



Academic (Im)mobility: Ecology of Ethnographic Research and Knowledge Production on Africans in China

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Abstract

Since the emergence of China in the geopolitical and economic spaces of Africa, academics have followed Chinese and African people moving in both directions and conducted on-the-ground, cross-border ethnographies. However, academics are not equally mobile. This autoethnography analyses the intersections of ethnography, mobility and knowledge production on 'Africans in China' through a critical exploration of the contextual issues shaping the unequal participation of Africa-based researchers in the study of Africa(ns) in a non-African setting. Based on my experiences before, during and after migration to Guangzhou city, I demonstrate that 'being there,' fetishised as ideal-type anthropology, conceals privilege and racial and power dynamics that constrain the practice of cross-border ethnography in the global South.

Résumé

Depuis l'émergence de la Chine dans les espaces géopolitiques et économiques de l'Afrique, les universitaires ont suivi les Chinois et les Africains évoluant dans les deux sens, et ont mené, sur le terrain, des ethnographies transfrontalières. Cependant, les universitaires ne sont pas aussi mobiles. Cette auto ethnographie analyse les intersections de l'ethnographie, de la mobilité et de la production de connaissances sur les « Africains en Chine » à travers une exploration critique des questions contextuelles qui façonnent la participation inégale des chercheurs basés en Afrique à l'étude de l'Afrique et des africains dans un cadre non-africain. Me basant sur mes expériences avant, pendant et après ma migration vers la ville de Guangzhou, je démontre que le « être là », fétichisé en tant qu'anthropologie de type idéal, dissimule des privilèges et des dynamiques raciales et de pouvoir qui contraignent la pratique de l'ethnographie transfrontalière dans le Sud global.

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Introduction

On 11 June 2018, Vivian Lu and Mingwei Huang circulated a short survey report through the Chinese in Africa/Africans in China Research Network (CA/AC). With the surge in scholarly interest in the dynamics of interactions between China and Africa, Lu and Huang (2018) attempted to understand how those taking part in China-Africa (or Africa-China) studies conduct ethnographic fieldwork, including the impact of the politics of field access and exclusion. Some of the key findings of the authors can be summarised into a thesis that captures the condition under which knowledge on 'Africans in China' is produced today. Their claim is that while many Africa-China scholars can do ethnography in China or African countries, race and nationality, institutional positions and locations across continents determine who gets to participate. African researchers identified access to Chinese visas as a major barrier.¹ While the report is limited by its largely descriptive approach, it is nonetheless timely and instructive as it calls attention to the 'spatial grounding' of African academics 'in place', posing a challenge to the promise of ethnography in Africa-China studies.

Since the emergence of China in the geopolitical and economic spaces of Africa, academics in universities and institutes in both the northern and southern hemispheres have followed the Chinese state and business enterprises where they went. Academics are also fascinated with how Africans have moved in the other direction, beaming searchlights to understand, interpret and predict the dynamics of an unfolding process. In this way, researchers reached critical mass as knowledge producers on the character of the Africa-China interactions. In many cases, the researchers produce knowledge by conducting on-the-ground ethnographies (Lu and Huang 2018), which often involve some form of cross-border mobility. Unfortunately, academics are not equally mobile! (Grgurinović 2013; Mau *et al.* 2015; Neumayer 2006).

For too long, the context within which Africa-based researchers conduct ethnography outside the African continent has not been brought to the fore of scholarly analysis. This is due to the fact that a significant amount of studies conducted in African humanities and social science disciplines are locally grounded (Alatas 2003), rarely involving cross-continental mobility for fieldwork. By analysing the intersections of ethnography, mobility and knowledge production in 'Africans in China' research, I seek to highlight the contextual issues that structure the (un)equal participation of Africa-based researchers in the study of Africa(ns) in a non-African setting. I contend that 'being there', fetishised as ideal-type anthropology, conceals privilege and racial and power dynamics that constrain the practice of cross-border ethnography in the global South.

Essentially, I reflect on academic (im)mobility² as a distinct form of movement in Africa-China interactions, with an interest in analysing how knowledge production on 'Africans in China' is shaped by the structures of constraints and opportunities within which 'migration for ethnography' occur. I frame academic (im)mobility as a prerequisite and vehicle for producing knowledge on cross-cultural interactions and possibilities, and specifically treat ethnography as a knowledge-making tool that all scholars researching the African experience globally should be able to employ. In this autoethnographic account, which is based mainly on my experiences before, during and after migration to Guangzhou city as a doctoral student, I reflect on the barriers embedded in the structures within which a Nigerian scholar seeks to participate in documenting the lived experiences of Nigerians in China. This pursuit is motivated by both an invitation and a charge. The invitation comes from Larsen (2016:90) when she writes that focus should be on how '...knowledge is created, shaped, and changed through its mobile conditions of production'. The charge, on the other hand, originates from Grgurinović's intention:

To open the space for a critical consideration of the uncritical, unifying discourse of academic immobility as an aspect of wider politics of science, education, and knowledge, which puts great emphasis on mobility as an important factor in what is vaguely defined as scientific 'excellence' (of institutions and individual scientists). (Grgurinović 2013:156)

In the rest of the article, I adopt a reflexive methodology, '...in the sense of seeing ourselves in a mirror, of ourselves being the object of our thought' (Bruce and Yearly 2005), to think through correspondences with China- and West-based academics and collaborators while planning my journey, as well as my experiences at the Chinese embassy in Lagos and port of entry in Guangzhou. Reflexivity emphasises the importance of self-knowledge and sensitivity, the role of self and impact of positionality in the creation of knowledge (Berger 2015). Advancing reflexivity, Bourdieu (2003) proposes 'participant objectivation' in which our personal experiences can become analytical resources to produce epistemic and existential benefits once we subject them to sociological control through self-socio-analysis. He believes '...that scientific knowledge and knowledge of oneself and of one's own social unconscious advance hand in hand' (Bourdieu 2003:289). To adopt a reflexive approach, therefore, implies that the researcher is the 'principal character', not just the 'central character', he is his own key informant; or simply, the researcher and researched are one and the same (Davies 2002).

Epistemic Domination, Mobility and Knowledge Production in Africa

Adebanwi (2016:353) writes that ‘the fate of the knowledge industry is the measure of all progress – economic, social and political’. Unfortunately, the global division of intellectual labour is unequally distributed and it is structured in a way that impacts negatively on the production of knowledge in Africa. Alatas (2003) decries the subordinate status of knowledges of the Third World, which includes most of Africa, due to the relentlessness of academic dependency even after political independence. He argues that intellectuals of the Third World rely on, and their scholarly output is conditioned by, Western social sciences. In addition to the divisions around theoretical and empirical intellectual labour on the one hand, and the separations formed along the lines of doing comparatist versus single-case studies on the other hand, Alatas (2003:607) highlights perceptively the division between doing ‘other country studies and own country studies’.

Arowosegbe (2016) posits that knowledge production on Africa happens within a historically determined and on-going power asymmetry, and that the political and economic domination of the African continent by the West has sustained epistemic dependency in African universities. Other scholars have raised the problem of epistemic domination of Africa by Western social sciences in different ways (Omobowale 2013; Keim 2008). Keim (2008), for instance, attempts to explain the marginality of Africa (and other developing countries in Latin America and Asia) in the production of social scientific knowledge by using the centre-periphery-model. Much in the fashion of dependency theorising, and focusing especially on the sociological enterprise, he argues that the sociologies of Western Europe and the United States are at the centre while the global South occupies the periphery. In Keim’s (2008) model, however, there is no place for the ‘semi-periphery.’ Ake (2011) discusses the role of globalisation in deepening imperialism in African social sciences.

Strikingly, the question of epistemic domination in African knowledge production space is rarely discussed alongside issues of African mobilities, especially academic mobility under the condition of unequal globalisation. Interrogating this neglect is important because the sovereign right to control who crosses or remains shut out of borders still lies largely with nation-states despite the fact that globalisation is alive and well (Britz & Ponelis 2012). Tighter border controls in the global North were no doubt influenced by the rise in terrorism threats since 9/11 (Brooks & Waters 2011; Favell, Feldblum, & Smith 2007; Larsen 2016). While the more affluent countries

are unlikely to transcend their terrorist fears any time soon, concerns about economic migrants from poor countries who may decide to stay put after arrival continue to put immigration at the centre of national debates and policy discourses (Neumayer 2006).³

So, the borders that globalisation optimists claim have opened up are fast closing again, only permitting certain people, designated as wanted, while keeping out the unwanted 'others' (Mau *et al.* 2015). Specifically, Mau *et al.* (2015) find that while visa-free mobility has increased over the past 40 years, not all countries benefitted equally, with wealthy countries gaining more mobility rights while the same rights stagnated or diminished for others, particularly for African countries. In essence, stricter visa rules are being deployed as a tool for disciplining people from some parts of the globe (Neumayer 2006). Through the cost and processing of visa applications, and the unilateral powers of the street-level bureaucracy to deny visas, receiving states are able to end mobilities before they begin (Lee, Paulidor & Mpage 2017). This makes globalisation a deeply conflicted process, in that unprecedented mobility is accompanied by enforced immobility (Neumayer 2006).

As a sub-category of mobile people, academics are feeling the effects of contemporary border dynamics, albeit varied in degrees. In spite of the possibility of facilitating the deterritorialisation of knowledge production, Larsen (2016:81) posits that academic mobility is not possible for all. At the same time that the disjunctive nature of global flows creates possibilities, inconsistencies and social inequalities still persist, owing specifically to '... the geopolitical power dimensions of academic mobility and inequalities that exist between and among academics based on race, gender, class, and other contextual factors' (Larsen 2016:92). Like other forms of mobility, she contends that 'mobility capital' is dispersed unevenly among academics, with implications for the character of knowledge produced and circulated in the globalised era.

African scholars in particular move cross-continentially under a condition of global academic migration inequality. Between 2018 and 2019 alone, scholarly communities and media organisations in the global North disseminated several sensational statements and reports that capture the entrenched nature of enforced immobility against African academics.⁴ Noting that a significantly high proportion of academic conferences take place outside Africa, Britz and Ponelis (2012) state that Africans travelling on the passports of African countries face strict visa restrictions from most countries in the global North. The reasons, they insist, are geographic, financial and political in nature. In their words:

The international traveling problem for academics from Africa is part of a wider international vocal debate on immigration that is spurred by not only national security but also by ideology, economic interest and negative perceptions. National safety and pride as well as own economic interest have many times resulted into narrowing the door for immigrants and as a result translated into legal barriers for traveling scholars (Britz & Ponelis 2012:473).

This captures the situation of Nigerian academics. Nigerian academics planning to attend conferences and trainings in countries across the global North often find that their mobility destiny is inevitably linked with the destiny of the Nigerian international migrant population. In an attempt to escape poverty and secure a better life abroad, many young Nigerians visit foreign embassies with manufactured documents to improve their chances of obtaining a visa (Akanle *et al.* 2013). Many of them are stereotyped at the embassies of the US, Britain, Canada and many Schengen countries, as ‘illegals,’ and ‘absconders’ who routinely assemble fake documents to secure a visa. In the words of Obadare and Adebani (2010:42), ‘the would-be migrant is largely regarded by the consular officials as a vagrant [and] the average Western consulate in Nigeria is a space of abjection and humiliation’.

It is not unusual for Nigerian academics to regard embassies as spaces of abjection as well because the stereotyped image of Nigerians is normally deployed when dealing with scholars. As Akanle *et al.* (2013:87) observe, ‘when Nigerian academics apply for visas, they are usually treated with the same disrespect and suspicion as other Nigerians, in part because it is difficult to ascertain their true status and because lecturers are not seen as immune to fraudulent visa applications’. Sometimes, the embassies request ‘special documents’ from Nigerian academics, and visa rejection is fairly common even after supplying the requested documents and paying the necessary fees, both to the embassies and the intended academic meetings, thereby leading to a waste of resources in an already low-resource environment (Akanle *et al.* 2013; Obadare & Adebani 2010).

The visa regime that limits African intellectual mobilities impacts negatively on development, creativity, and knowledge sharing, with implications for the questions of social (Britz & Ponelis 2012) and epistemic justice. Akanle *et al.* (2013) complain that because of the visa challenge, African-generated knowledge remains at the margins of global scholarship. The inability of African scholars to travel because of the inequality in global visa regimes limits the participation of Africa in the global knowledge economy. This further entrenches the already skewed global knowledge structure into a deeply one-sided understanding of the world.⁵

All of this reveals how the dominant narrative of globalisation masks the pre-eminence of borders which continue to keep some people out based on geography of origin, stereotypes and stigmatisation. However, much of the discussion and many of the analyses focus on African academics who visit the West, usually on a short-term basis, to attend conferences and workshops. Not much is being done to understand African academic immobility in the context of Afro-Asia interactions nor the ways that barriers in emerging powerhouses like China constrain Africa-based ethnographic endeavours that are oriented towards understanding the lives of Africans residing in Chinese cities. Also, the centre-periphery model in intellectual labour inequalities (Keim 2008) overlooks the unequal relations between the periphery and semi-periphery areas. With advances in Africa-China relations, I argue that China should be approached as a node of interest for ethnographic and social scientific activities for African scholars. For one, cities in mainland China host a significant African population. There is no doubt that this population is relevant for understanding social change processes in China and Africa. More importantly, China-bound migration is now an aspect of the modern history of Africa, the documentation of which should involve scholars working from and in both regions and elsewhere. In the next section, I describe my experience as a Nigerian-based doctoral student seeking ethnographic information on Nigerians in China.

The Study of Africans in the World: Doing Ethnography in China

The inflow of African students into China for educational purposes and their experiences in various Chinese cities are being documented by 'Africans in China' researchers (Bredeloup 2014; Haugen 2013; Ho 2017; Li 2013). However, most of these students are on government bilateral scholarships and enrolled in STEM or short-term Chinese culture and language programmes. The knowledge produced from participating in these programmes makes little contribution towards understanding the transformations that the African presence in China is bringing about.

When I decided to study the Nigerian migrant community in China, I engaged colleagues and faculty members to know what they thought. While the former wondered if all the problems in Nigeria had been researched, most of those in the latter group warned me about the impossibility of my pursuit. One faculty member, having reminded me of my 'Nigerian-ness' and talking about my placement in the global South and financial status as self-sponsored student, told me stories of friends who abandoned PhD pursuits midway after wasting their time chasing 'ambitious' research.

The two groups mentioned above are part of the social organisation within which I would conduct research that had not begun but was already dead on arrival. Framed as pragmatic advice, I was admonished to subject myself to an honest evaluation, to think about funding and the demands of cross-continental mobility particularly. However, by proposing that I should abandon the original idea for more localised research, I noticed that a more fundamental assumption of other doctoral students and faculty is that an African based in an African university is not supposed to participate – or is incapable of participating – in a debate on Africans residing in a non-African country.⁶ Certainly, the protracted problem of lack of funding for doctoral research has created a culture or tradition within Nigerian academe where students have come to believe that engaging in ethnographic research outside the African continent is not possible or wise.

Being at the very early stage of my research, it would have been a good time to abandon the idea. However, I had convinced myself to believe that, in choosing to study Nigerians in China, I would be well-positioned to participate in constructing a history of Africa that is still unfolding – a responsibility that Western and Asian scholars had taken on at the time. I was focused on the implications of my ‘pragmatic’ move, whether it would matter, over the short- or long term. My PhD supervisor was on board all the way. Having taught about sociological theory for many decades and having introduced graduate students to issues in diaspora theorising, he was naturally disposed to support my research interest. The key research puzzle for me was to understand the gamut of processes, social relations and practices with which Nigerians increasingly settle as migrants in Guangzhou, the largest city in south China.

The first major hurdle for the research was funding. Many African universities lack access to research funds, and the problem is worse in social sciences and humanities disciplines. In a chronically resource-poor setting like Nigeria, institutional funding for research is almost non-existent. Most doctoral students in Nigerian universities are self-financed. As the first national university in the country, the University of Ibadan, where I was enrolled, is one of the few universities in Nigeria that provides some financial support to doctoral students.⁷ However, the funds available within the university are often inadequate to conduct ethnographic fieldwork, especially a cross-border kind. For transnational ethnographic activity, a doctoral researcher is no doubt immobile. As a result, I was constrained to look outwards for other funding sources, some of which you only stand a chance of getting if you are capable and willing to re-think, un-think, abandon or readapt your research proposal, proposition and focus. Being adaptive, in these senses, is ‘being creative’!

Once the issue of funding was resolved (sources listed at the end of the paper), I was confronted with the problem of travel logistics. Over the course of a two-year planning and waiting period, I learned that academic mobility for ethnographic fieldwork is neither a neutral nor a straightforward process, but rather an activity that takes place within structures of institutional inefficiencies and ineffectiveness, global inequality and racialised hierarchies of power, visa black-market economies and mobility informalisation. To plan my travel, I checked the visa requirements on the website of the Chinese embassy in Nigeria and found that I was qualified to apply for an 'F' visa which is 'issued to foreigners who intend to go to China for exchanges, visits, study tours, etc.'⁸ The documents required for the 'F' visa were:

1. Application form;
2. International passport data page;
3. Original invitation letter of duly authorised unit or confirmation letter of invitation issued by the Chinese government departments, companies and social organisations authorised by the Chinese Foreign Ministry;
4. Appropriately stamped invitation letters issued by a relevant unit or individual, with information of applicant and inviting entity/individual and details of planned visit;
5. Letter of introduction from applicant's place of work detailing relevant personal information and purpose of visit;
6. Latest six months bank statements with minimum of ₦4 million deposit,⁹ and;
7. Any other documents deemed necessary by the Chinese embassy.

Depending on the number of entries requested and the duration of stay, visa costs range from a minimum of ₦8,000 (or \$50) to ₦24,000 (or \$150). Also, consular officers have the sole right to determine the visa validity period, number of entries and duration of stay, and may also alter or cancel issued visas without explanation.

Of the documents required for a visa application, item numbers 1, 2, and 5 were easily assembled. As a doctoral student without a job, item number 6 appeared preposterous. Item number 7 is a standard line in almost all embassies to give room for operational latitude. This could be ignored for now as its impact on my mobility could not be readily assessed. The difficulty with Chinese visa applications centres was on item numbers 3 and 4 since both cannot be obtained without interfacing with Chinese scholars and education institutions, preferably universities.

Being a member of a major Africa-China research network, I reached out to experienced researchers, including three senior Chinese researchers at universities in Beijing, Guangzhou, and Wuhan. In the two years that I

worked on mobility logistics, two other senior academics based in European and American universities but with strong ties to Chinese universities also helped.¹⁰ I exchanged several dozen emails over the two years and the responses were generally good, with most people expressing a willingness to help. Senior academics in Chinese universities were particularly responsive and helpful. Nevertheless, many long correspondences met a brick wall as the institutions could not supply me with the document I needed the most.

I obtained a police clearance and did an extensive medical investigation that included HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis B examinations and posted all the originals to China via a courier service. In all, I received five letters of invitation: two came from a renowned Chinese scholar based in Guangzhou; two from another Chinese scholar, the first while he was based in Guangzhou and the second when he moved to another university outside Guangzhou; the last one was issued by a young Chinese scholar who recently tenured in a Beijing university. Of course, the original letters arrived at different times through courier services. Also, prior to issuing some letters, I was told to prepare a plan of daily activities that spanned three months, stating where I would be at what time and what specific activities I planned to carry out.

When I approached the Chinese embassy in Lagos with the documents,¹¹ I found that my application could not be accepted without an ‘Original Invitation Letter of a Duly Authorised Unit’ (OILDAU) – item number 3. The OILDAU is issued by the Chinese Foreign Ministry (CFM) and the organisation or individual intending to invite a foreigner ought to apply for it. My interactions with Nigerians employed to check documents at the Chinese embassy and visa agents indicated that no application is processed without the OILDAU. With the back-and-forth exchanges with Chinese professors and helpers, the OILDAU would dominate our discussions and, at the same time, be a source of disappointment – and depression.

What is this OILDAU and why is it so obscure and out of reach? Most of the Chinese scholars I worked with were not aware of the so-called OILDAU. One professor approached the international affairs office of his university to make inquiries and was told that it would take several months to get it. Two other helpers said that the CFM was not issuing the documents to Nigerians.¹² The more I interfaced with these gatekeepers and those offering assistance in China, the clearer it became that, in the structure of mobility from Nigeria to China, the OILDAU is a best-kept industry secret.

Through the tangled process of assembling travel documents, I was advised to pursue other options. One of these was to register as a language student or for a year-long cultural programme that is supported by the government of China in Chinese universities. I had spent a lot of time on

my PhD already and there was still no guarantee that I would be selected for the programmes.¹³ Another worthwhile suggestion, which I had not thought of, was to explore, if available, the active Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) of my home university with universities in China. The University of Ibadan has an Office of International Programmes (OIP) which coordinates such affairs. The Director of the OIP agreed to meet me, and my interactions with her showed her readiness to assist.¹⁴ Unfortunately, the office had no MOU that would work for me. On the one hand, my university did not have a relationship with a university in Guangdong Province where I planned to do research. On the other hand, existing relationships were applicable to mobilities for exchange programmes targeting undergraduate students.

Informality and Chinese Visa Market Economy in Nigeria

While I explored ‘mobility options’, I maintained a constant presence in my academic department in Nigeria. I was stuck, and waiting in the sense of ‘waiting out a crisis’ (Hage 2009). In fact, my ‘directionlessness’ troubled a professor who tried to help by contacting a friend at Nigeria’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs. With his mobile phone on loudspeaker, I heard the contact express pessimism about the feasibility of getting the Chinese visa the ‘normal way.’ The alternative way he proposed would cost up to ₦800,000¹⁵ for a 30-day ‘M’ (business) visa but there was no guarantee. Of course, from my interactions with visa agents, I knew the cost was exaggerated, and that I would require less than that amount if I were to patronise the informal Chinese visa market.

Still willing to help, the same professor offered another way out of my visa problem. He encouraged me to pray as only God could resolve my visa problem. Given the fact that I had funding sources and travel experience, he believed my condition could not be left to the physical realm. As a strategy for navigating socially inexplicable occurrences, the professor suggested prayers. This suggestion is not surprising for two reasons. One, over my years as a graduate student, the professor had become familiar with my general disinterest in religion, and had, at different times, tried to get me to turn to Christianity. Second, and most crucially, religion, even in its transnational form, is a crucial part of the visa economy in Nigeria. As Obadare and Adebaniwi (2010) reveal, migration in Nigeria is treated as a spiritual phenomenon needing divine intervention. Traveling abroad, they continue, involves the services of traditional *juju* men, Islamic *Alfas* and Christian pastors and evangelists. The reliance on religion, they discover, is ‘...necessitated by the uncertainties built into both the particular process of getting entry visas...and with emigration from the country as a whole’ (Obadare & Adebaniwi 2010:36).

The informal Chinese visa market, with its extensive link to centres in China, is thriving in Nigeria. Researchers studying Africans' presence in China describe how the restrictive visa regime led to the rise of Chinese-run semi-legal or illegal visa agency services, often conducted in conjunction with state officials (Lan 2017). These agents help with visa renewals and arrange invitation letters for African visa applicants. They have a strong network with African visa entrepreneurs in big cities such as Lagos and Abuja. In my case, I learned that agents in Lagos are well integrated into the Chinese visa processing value chain. The visa processing framework recognise them officially as brokers whose primary role is to interface between prospective migrants and the Chinese embassy.

I had known the visa agents were a real option from the time I began planning for my fieldwork. However, I was struggling with whether I could trick myself into accepting an explanation that legitimises the option and that, at the same time, renders insignificant the potential legal, ethical and existential issues arising therefrom. Some of the questions I grappled with were: how do I to justify, to myself, the payment of \$2,000 for a service that costs \$50? Since the agents can only 'assist' with a business visa, am I a businessman? The second question is especially puzzling because, to apply for business visa, an applicant must prove that s/he is a businessperson. To make a businessperson out of you and 'package' you for the embassy, the agents must manufacture documents, especially introduction and invitation letters authenticating an applicant's status. The OILDAU from China must also carry corresponding information. I was worried that mobility through the informal visa market structure posed a threat to me directly. I was concerned that the visa black market economy could potentially invalidate my 'authentic scholarly identity'.

The uncertainties surrounding my situation at the time, and the urgency and responsibility to execute the project I had committed to, were being processed as the institutional clock tick-tocked. To settle into the path I was constrained to take, I convinced myself that I was only attempting to 'move within a moving environment' (Vigh 2009). To proceed, I rationalised the visa market as 'visa informality'. That reconstruction made my decision immediately relatable. As with Treiber (2014) who reasons that informality in migration is a typical mode of action in 'unprivileged migration', I resolved that having a business visa with the help of an agent was built into China's mobility system. It was my way of dealing with the dilemma of exclusion, I concluded. That is, still in Treiber's (2014:7) understanding, I interpreted the informal visa market as something that keeps the world accessible and manageable, that it is:

Difficult to classify informal praxis clearly into fraud, manipulation, circumvention or exploitation...that informality has become a decisive trait of unprivileged migration through our brutally asymmetric world (Treiber 2014:21).

Once I decided to go with visa agents, plans were set in motion. Of all the seven items listed as part of documentation, I submitted just three¹⁶ while the agent sourced the rest. Incredibly, the 'normal way' of obtaining visa took two years and failed; the 'not-normal way' produced a 30-day business visa in under a month.

Uncertainty and Risk: Entering the Field and Staying Safe in Guangzhou City

In the informal visa market, identity-switching and performance are critical to successful mobility. For the interview at the Chinese Embassy in Lagos, I was prepped by my agent to take on the identity of a businessman by internalising a set of business-like questions and their answers. Surprisingly, however, these questions were not revealed to me until the morning of the interview. Until that morning, I did not also know that I was travelling to Ningbo for business tourism along with four other staff members of a company that I did not know I worked at. As a performer in a group interview, I had to quickly learn who held which position. I learned fast but it was difficult remembering who the Director of our fictitious company was between the couple in my contingent.

Our agent was present all the way, pacing up and down the waiting area and the interview hall. When our time for interview came, the agent handed the documents to the consular officer who sat calmly behind a glass barrier. Even though my queue was short with just four or five persons ahead of me, it felt very long. My anxiety rose as I moved closer to the interviewer, wondering, unsure and fearful, while struggling to stay alert long enough to remember the information about our company and the staff members on 'our' business tour. I was surprised that the interview itself, which lasted for about a minute, was casual and non-intrusive.¹⁷

Having collected my visa, I presumed I was free. However, the worst part of the existential burden that follows from the condition of posing as a businessperson lies at the port of entry in Guangzhou, China. The Baiyun International Airport in Guangzhou is one of the busiest airports in the world, with connections to many Chinese cities through commerce and industry. Most Africans who arrived in China since the first decade of the twenty-first century came to Guangzhou and entered through Baiyun.

I arrived at the airport around evening and the immigration desk was not as intimidating as expected. Going through this checkpoint was smooth. I picked my bags and changed some money from a desk to the left. A Nigerian co-passenger, Adekunle,¹⁸ was by my side as we approached the exit area. Then a customs officer nudged us to a secondary checking area. Once the machine had scanned our bags again, we started to leave. Adekunle was ahead of me by a few steps. In no time, another officer popped up and asked where I came from, to which I responded: Nigeria. ‘So, you’re a Nigerian?’ he asked to confirm. I said ‘Yes’ again. From here on, the burden of an appropriated identity confronted me.

To start, there were a series of accusatory probes: ‘You know you Nigerians swallow drugs and bring into China?’ ‘Are you one of them?’ ‘What do you have in your stomach?’ I said food. ‘Are you sure it is food and not drugs?’ The officer continued with his interrogation. Noticing my absence, Adekunle returned to look for me but the officer told him that I was not his business. Later, he asked to know the purpose of my visit, and I said business. On his assessment, I did not look the part. For one, my outfit was casual: I wore a jacket over jeans with a T-shirt my girlfriend had given me just two days before as a birthday gift. I wore eye glasses and my moustache was long. My equally long hair was rough from the long journey to Guangzhou. Everything about my appearance contradicted the identity of a ‘businessman’. In his doubtfulness about my credentials as a businessman, he pressed on with more accusatory questions as follows:¹⁹

Officer: How much money do you have?

Me: \$500

Officer: You mean you are here on a business and all you have is \$500?

Me: Well that is the cash I have. I have a USD debit card with more money on it. I don’t have to carry cash.

Officer: What if you want to use the card and it doesn’t work? What will you do?

Me: Well you have ATM here, it should work. Do you want us to try?

Officer: Well I don’t believe you. What kind of business do you do?

Me: I sell bags.

Officer: So, you sell bag? Okay tell me how long you have been using this bag – pointing to my XYZ branded travelling bag.

Me: It’s been a while.

Officer: Tell me about the brand of the bag you’re carrying.

Me: I don’t know about this bag.

Officer: You mean to tell me that you're dealing with bags and you don't know about this brand? The brand is known all over the world! I feel there's something you're not telling me; is there something you're not telling me?

Suddenly, the excitement I felt after passing the immigration desk vanished. I was afraid and not being able to show my dread aggravated my anxiety. Was this the end of my fieldwork? I broached the thought of being thrown back on the plane as quickly as I had landed. I was prepared to confess, to show the letter of introduction I obtained from my university as proof of my real identity and actual purpose in China. I was busy in my thoughts while remaining calm, giving up nothing. After some minutes of interrogation, I told the officer that I had nothing more to say to him, when I, indeed, had more to tell him.

However, the officer, in his impatience, was sure I had illicit items like drugs tucked away inside my belly. He ordered me to present my luggage to a bigger machine for further scans. While the scan was happening, I looked away from the officer but kept him in sight. I was then guided to another machine to do a full body scan. They needed to check my stomach, just to be sure. Before I stepped in, I asked if I should take off my clothes, to which the officer responded in the negative. By now, another officer had joined us. With the bodily scrutiny complete, the second officer handed over my passport and told me to go. The interrogating officer was no longer in sight. The trip became smooth again. Adekunle was waiting for me outside the airport with a cigarette between his fingers. The night was cold. Throughout the bus ride, I stared at the second-hand bag I picked up in Lagos and wondered how it had transformed into an albatross.

Academic Im(mobility) and 'Africans in China' Studies: A Closing Reflection

In a world deeply unequal, where geography, position, racism, stigmatisation, othering and power relations determine and precondition the environment surrounding who gets 'out there' to do ethnography, the charge against 'armchair anthropologists' (Howell 2017) demands critical and refreshed scrutiny. The reality of borders in modern nation-states consigns to oblivion the essentialised assumptions of academic freedom that the charge of anti-armchair anthropology implies. We must acknowledge the global racial and power structure by asking and critiquing how academic freedom should be reckoned in the context of boundary and unequal mobility freedoms and restrictions.

In this article, I have highlighted that in the pursuit of ethnography data, certain structural factors and rules, both written and unwritten, are sources of contradictions. African researchers are trapped in a world that is closing as quickly as it is opening. The firm grip of states to control who is mobile or immobile strengthens the position of agents operating in the informal visa market. The structural constraints that precondition the extent of researchers' mobility sustain an economy that imbues the fieldwork process with 'existential threat'. I have shown that in the current order of 'epistemic things', academics share important characteristics with migrants generally. Precisely, I showed through my personal experience that academics are not so different after all – or instead that some are indeed different! I maintain that border constraints impact on the ability of African social scientists to make contributions towards understanding the lives and implications of the presence of Africans in the world.

With China's growing wealth and increasing presence in global affairs, the kinds of people moving to China from Africa have diversified. Migrant flows have come to include trade migrants who hope to reap rewards from China's economic prosperity and advanced commodity manufacture. Even more interesting are the economic migrants who have constructed and pursued what some have called 'China Dream' (Marfaing 2019). This brings more than transient African people; it is also producing a distinctive presence that is rapidly altering and transforming the outlook of the cities that Africans have moved to. In Guangzhou where the visibility of Africans is high, the people in the streets exhibit the extra dimension of Africa's blackness. Much like the state, local Chinese residents are noticing, and constructions and narratives of invasion are circulating with the worst forms surfacing online among Chinese netizens (Pfafman, Carpenter & Tang 2015; Wing-Fai 2015; Cheng 2011).²⁰ Offline, the problem of criminality fuels animosity towards specific African groups (Pang & Yuan 2013) despite the dynamic closeness that is occurring through work and interracial marriage.

As part of the African diasporisation and twenty-first century histories are constructed in China and other Asian countries, more issues will arise. Diasporas of Africans are part of the knowledge realm with which African researchers must engage. As one scholar observes, African studies and diaspora studies must be integrated with one another (Busia 2006). This view anticipates the need for African researchers to show an interest in, and do active research on, African diasporas, including those currently in formation in Asia. 'Africans in China' studies must also be considered an arm of Africa's historical formation, linked to past and future changes. In short, the presence

of Africans in China is an aspect of a history-making process. This endeavour should involve researchers working from everywhere, not only those privileged by global racial hierarchies or geographies of visa power which place African intellectuals at the bottom of the global knowledge system.

'Africans in China' is a critical part of Africa's postcolonial decolonisation project, where knowledge of Africa is co-produced, and debated through multi-perspectival lenses. Efforts should be, from the beginning, directed at guarding against African intellectuals becoming reactionaries against knowledges on Africa(ns) in China in the future. This is because, once documented, transmitted, reproduced, and institutionalised, the knowledge so produced becomes a power unto itself, which will require equal or more superior and aggressive knowledge-power to dethrone. This is not a pessimistic view of Africa's future as potential knowledge producer. Rather it anticipates that in the future, dissipating intellectual energies on reactionary epistemologies will be a waste, especially when opportunities exist in the present to co-produce knowledge. Moreover, the task of centring academic mobility in Africa-China strategic relations also offers an opportunity to reverse the dominance of the Western episteme in conditioning what Africa knows about China and other Asian countries. It would serve similar purposes in respect of what Africa/Africans knows about itself/themselves in Asia. So, why wait?

In all of this, African states must be responsible and responsive by funding graduate students and programmes focused on the study of Africans in the world.²¹ A concerted effort is needed to ensure that the funding of higher education is not outsourced as has been done for many decades. This step is critical in reducing the academic and epistemic dependency of the continent. Furthermore, there is a need to broaden the scope and content of academic freedom to accommodate academic mobility. The traditional view limited academic freedom to the freedom of intellectuals and educational institutions from state repression, university closures, thuggery, and ideological confinements (Mkandawire 1997). To advance the integration of academic mobility into academic freedom, there should be an acknowledgement that Africans in the world beyond the African continent are a part of the story of Africa. We must also agree that the translation of the stories into knowledge of Africa(ns) must involve the active participation of African researchers, especially those based in African universities.²² Finally, ensuring that African scholarship should not be silenced, as Mkandawire (1997) worries, requires a continent-wide commitment to opening the world to African scholars and researchers at all levels through advocacy, collaboration and social and political engagements. 'Knowing the world', an

attitude which Africa must cultivate to meaningfully engage in the rapidly transforming global society, demands being out there in that same world. Academic mobility is central to achieving this.

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Notes

1. Only eight of the total number of respondents (n=42) were Africans. One respondent called for ‘thoughtfulness around the visa challenges facing people from African countries...[,] that this is an impediment to the quality of research to Africa-China studies’ (Lu and Huang, 2018:4).
2. This refers simply to (in)ability or (in)capability to move freely across national borders in pursuit of intellectual or scholarly engagements such as conferences, collaborative meetings and to conduct ethnographic fieldwork. In the case of African researchers, being able to move cross-continently is emphasised. ‘Academic (im)mobility’ in this article should be differentiated from other uses of the term, e.g. Sivak and Yudkevich (2015) where it is used as ‘academic in-breeding’ (see Dutton 1980).
3. This reflects a pre-Covid-19 condition of the world. The Covid-19 pandemic will likely worsen the situation and further impose more immobilities on African migrants. With the adoption of vaccine certificates in the European Union and the possibility that vaccination in many African countries will take several years to reach the mass of the population, African migrants in general and scholars in particular will likely remain grounded in place for much longer than their counterparts in more economically advanced societies.
4. See, for example, Canadian Association of African Studies (2018) and Grounds (2019)
5. Britz and Ponelis (2012) interestingly reference a key international instrument that seeks to affirm the right to pursue intellectual activities without hinder-

- ance – the Kampala Declaration in 1990. At the summit where the Kampala Declaration was agreed and in similar meetings, academic (im)mobility was framed as an impediment to academic freedom of movement (p. 471).
6. Prior to my research on Nigerians in Guangzhou, two (that I know of) PhD-level ethnographic research projects were conducted outside Nigeria, all within West Africa. The longstanding ECOWAS agreement guarantees the free movement of citizens between member states within the sub-region and visas are not required for the researchers to move within the sub-region.
 7. I was awarded the Postgraduate School Scholarship Scheme from the Postgraduate School of the University of Ibadan. The award covers a substantial part of tuition fees and gives a monthly stipend of approximately \$270 (July 2014 rate).
 8. See <http://lagos.china-consulate.org/eng/lszj/zgqz/t1090583.htm>, accessed 15 May, 2015.
 9. Approximately \$25,000 at the 2015 exchange rate.
 10. One was Swiss and the other a Nigerian professor. The Nigerian professor did not have a direct link to China but he recommended an American colleague with decades of research collaboration with a Chinese university.
 11. For item number 6 (bank statement), I approached senior scholars and friends to raise the needed cash to ‘beef up’ my account. Personally, I converted US dollars from my account to Naira to further jack up the deposit, since, according to visa agents, the Chinese consular officers want to see the Naira not the US dollars.
 12. In one case, after series of exchanges and documentation from August 8 to November 30, 2016, I received the following response: ‘Hello XYZ, How are you recently? Thank you for your care. Sorry, I must tell you a bad news. Because of limits of China’s government policy to Nigeria, staffs in the office cannot give you a visa. I hope your things is OK. Sorry [crying emoji]. Best regards, ABC (Personal email correspondence, November 30, 2016)
 13. I arrived in Guangzhou to find that not considering this option had been wise. A number of Nigerians in the city told me that enrolling for Chinese language programmes is tough. Many Chinese universities in Guangzhou are realising that some Nigerians enrol in the programmes to obtain long-term visas that let them stay in the city while mainly doing business without much hassle from the security agencies.
 14. An assistant was assigned to plough through all active MOU with Chinese schools. The status of a number of MOUs could not be determined by the OIP.
 15. Approximately \$5,000 based on the mid-year 2016 conversion rate.
 16. Passport photo, international passport and personal bank statement.
 17. I went through this routine a second time to finalise my fieldwork. This time, however, my agent said I had a registered company named ‘XYZ International’ and I was visiting China as the Director to make business contacts. So, I interviewed as an individual applicant.

18. Not his real name.
19. Based on memory recall after I left the airport.
20. This reality is manifested in the most alarming form with the outbreak of Covid-19 in China. See Africans in China Face Evictions, Discrimination – Report (<https://allafrica.com/view/group/main/main/id/00072795.html>); Will African Migration to China Ever Be the Same Again? (<https://allafrica.com/view/group/main/main/id/00072993.html>). 4 June 2021.
21. While African states have damaged African higher education through the infusion of destructive neo-liberal ideas and policies, their role and participation remains crucial in facilitating mobility-linked academic freedom in Africa.
22. This “going out” into the world should not be limited to the study of African diaspora alone. African researchers with an interest in learning about other societies should also be able to do so without the hindrances of borders, race, passports, nationality and other such issues. I thank the peer reviewer for raising this important point.

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