship to African students should evolve from 2,000 per year to 4,000 per year by 2009.
- FOCAC IV (2009)→ Chinese annual scholarships should reach 5,500 by 2012.
- FOCAC V (2012)→ More abstract pledges were made to implement the education cooperation between China and Africa and provide more scholarship opportunities for African students and researchers (See Box 2 below):

Box 2: FOCAC V Beijing Action Plan

6.2.1 The two sides noted with satisfaction that cooperation of higher quality and in more diverse forms on education were conducted between China and Africa since the Fourth FOCAC Ministerial Conference. The two sides agreed to attach more importance to cooperation in education and push for new progress in China-Africa education cooperation.

6.2.2 The two sides will continue to implement the 20+20 Cooperation Plan for Chinese and African Institutions of Higher Education, improve the cooperation mechanism between Chinese and African institutions of higher education, encourage Chinese and African universities to carry out cooperation in regional and country studies and support African universities in establishing China research centers.

6.2.3 The two sides will continue to promote the establishment and development of the Confucius Institute and Confucius Classrooms in Africa. China will extend active support in terms of teaching staff, personnel training and teaching materials and equipment.

6.2.4 China will provide US\$2 million annually under the framework of the UNESCO trust fund to support education development programs in Africa, in particular higher education in Africa.

6.2.5 China will continue to help African countries build educational and training facilities and provide more opportunities for short, medium and long-term training and scholarships.

Source: (Forum on China-Africa Cooperation; 2012)

A favorable academic immigration policy

Generally speaking – and in stark comparison to EU or US visa – a Chinese visa is usually easy to obtain. Since China’s government started its “open-door” policy in the 1980’s, China has increasingly opened its borders and managed to attract foreigners from all over the world. This overall trend notwithstanding, in recent months, the Chinese government has become weary of its foreign community due to negative reporting on crimes, notably events that occurred in Beijing and involved foreign nationals. This could mean that controls and immigration policies might be getting tougher; in June 2012, Beijing ordered a 100-day crackdown on illegal immigrants, for instance. Yet, it is still simpler to obtain a visa to go to China (including for permanent residency), than it is in most Western countries, especially for Africans. Furthermore, the financial requirements are not as high, and are thus easier to meet than they are in many Western countries.

More specifically foreign students on a Chinese government scholarship obtain a visa easily upon enrollment. The university takes care of most of the visa application and the scholarship format is sufficient evidence for the Ministry of immigration. As for those studying on private funds, they are practically guaranteed to get a student resident permit as long as their university’s expenses are paid for (*personal communication, 10th June 2012*). As for those short term students who want to take Chinese language training programmes, numerous language schools will take care of the immigration formalities and they will also qualify for a student resident permit.

2.2.3 Education as a catalyst for international relations?

Western countries are closing their borders, against the backdrop of the economic crisis

Immigration policies in the Western world have become stricter in the past decade. In the US, since the attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York City on 11 September 2001, the immigration policies are directly linked to Homeland Security concerns. As opposed to China - that started opening its border in the 1980's - the West began attracting foreigners earlier. There have therefore been numerous waves of immigration since, and Africans have been consistently migrating to those countries, not least so the former colonial 'motherland' as indicated above. In France, the Government of former president Nicolas Sarkozy had ruled that the number of foreign students for the year 2012 should be taken down to 180,000, which meant a cut of 20,000 students. And although the new socialist government has dismissed some of the decisions of the former Ministry of Immigration, it has not completely overturned this particular measure yet¹⁴. From personal experiences and anecdotal evidence, one can clearly state that hurdles for student visa applications have become harder to overcome in the last years. University being practically free in France, it is one of the cheapest countries in the West when it comes to education and Public education. Consequently, France has attracted thousands of students, with a large proportion of them coming from Africa.

But also in the European Union (EU), immigration became more of an issue, exacerbated by political developments on the Southern banks of the Mediterranean, in the aftermath of the "Arab Spring". While the EU has further integrated with the Schengen zone system, the outside borders cannot be systematically (tightly) controlled. Thus, a large number of illegal immigrants who reached out to the Southern border (Italy) were able to access the EU over the last years. The combination of these factors – security and high levels of illegal immigration –has made immigration policies tougher, regardless of the foreigners' status and reason for application. Additionally, as France has been facing an economic recession and the Euro-currency crisis for the past three years, those stricter immigration policies are part of the collateral set of austerity measures, which have been set in the Europe.

As for the United Kingdom, the student Tier 4 Visa is probably one of the hardest to obtain. It seems that this trend has been continued in the past years, mainly because of the economic crisis. Education in the UK has become rather a commodity to trade in, shifting the numbers and regions of origin of foreign students in the UK. The total number of student entry clearance has dropped by 21% in 2012. Moreover, records show that out "of the total of students admitted in 2010, 63% (172,000) were from Asia, a change from 2008 when only 51% (114,000) were nationals of countries in Asia". On the other hand, the share of African students has clearly decreased¹⁵.

The economic criteria now prevails over the historical-based benchmark

More generally, emerging economies and particularly those assembled in the BRICS grouping present a certain appeal for African students today. India, for instance, accommodated 1,500 Africans studying on Indian government funded programmes in 2011 and this figure is bound to increase. The country in fact provides quality education - fitting the standards set by the UNESCO - and easier living conditions for scholars. Indeed, a great share of students obtains funding and the cost of living is more affordable than it is in Western countries¹⁶.

As China has emerged as an economic world leader, it has also become an attractive country for Africans migrants. Important influxes of traders, but also visitors and students have traveled to

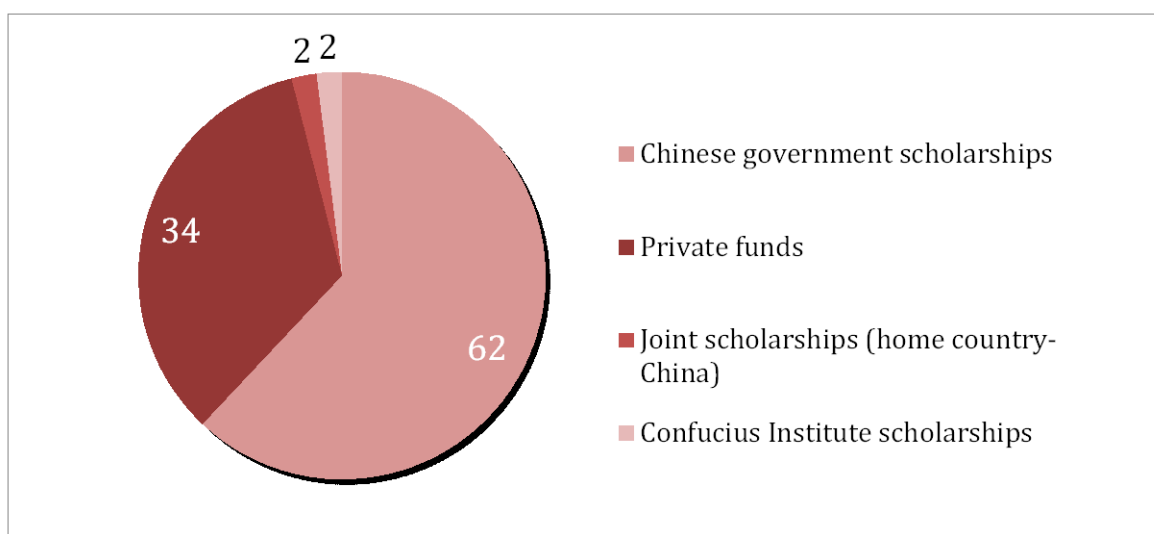
China in the past decade, making use of opportunities opening up with globalisation. The economic advantages that the country has to offer to African students in an increasing number of cases appear to be trumping the historical connection that their countries of origin have with the former European colonial metropolis.

The Chinese government scholarship format usually offers a full bursary covering the tuition fees, on-campus accommodation, a monthly allowance (varying from the level of studies) and air-ticket fare (an open round-trip ticket from the home country to China) for each student (Cf. appendix; Chinese scholarship application procedures). This represents a substantial financial aid for hundreds of African students who cannot afford self-funded studies abroad. As a point of comparison, France hosted approximately 107,000 African students in 2009, of which only 4,500 were on scholarship¹⁷. It is indeed difficult to find funding from the French government but also from other European countries as well as Canada and the US. The opportunities are limited and often enough, African and international scholars rather receive funding from private sponsors or aid organization. Furthermore, it is overall less expensive to study in China, including for self-funded students, since the tuition fees are lower and the cost of living more affordable.

Besides numerous funding opportunities via Chinese government scholarships and also Confucius institutes' bursaries and other special scholarships, a growing number of Chinese universities have acquired a positive reputation for providing quality education, notably in Economics (presumably also linked to the economic success story of the Chinese economy over the last three decades). And last, but not least, the option of learning Mandarin is perceived as a way to facilitate potential cooperation with Chinese companies, seeing China as a still growing economy with yet untapped potential.

While it is difficult to calculate the exact number of African students on private funds in China, there are an increasing number of them every year. Regarding the case of Beijing, the chart below reflects the answers provided by the sample of 100 African students studying in Beijing in June 2012. This chart supports the previous statements and reveals that an important share of students are self-funded (62%):

Diagram 1: Types of education funding



Ultimately, up-to-date national data was difficult to obtain. However, according to the FOCAC's objectives, from 2009 to 2011, there should have been an additional number of 16,500 African scholars in China. That would thus count for a total of 28,500 African students in China (excluding those who are privately funded) according to Professor Adams Bodomo's (2009) conclusions¹⁸.

In short, the China-Africa education cooperation is a telling indication of the link that Africa and China share today. As Kenyan journalist Bob Wekesa of *China Daily* explains, "no matter what policy formulations emerge as the US and the EU rethink en re-engineer their strategy, one thing is for sure: China's powerful entry into Africa has changed the equation and thrust on to the center stage of global geopolitics"¹⁹). It appears that the "look-East policy" is becoming popular in the eye of Africans as well who want to show the West that they no longer need them exclusively. Or, in the words of Robert Antoine, a Congolese Ph.D. student at Peking University, "Africa is in motion. It has got alternatives and is aware of them." (*Personal communication of 10th June 2012*).

3. THE PERCEPTION OF AFRICAN STUDENTS - SHAPING THE SINO-AFRICAN PARTNERSHIP

3.1 Understanding mindsets of African students in China – The methodology

As indicated in the introduction, this report also drew on qualitative research methods, seeking to ascertain the distinctive features of the subjects of the survey through their own point of view. As Herbert and Irene Rubin explain the purpose of qualitative methodology very suitably:

"Qualitative interviewing is an adventure in learning about teachings in different countries, their cultural views their problems, and solutions, and how their practices are similar and different than our own. The way we interview depends on what we want to know. It is a process of finding out what others feel and think about their worlds. The result is to understand the major points of their message and how it compares to your own situation. Not only do you need to be a good conversationalist, but also a good listener"²⁰ (Rubin & Rubin; 2004).

In line with this statement, for our question on the mindset(s) of the African student population of China, it seemed essential to conduct deeper interviews, with questions that would make the interviewees share in-depth information and go beyond the technicalities about their studies. Consequently, this method, implicitly or explicitly, enables us to unpack the students' own perception of their role in the Sino-African cooperation. Certainly, the objective of this research method was to understand how the subjects perceived themselves in the Sino-African framework and how they wished to have an impact on it, if they did. Hence, the questions would have to extensively deal with the interviewees' career prospects, but also their possible current cooperation with the Chinese (be they public or private moral persons), on a local scale for instance.

Initially, the idea was to reach out to a smaller number of students (from 5 to 10); as opposed to the sample of 100 students gathered as an introductory database in the quantitative methodology part. The selection would focus on students preferably with an advance level of studies (end of BA or MA) and an active role in the African community (members of an association for instance). The interviews would consist of open-ended questions that would give

more freedom to the interviewees and help raise other interesting topics. The most efficient way to find those students seemed to contact students associations and unions. Additionally, important progress was made with assistance of the Centre for African Studies of Peking University, and by attending social events, which gathered African students from various backgrounds and universities. Thus, during the fieldwork in Beijing, six students were contacted and interviewed. Five of them were interviewed in Beijing, while the latest meeting was arranged through Skype to fit the last interviewee's demanding schedule. Two more interviews were set to be carried out through Skype; however, availabilities from both sides did not present themselves in a timely fashion.

The in-depth interviewees' profiles:

- A Ph.D. student at the Center for African Studies of Peking University. Gender: male. Origin: Central Africa. Age group: over forty. Funded by the China Scholarship Council. Fluent in Mandarin. Highly engaged in the African student Association of PKU. Third year in Beijing.
- A Masters student of Global Finance at the University of International Business and Economics. Gender: male. Origin: francophone West Africa. Age group: early-twenties. Funded by the CSC. Member of the Ivorian students association of Beijing. Sixth year in Beijing.
- An MBA student at Jiaotong University. Gender: female. Origin: East Africa. Age group: late-twenties. Funded by the CSC. Highly engaged in the association of Ugandan students and working alongside studies. Seventh year in Beijing.
- A Bachelors student in Electrical engineering at Tsinghua University. Gender: male. Origin: East Africa. Age group: mid-twenties. Funded by the CSC. Highly engaged in the *Young African Professionals and Students* association (*YAPS Asia*). Founder of his own company²¹. Sixth year in Beijing.
- A Masters student in International Development at Tsinghua University. Gender: female. Origin: East Africa. Privately funded. Former member of *YAPS*. Part-time English teacher. Third year in Beijing.
- A Ph.D. student in International Business at UIBE. Gender: male. Origin: francophone West Africa. Age group: late-twenties. Funded by the CSC. Worked in the diplomatic mission of his country.

Informal focus groups and observation:

Accessing African students' gatherings and other social events was a rich source of information. Firstly, attending a *YAPS* meeting on "Life and ambition in China for African youth" chaired by the Ethiopian President of the association, and with Lord Baron Hastings (Member of the British Parliament and consultant for KPMG) as a guest and lecturer, was very enriching. *YAPS* members and other African students from all parts of the continent attended and spontaneously brainstormed on ideas on their impact on China-Africa relations, and shared accounts of their personal experience as Beijing residents. Additionally, the invitation to the graduation ceremony of the Masters of International Development of Tsinghua University offered interesting information. African students debated among themselves but also with other foreign students about the advantages of studying in China and the adjustments that needed to be made to accommodate foreigners and make their transition from their home country or departure country as smooth as possible.

3.2 Beijing: a centre for mass and elite training

The municipality of Beijing is an obvious and relevant choice to assess the growth of the African students' immigration influx in China. It is the capital of Mainland China and therefore a political and diplomatic centre that concentrates most of the embassies and official diplomatic representation and delegations. It is also a major economic centre since it is home to the main state-owned companies' headquarters and receives a great share of the foreign investment of the country.

Beijing is the second largest city in China (after Shanghai), with a population of over 19, 612 36 as of 2010²². Historically, the immigrant population of Beijing has been the largest in China. And when it comes to students, Chinese statistics report that in 2006 already, 46,529 foreign students were concentrated in the city, making it the main education focus, before Shanghai (31,568) and Tianjin (10,155)²³.

There were 35 national universities welcoming international students under Chinese government scholarships in Beijing out of a total of 164 (20.73%) in 2011. In comparison, in the municipality of Shanghai, only 14 universities would host international students (8.53%)²⁴. Each year, hundreds of African students travel to Beijing to commence their studies (undergraduate, postgraduate, and PhD programs, as well as language training programmes) and the influx has steeply increased in the last decade. The most popular schools they enroll into are the Beijing University of Science and Technology, which hosts 400 African students, and Beijing Jiaotong University with 200 African students (according to the international student offices of the University of Science and Technology and Jiaotong University). Also, the University of international Business and Economics (UIBE) hosts an increasing number of African students, which reached 87 in 2011.

The fact of the matter is that Beijing offers a wide panel of field choices for foreign students, ranging from Law and Political Sciences, to Economics, Finance, Accounting, Technology, Science, Forestry, Environmental studies, Aeronautics, Sports and Fine Arts. Each university possesses an average number of 20 academic schools but some institutes specialize in one very particular area (such as China University of Geosciences, Beijing University of Chinese medicine, Beijing Forestry University, etc.).

3.2.1 Beijing as a centre for high-level academic training – the C-9 League

Since the late 1980's, China has strived to convey a prestigious image of its nation to the international community. Alongside the economic miracle it has performed in the past twenty years, it also set the bar high for its secondary education system, thus increasing its global competitiveness in education. The Chinese government started "Project 985" in 1998, which aimed to select a few of the top universities in the country and enhance their assets on a national and an international scale. Eventually, nine universities were selected and have since been considered to strive being the equivalent to the US's "Ivy league" institutions: the "C-9 League"²⁵. The table below features "C9 League" member universities that have, in specific fields, already performed above the world average in terms of citation impact:

Table 3: Eastern stars: Universities of China's C9 League excel in select fields Data provided by Thomson Reuters from its Essential Science Indicators, 1 January 2000-31 October 2010							
C9 Field	University	(City)	Papers	Citations	Impact	World impact	% > World
Fudan	University	(Shanghai)	342	4,097	11.98	7.66	56
Plant and animal science							
Fudan	University	(Shanghai)	1,018	10,766	10.58	6.93	53
Materials science							
Peking	University	(Beijing)	1,112	11,652	10.48	6.93	51
Materials science							
Peking	University	(Beijing)	566	6,294	11.12	7.66	45
Plant and animal science							
University of Science and Technology of China (Hefei)			1,694	16,589	9.79	6.93	41
Materials science							
Nanjing	University	(Nanjing)	1,306	11,610	8.89	6.93	28
Materials science							
University of Science and Technology of China (Hefei)			595	6,541	10.99	9.59	15
Geosciences							
University of Science and Technology of China (Hefei)			1,590	8,360	5.26	4.70	12
Engineering							
Nanjing	University	(Nanjing)	975	4,900	5.03	4.70	7
Engineering							
Tsinghua	University	(Beijing)	982	3,527	3.59	3.44	4
Mathematics							
Shanghai Jiao Tong University		(Shanghai)	699	2,443	3.49	3.44	1
Mathematics							

Source: (Times Higher Education; 2011)

A study made by Thomas Reuters in 2010 stated “these universities, which have about 3 per cent of the nation’s research and development personnel, receive about 10 per cent of China’s Research and Development budget expenditures”²⁶. This illustrates the Chinese government’s attributed value to the education system and its aspirations to make its top ranked universities a reflection an equivalent of its economic success in international comparison.

Two of the best universities of China, which are members of the C-9 League, are located in Beijing: Tsinghua and Peking.

Tsinghua University was founded in 1911 in Beijing. It is one of the leading universities directly affiliated with the Ministry of Education in China.

“It now consists of 15 schools with 56 departments, covering a variety of academic fields such as sciences, engineering, humanities and arts, history, philosophy, economics, management, law, education and medicine. Tsinghua University holds “the largest numbers of academicians affiliated with the Chinese Academy of

Science and the Chinese Academy of Engineering, of the top disciplines on the whole, of the State Key Laboratories, of national awards in science and technology, of research funds, and also of articles indexed in SCI, EI and ISTP over the years”²⁷. In the academic year 2010/2011, Tsinghua had enrolled more than 3,200 international students from 122 countries, with 34% pursuing Master and doctoral degrees, 37% studying for Bachelor’s degrees, and 29% visiting for advanced studies, joint research, and Chinese language study. The internationalization of the University also had implications for the teaching language: Ten of the Master programmes were delivered in English, and more than 220 other courses were also taught in English²⁸. The university was ranked at the 71st place in the world by the Times higher education ranking and at the 47th place by the QS world university ranking in 2011²⁹.

Peking University (also called “Beida”, i.e. “Beijing Daxue”, which means Beijing University in Chinese) is the first established modern national university of China. It was founded as the Imperial University of Peking in 1898. Every year, Peking University has approximately 2,000 international students studying on the Beijing campus and about 50 at the HSBC Business School, located at the University’s Shenzhen Campus (in the Southern Guangdong province).

“Its international students are made up of students from most countries in the world including most of Western Europe, North America, South America, and all parts of Asia, Australia as well as many countries in Africa. Through the years, this renowned institution has signed agreements and academic partnerships with prestigious institutions such as Cornell Business School, Yale University, Stanford University and London School of Economics³⁰.

It was rated at the 49th place by the Times higher education ranking and at the 46th by the QS world University ranking³¹.

Those two universities are the “pride and joy” of China, along with the University of Science and Technology of Beijing, UIBE and Jiaotong University. The fact that all of these institutions are located in Beijing only reaffirms the appeal and popularity that the city encounters from foreign students, and African students more specifically.

At Peking University, there were relatively few African students even though it has increased in the last years. The African student association reports that there were 30 African students at PKU, mostly Ph.D. students. However, as states a Central African student:

“Scholarships to study at Beida or PKU are also available to other levels of studies. The selection process is just tougher, which is why they are considered good schools. And for African students, it’s becoming an important factor.”

Through the results of the fieldwork conducted in Beijing, one of the key findings was the idea that simplistic preconceptions about the African students’ – of them following only finance - had to be dismissed. Beyond the factor that a large number of students were coming to China because of the funding opportunities, other reasons were also convincingly given, not least those directly related to the quality and prestige that certain institutions in Beijing could provide. With the case of Western African students for example (see below), results show that 9 students among the 20 interviewees chose to come to Beijing because of their course (topic, content), and 7 were motivated by the reputation/ranking of the university. Moreover, on the continental scale of our interviews, the reputation and ranking of the University was a

determinant factor in the studies' choices for the sample. Indeed, a full half of the interviewees (50 out of 100) stated that the main determinant was the course and 34 gave priority to the reputation and ranking of the university before applying. On the other hand, only 4 of them chose their Chinese university by default, as they found themselves bound by their scholarship requirements, and 5 by other personal reasons. Such figures indicate that the standing of universities is an important matter to African students as a whole; choices are made very deliberately.

Most of the students that were subjected to a more in-depth, semi-structured interview confirmed that pattern. Looking at these students' profiles, one can easily assume that they gave importance to the quality of the institution that they were enrolled in. Amongst the people interviewed were one Ph.D. student at Peking University, two students of Tsinghua University (one undergraduate and one Masters student), two studied at UIBE (one Ph.D. and one Masters student) and one was graduating from Jiaotong University (MBA). It can be noted that this list of universities is far from fortuitous.

The elite training appeal did contribute to the decision to migrate to China. The Electrical engineering student at Tsinghua straightforwardly claimed that his choice was not accidental:

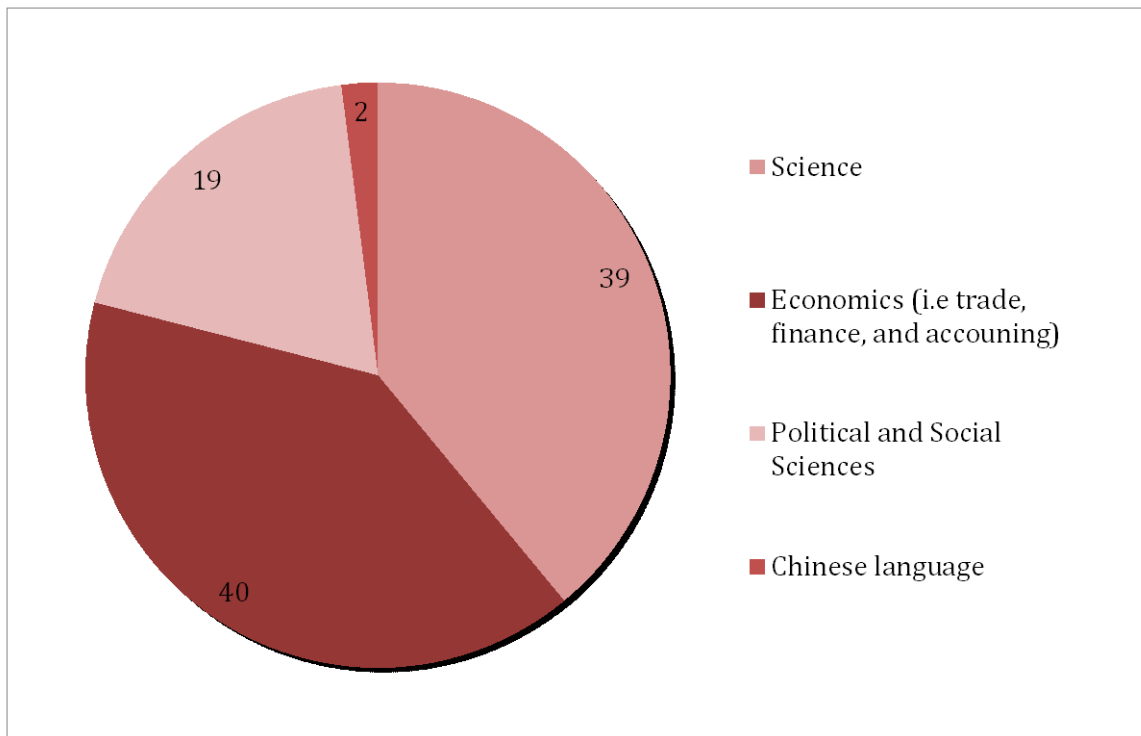
“My father knew a lot about China. I knew a lot about China. And I applied to one of the best schools in the country. We thought it'd be a strategic move. And I got accepted, which was all part of my plan” (interview on the 17th of June 2012).

And his fellow-country mate enrolled in the programme of Master of international Development went further: “After a gap year, I was ready to go to graduate school. But for me it was going to be Tsinghua or nothing”. Last but not least, the Ph.D. student at Peking University proudly explained that he obtained a scholarship to start his postgraduate course at “the most prestigious school of China”. He finished his statement – somewhat tongue-in-cheek – by saying: “I was looking for the cream of the crop of universities... because I am myself the cream of the crop of African students!”

3.2.2 Students' motivation: Learning in – and from – China

African student population of the municipality of Beijing seems to favour science and economics. Indeed, economics-related fields are the most popular paths (39%) for African students, after science (40%). On the other hand –presumably due to the specific political system of China – political and social sciences (20%) do not present the same appeal. Exclusive studies of Chinese language and culture are also the apparent endeavour of a very small group, illustrating a rather pragmatic motivation for studying in China:

Diagram 2: Fields of study



More specifically, such a trend can be further asserted when looking at African students from a particular region. Results obtained from students originally from Western African countries confirmed that the Economics and Science-related fields of studies were favoured. 9 West African students out of 20 were taking Economics courses, and 8 of them chose a science study path. On the other hand, only 3 out of 20 were studying political and social sciences. Another interesting observation was that out of this sample of 20 students, 10 different Beijing Universities were represented. This shows that those students were distributed in almost one third of the total of 34 universities that welcome international students in Beijing.

Box 3: Statistical details for a sub-sample of West African students

- Countries of origin:
 - Mali: 8
 - Senegal: 2
 - Togo: 2
 - Liberia: 2
 - Ghana: 1
 - Cape Verde: 1
 - Niger: 1
 - Côte d'Ivoire: 1
 - Sierra Leone: 1
 - Guinea Bissau: 1

- Gender:
 - Female: 5
 - Male: 15

- Age Group:
 - 18-22: 6
 - 23-26: 10
 - 27-30: 3
 - Over 30: 1

- University:
 - University of International Business and Economics (UIBE): 6
 - Jiaotong University: 2
 - Renmin University: 2
 - Tsinghua University: 6
 - Keji University: 2
 - University of Science and Technology of Beijing (USTB): 3
 - Central University of Finance and Economics: 2
 - China University of Political Science and Law: 1
 - Beijing language and Culture University: 1
 - North China Power and Electricity University: 1

- Reasons given for choosing their course:
 - The content of the course: 9
 - The reputation/ranking of the school: 7
 - External constraint: scholarship requirements: 2
 - Parents: 1
 - Other: overall environment: 1

- Field of studies:
 - Science 8
(Engineering, Mathematics, Computer Science, Information Technology)
 - Economics 9
(Financial accounting, Accounting, Finance, Business Administration, International Trade)
 - Political and Social Sciences: 3.

All students who were submitted to a one-on-one interview mentioned the aspect. When asked about the added value that they thought China possibly offered over other countries, the interviewees unanimously claimed that it was mostly the economic expertise and work opportunities, even before the acquisition of Mandarin. “We Africans have so much to learn from China if we want our countries to be part of the emerging nations. Studying in China, and mostly Beijing, is the first step”, emphasized the Ph.D. student from the Central Africa, who added that he was quite enthusiastic to witness that “more Africans were sharing his point of view”. As for the initially reluctant student in Finance from West Africa, he admitted that after having lived in Beijing for six years, he understood why his parents insisted that he studied in China instead of the US:

“I did not really have a choice. My father traveled to Beijing for business and when he witnessed what was happening there, he came back and said: ‘my son is going to China!’ I was upset at first because I wanted to play basketball at an American college, but looking back on it today, I think it was the right path. The environment is quite good and there are a lot of business opportunities.”

Some other students were examples of the opportunities that apparently thrive in Beijing. Indeed, the Electrical Engineering Bachelors student was in the midst of building his own startup company with other Africans in June. During the YAPS gathering, he and a business partner from East Africa introduced the idea of “a platform that would be made for African students coming to China and would facilitate their life as expatriates, on every possible level”. They had just found Chinese and foreign investors and had registered their new enterprise in Hong Kong, i.e. beyond the PR China. The two partners of this startup showed an impressive entrepreneurial spirit, and one of them pointed out that “Beijing has played a large part in molding us into the proactive beings that we are now.” The President of the African students’ association concluded: “Beijing is the best place to make business contacts. But it’s also very competitive. Having lived here for a while, the YAPS family and myself have built a solid and broad network. And it’s finally paying off”.

Lastly, the East African MBA student from Beijing Jiaotong University revealed quite an impressive run in Beijing as well. She had been “offered a consultant position for [a Chinese multinational company] before graduation and had interned there several months”. After graduating with a Bachelor degree of Environmental engineering at the University of Science and Technology, she shifted her strand of interest and chose to study Business Administration:

“In 2006, the FOCAC happened and I remember President Hu Jintao making an announcement about the Development Fund to Africa. It was quite intriguing. And I realized that my advantage, being in China and Beijing, would only come through being able to position myself more or less in business development rather than environmental engineering”.

3.2.3 African student associations: implementing Sino-African relations on a local scale

The growing population of African students of Beijing tends to concentrate into diverse smaller entities based on nationality, religion, or interests and goals, not unlike patterns experienced elsewhere. This phenomenon of micro-diaspora produces, in some cases, a broader effect that

impacts Sino-African relations on a local scale. Through the interviews and focus groups that took place during the field trip, the aspect of common nationality networks; be they formal and institutionalized, or rather strictly socially maintained, was of great importance and seemed to have an impact on the Sino-African cooperation.

-National associations and communities:

Firstly, associations based on nationality were numerous and played (some of them at least) an active role of linkage, guidance and information-provider for its students and the embassies.

For instance, the East African MBA student interviewed, as President of the national student association, endorsed this factor:

“I’ve been the student President for one year. This year we (Ugandan students) are more than 150 scholarship-registered students in China. And the private-funded ones are even more than that, approximately 200. So we could be about 400 students in the country, with a large share in Beijing. So communication is necessary, which is why we created a *Yahoo Group* forum. We can access the students’ challenges and problems and implement the education cooperation between China and Uganda at our level”.

The student also emphasized the fact that the role of the association had more impact than an alternative one of the embassy, claiming that Ugandan students would immediately join it when they arrived in China. This also illustrates a strong civic-mindedness of many students in China, replicating models from their home countries:

“We have a good database and we are the ones reporting to the embassy. Not the other way around. It’s not easy for the embassy to collect this information, which is why we collect it, and give them feedback. We organize a conference once a year to discuss student matters and report back to the embassy. We have provincial associations, like here in Beijing.”

A West African students association showed common traits with that of the East African example. The Ph.D. student at UIBE, having worked simultaneously for the association and his national embassy, described the liaison between the two entities as quite similar.

“We students are the envoys of our community. We are well organized. If we have a problem, we just report it to our President who communicates with the embassy. We are about 100 students from [my country] in the city and we like to consider ourselves as a big family. We all meet at the embassy for important religious and national events too.”

Moreover, sometimes, the communities implement Sino-African relations as they encourage other country fellows to come study, and mentor them through living in China, therefore creating larger national networks in the country. This phenomenon of “word of mouth” is more important than one would expect. In fact, the East African Electrical Engineering student interviewed explained that he had “been encouraging other friends and family members, living back home or elsewhere, to come to study or look for jobs in Beijing or China”. It appears that his promotion of the China lifestyle, work opportunities and education system, has been quite effective. Actually, another interviewee from his home country, whom he has known for several years, said it was one of the reasons she moved to Beijing three years ago. This Masters of

International Development student explained that she was in a transitional phase between graduating from a US University and potentially starting job hunting:

“I was in New-York, with a degree in Health and Society in my pocket, and very few options available in the U.S. My friend who was studying at Tsinghua, kept telling me that it was the perfect time to come to Beijing and that I could even find a job before going back to school for my graduate studies. So I followed his advice, came, and found a teaching job at Beijing Language and Culture University (BLCU). And one year after that, I applied at Tsinghua and got in”.

And the number of Ethiopian students that have since come to study in the city through that same process is quite big. “It’s becoming a big thing in our circle, and in our circles’ circle!” added the young woman. “I mean in the past three years, 8 of my cousins have enrolled at UIBE and a few other friends have come to study Chinese at BLCU. Our diaspora in Beijing keeps growing”. This growing diaspora of Africans also sees a growing life in associations in China.

-Career and opportunities-driven associations:

The most stirring illustration of such a reality in Beijing is probably the existence of the association entitled Young African Professionals and Students (YAPS):

In its introductory description (above), the association explains that it wishes to be a platform for African youth in China and contribute to the implementation of the Sino-African partnership. The organization was created as the result of a group of young Africans living in Beijing becoming aware of its need of a platform of information and networking instigated by Africans:

“Yaps came out of the idea that we couldn’t find a comprehensive organization that would cater for African students and professionals and their activities in China. We wanted to have this entity that would also promote the continent directly in China. And at some point we just thought that instead of thinking about it, we should just do it” summarized the President of the association (interview on the 17th of June 2012).

Box 4: Young African Professionals and Students (YAPS) – aims and aspirations

Young African Professionals and Students (YAPS), is a non-profit network that was founded in 2009. The network was formed by a group of Africans in China who are passionate about the development of the continent. YAPS is a network association for African graduates with interest in Africa and Sino-Africa relations.

YAPS was established to provide a platform for our members to deepen their knowledge of the continent, identifying opportunities presented by Sino-Africa relations and broaden their network of likeminded individuals.

Our membership base is a premier pipeline and skills pool of African graduates with China expertise. Our members are active participants in the development of China-Africa relations mainly through education exchanges.

YAPS members are the custodians of future technology and knowledge transfer to Africa underpinned in the FOCAC and other bilateral and industry agreement between China and African countries.

Source: *Young African Professionals and Students*, www.yaps.asia

YAPS appeared to be a well-organized and structured entity. Indeed, the President is assisted in his role of head by the Vice President (who also has the title of Executive chair). A Public Relations agent deals with sponsoring, partnering up with companies and promoting the work of the association through media exposure. And the rest of the team is in charge of general and occasional topical event and project management, as well as what YAPS calls “capital and skills enhancement” by providing training and workshops to Africans in need. The latter of those activities is the one that an East African interviewee found the most important and useful:

“I have been invited to a few events that YAPS hosted. They organize very useful and interesting activities. And more importantly, they arrange lectures and workshops, with Chinese professionals for instance, that really give guidance to African students. It also creates good opportunities to network.”

YAPS also aspires to promote a positive image of the African continent in China, including through cultural events:

“We want to create a united front for Africans. We try and get students together, regardless of their nationality, through cultural events. We’ve done events with the help of the Ethiopian embassy, the Rwandan one... Africans come and some sell coffee or other products from their country.”

Through the Chinese government incentives, numbers of African students going to China are increasing. The opportunities sought are often economic, but also go beyond this. Western countries are not necessarily the only destination for Africans who want to study abroad. China, indeed, has a lot to offer in academia (with variations by topic areas, as shown), but it also comes with opportunities for career prospects. Additionally, there is an ideological dimension to the explanation of why studying in China. Some of the young African intellectuals apparently agreed with the official political discourse claiming China and Africa to be equal partners, as opposed to the dominant/dominated pattern that the old continent has had with the West. This ‘anti-West sentiment’ decries that developed countries still operate “spoon-feeding” to Africa. “I will always value a Chinese scholarship more than a scholarship from the West. At least China respects Africa, treats it as its equal” as stated by an African Ph.D. student at Peking University. “China”, he added, “shows results and concrete measures. Each year, they offer 60 scholarships to [my country], while [the former colonial power] only grants us 5. ” Some of the African students indeed perceive themselves as the future ambassadors of Sino-African relations. After all, like an East African student at Jiaotong reasoned, the scholarship students that graduate in particular “have the Chinese language skills, the degree, and mostly the knowledge about China and the Chinese. Who better can perpetuate the relations between the two parties?” Study in China means that these Africans already implement the Sino-African partnership by the simple fact of living there. They are, for the most part unintentionally, “cross-cultural” messengers in this context. Like Professor Bodomo pointed out in his study,

“The students even in their first year are already bridging the educational systems of African and China, they are constantly questioning and comparing the two systems”³².

While the sample subjected to in-depth interview showed vision in the matter, explaining that their experience and studies in China was being done with a purpose,, this is not necessarily the

case for the rest of the students. “Awareness is not a common trait of the African students of Beijing” certified an employee at an East African embassy, and a former student in Beijing and member of YAPS. Indeed, the interviewees that were selected had a particular profile that implied intrinsically that they could be prone to a certain level of awareness of the Sino-African framework. In fact, a number of them deplored that a lot of African students did not care for the relationship between China and Africa and did not have any plan of becoming players of this partnership.

3.2.4 Challenges of Chinese scholarship and study programmes

Through the qualitative methodology (interviews, focus groups, etc.), an important number of students expressed grievance against the Chinese government scholarships they have been given (most of the scholars that were interviewed were in Beijing under a Chinese government scholarship).

The main grievance revolved around the selection of the applicants for the scholarships. Referring to the “China-Africa Education cooperation” commitment declarations, they will state that China grants a certain number of scholarships to each country every year. That number varies, presumably according to the level of engagement that China has in the particular country. For instance, in 2008, China granted over 100 scholarships to Sudan. The number of scholarships to Kenyans has also come up in the past few years. The respective African governments then select students among all their national applicants; the Chinese authorities prefer not to be involved in the selection process of the individual students and leave the selection to African countries. Yet, the processes differ across African countries. In South Africa for instance, up until last year, the selection of students was made by a panel of judges from the Chinese and the South African side (the Chinese embassy and the Department of Higher Education of South Africa) after the Department of Higher Education had sorted out a few qualified candidates through an interview (information obtained through an appointment with an agent of the Department of Higher Education of South Africa in Pretoria). One of the objectives of the Chinese government scholarships is to help deserving people who do not have the means required to self-fund their studies. Lack of engagement of Chinese authorities can thus lead to cynicism towards the scholarship scheme. Interviewees stated that there was a lack of control that can lead to unethical behaviors such as unfair networking and corruption, making connections a requirement to a successful application:

“That’s how it works in [my country] at least. A lot of diplomats’ or politician’s children study here on a Chinese Government scholarship. It’s quite common. I won’t lie... even my parents used some of their connections when I applied for the scholarship. Everyone plays with the cards they have. That’s the sad reality”

as an interviewee concluded quite bleakly. Certainly, a few students that were part of the elite in, namely, Liberia, Ethiopia and Kenya, were actually studying on a government scholarship at prestigious Beijing universities.

Most students witness the lack of guidance that exists regarding the scholarship and the studies’ circumstances before departure. It depends on the application procedure for the most part. If a student has been accepted to a particular school and has been granted a scholarship to take a particular programme at that school, the information available is plenty. Indeed, the student can liaise directly with his university. However, if one is applying for a scholarship to study in China, they have to take up Mandarin classes for a year and sometimes do not know where they will be

enrolled beforehand. And when they finally arrive in China, they don't necessarily find guidance and help through their embassy. Most of the mentoring is done and promoted by the national community that is already settled in the country.

Most of the students on a scholarship are happy with the opportunities they were given by studying in China. They emphasize the value of language and culture open-mindedness they have acquired while studying in the Middle Kingdom. They also generally believe the scholarships are good enough since the cost of living in China is quite affordable. However, there is a shared feeling of frustration among the interviewees regarding the quality of their training and education when studying in Mandarin. "I sometimes get the feeling that I memorize chapters of a book, but that does not require brain activity at all!" confessed an MA student in Finance from West Africa who has lived in Beijing for over six years. In practice, the majority of students on a scholarship who have taken HSK level test score an average of 3 to 4 level (which is the equivalent of lower intermediate and intermediate). It is very rare for students to score a 6 or a 7 level (advanced). An East African student at Tsinghua claimed his level was still intermediate:

"It's not as high as it should be. It's absolutely difficult to be honest. It's gone to the level where I stopped competing for top grades and just tried to pass. There were 20 Africans in my programme at the beginning. Now I'm the only one left. I don't know what is says about us Africans but taking scientific courses in Mandarin is definitely frustrating. And the first year of language training is insufficient and not as thorough as it should be."

Lastly, there seems to be a shortage of the scholarship system in terms of follow-up actions, practicing acquired skills beyond mere learning at university. The issue here is that it is very difficult to obtain hands-on experience regarding the particular subject that the students are taking. As an East African student put it:

"In the past three years, 30 students from my country have graduated in Beijing. But only two of them have managed to get an internship. And among my classmates at Jiaotong, only me and another African student have managed to secure an internship. And they all really wanted to."

In Western countries, it is quite common to have a compulsory internship required in order to graduate from a course, regardless of the field. Apparently, there is no internship requirement in Chinese universities, therefore, some students complete over six years of studies without having applied any of the skills they were taught.

And finally, the social discrimination against (Black) African students takes a toll on most. As stated by a West African student at UIBE:

"We're used to it by now but it's still annoying to be a black person in China on a daily basis. We have to endure the rudeness of taxi drivers, people in public transportation, etc. And it's not really a communication problem because I speak fluent Mandarin. It's not necessarily racism. But it's ignorance!"

4. Conclusions

The conclusions of this study need to start with a word of caution: this ambitious research project resulted in somewhat conclusive answers that would yet have to be deepened and extended to be fully validated. Fieldwork was carried out for a relatively short period of time (during 20 days), with most of the empirical work summarizing in a database of 100 students, and six others for the in-depth interviews. We feel that the research succeeded to provide an interesting angle on the influx of the African student population of Beijing in particular. However, such a study would have to collect more data and a wider sample of students to be more scientifically grounded.

That being said, the main problems that were encountered during the field trip were not actually related to a time shortage. Rather, it proved difficult to access quantitative information from different authorities and official entities in Beijing and in South Africa. As it was mentioned in the methodology description, most of the figures that were needed to assess the scholarships evolution and the growth of the African student population in China would have to be requested from the Ministry of Education of China and the China Scholarship Council. However, repeated contact at various stages in the research was fruitless. Explicitly, the person in charge of African Affairs at the China Scholarship Council explained that the required type of data could not be disclosed, while the Ministry of Education appeared to have kicked the ball into the long grass by asking for formal email query to which they never replied. Besides, it was impossible to obtain an appointment with the head of the educational department at the Embassy of China in Pretoria. Thus, some figures could not be collected and the ones that appear on this research report were mainly gathered from previous studies on the matter, and older reports of the Chinese authorities, namely the CSC and the MOE, found online.

In sum, there is obviously growing influx of African students migrating to China, and this comes with important economic and diplomatic implications for the China-Africa relationship in the long run. However, the idea that all African students perceive themselves as future players of the Sino-African relations is to be considered with high levels of caution.

International media and academia have often criticized the Chinese official ideology of China-Africa relations. The idea of the Eastern economic power claiming that it will always “be part of the third world” and therefore, by definition, will avoid any kind of offensive imperialistic approach towards its peers, seems far from the geopolitical reality. But the question that is important and relevant in this study is the perception of an “equal-to-equal” partnership in the field of higher education. Professor Kenneth King raises this question in a 2006 paper entitled “*The Beijing China-Africa Summit of 2006: The New Implementation Implications of Aid to Education*”:

“China has traditionally avoided presenting itself as a donor, preferring to see itself as the largest developing country working alongside other development countries in a South-South relationship. The banners for the Summit proclaimed its title: “Friendship, Peace, Development and Cooperation”, but note that it was development and cooperation, not development cooperation (which is another name for aid)”³³.

Yet, don't the way the commitments are made and the whole scholarship policy system resemble aid? According to Deborah Brautigam, there is no doubt: “it's aid, not cooperation”³⁴. In other words, this ‘exchange’ is a one-way street: the Chinese authorities offer scholarships to

African students who come to China and study in Mandarin. The number of Chinese exchange students going to Africa to study has been stunningly low in the past decade. This might be due to perceptions that China had to develop a backward African educational system. Some Chinese researchers such as Kaiyu Shao have defended that very idea in explicit terms³⁵. The relationship does not need to be unidirectional, as Tanzania illustrates. The East African country has hosted a few Chinese students over the years and some have studied in Kiswahili. Recently, the Tanzanian government “has increased the number of scholarships from five to ten every year” (Mikama; 2012)³⁶, in an attempt to reciprocate the scholarship scheme.

Some aspects that we can recommend based on this study are going beyond the scope of cooperation in education, such as lack of transparency in student selection or the need to address racial stereotypes/ignorance amongst Chinese population towards black students. These issues merit attention. Our recommendations, however, should focus on the narrower topic of student education in China.

In the face of some of the issues raised by this study, two key recommendations can be made:

- Opportunities to get hands-on experience during the studies can and should be improved. An MBA student at Jiaotong notably suggested that both African and Chinese governments should make policies to fill that void. It would be helpful to consider Chinese companies and universities to partner-up in order to provide internships or other experience opportunities for the student that wish to gain hands-on skills.
- Finally, in choosing students, privilege and emphasis should be made at the levels *beyond* Bachelors and Masters. One student pointed out that when the students come to China right after high school; they struggle with the language and sometimes give up. The fact that they already have a degree implies that they have a solid academic background. Besides, there is a natural selection as only the most competitive ones who want to continue with post-graduate studies will come to China and the success rate of their studies is bound to increase.

End Notes

- ¹ See Forum on China-Africa Cooperation. 2012. 'Zhong Jianhua: Chinese Enterprises in Africa,' via *Wall Street Journal* (Chinese edition), 17 April.
- ² See Council of Foreign Relations. 2012. "Expanding China Africa oil ties," 8 February.
- ³ See Marson, Harry, C. V, Major. 2008. *Wooing the Dark Continent: US and China engagement strategy in Africa, is it complementary or competition*. US Army School of Advanced Military Studies, Kansas, USA.
- ⁴ See Kaiyu, S. 2012. *Blackboard Cooperation: China's role in educating Africa, Consultancy Africa Intelligence*.
- ⁵ Quoted from King, K. 2006. *The Beijing China-Africa summit of 2006: The New implementation implications of aid to education*. Paper delivered to the Symposium of China-Africa Shared Development, 18-19 December 2006, Beijing.
- ⁶ See "African students in China: A case study of newly arrived students on FOCAC funds at Chongqing University" in Bodomo, A. 2009. *Fresh faces for future Africa-China relations: A note on the experiences of newly arrived African students in China on FOCAC funds*.
- ⁷ More information about the C-9 League can be found on the QS Worldclass website: <http://www.qsworldclass.com/>.
- ⁸ See Campus France. 2011. *Chiffres Clés n°6, Les étudiants internationaux*.
- ⁹ See *Black Expat Magazine*. 2008. "2008 African International Student Census," Vol. 1. Issue. 1. Spring.
- ¹⁰ See Campus France. 2011. *Chiffres Clés n°6, Les étudiants internationaux*.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² See "African students in China: A case study of newly arrived students on FOCAC funds at Chongqing University" in Bodomo, A. 2009. *Fresh faces for future Africa-China relations: A note on the experiences of newly arrived African students in China on FOCAC funds*.
- ¹³ See National Bureau of Statistics of People's Republic of China. 2007. *Statistical Yearbook 2006*.
- ¹⁴ Information gathered from press articles : 'Immigration légale : Guéant veut supprimer 20000 autorisations par an', <http://www.lemonde.fr/>, 'François Hollande interpellé sur la politique migratoire de la France', <http://www.rfi.fr/>
- ¹⁵ See National study statistics, <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/>
- ¹⁶ Information gathered from *Daily News & Analysis*. 2010. "African students favour India over Europe and US," 2 March.
- ¹⁷ See Campus France. 2011. *Chiffres Clés n°6, Les étudiants internationaux*. ¹⁸ See "African students in China: A case study of newly arrived students on FOCAC funds at Chongqing University" in Bodomo, A. 2009. *Fresh faces for future Africa-China relations: A note on the experiences of newly arrived African students in China on FOCAC funds*.
- ¹⁹ Quote from Wekesa, B. 2011. "When will the West ever learn," *China Daily*, 1 December.

²⁰ See Rubin, I., Rubin, H.J. 2004. *Qualitative interviewing: the art of hearing data*.

²¹ See details about the interviewee's profile in II. The case study of African students in Beijing: an attractive center for massive as well as elitist training.

²² See National Bureau of Statistics of People's Republic of China. 2011. *Communiqué of the National Bureau of Statistics of People's Republic of China on major figures of the population census of 2010*.

²³ See National Bureau of Statistics of People's Republic of China. 2007. *Statistical Yearbook 2006*.

²⁴ See China Scholarship Council. 'Guide to study in China and Directory of the Chinese higher education Institutions under Chinese government scholarship program', 2011.

²⁵ See *Times Higher Education*. 2011. "Eastern stars: Universities of China's C9 League excel in select fields," 17 February

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ See China Scholarship Council. 2011. *Guide to study in China and Directory of the Chinese higher education Institutions under Chinese government scholarship program*.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Information selected from the following websites: QS Top Universities. Online: www.topuniversities.com, and QS World University Rankings. Online: www.qsworlduniversityranking.com.

³⁰ See China Scholarship Council. 2011. *Guide to study in China and Directory of the Chinese higher education Institutions under Chinese government scholarship program*.

³¹ Information selected from the following websites: QS Top Universities. Online: www.topuniversities.com, and QS World University Rankings. Online: www.qsworlduniversityranking.com.

³² Quoted from 'African students in China: a case study of newly arrived students on FOCAC funds at Chongqing University' in Bodomo, A. 2009. *Fresh faces for future Africa-China relations: A note on the experiences of newly arrived African students in China on FOCAC funds*.

³³ Kenneth King (2006) also analyzes the traits and distinctiveness of the evolution of the China-Africa Education cooperation and China's education policy in Africa in a broader sense.

³⁴ See Brautigam, D. 2009. *The Dragon's Gift: The Real Story of China in Africa*.

³⁵ Kaiyu, S. 2012. *Blackboard Cooperation: China's role in educating Africa, Consultancy Africa Intelligence*.

³⁶ See Mikama, A. 2012. "Government increased scholarships for Chinese," 30 May. *Tanzania Daily News*.

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