



International student mobility as “aspiration on the go”: stories from African students at a Chinese university

Daisy Binfang Wu¹ · Song Hou²

Accepted: 24 April 2022 / Published online: 26 July 2022
© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature B.V. 2022

Abstract

This article examines international student mobility (ISM) as a process of “aspiration on the go” for African students in China—a burgeoning yet under-researched international student flow. Drawing on 15 months of fieldwork at a Chinese university, we present ethnographic case studies of African students that unveil their varied aspirations for travelling to study in China and, more importantly, reflect the diversity and dynamics of their aspirations on the go in confrontation with the realities they have encountered during their stay. We demonstrate that students’ aspirations might be preserved, transformed, reconfigured, placed on hold or go well to realisation, each of which impacts their ISM navigation, such as decisions to leave, to stay or to move to another university/country. We argue that adopting a dynamic and processual approach is important for rethinking international student aspirations and mobilities, in that it not only identifies nuances that diversify our understanding of what international education may mean for different individuals—especially for those from less-privileged backgrounds in an ISM flow within the Global South—but also bridges such binaries as imagination and reality, promise and precarity and structural force and agency that are usually treated separately in the literature of ISM.

Keywords International student mobility · Aspiration · Aspiration on the go · African students · China · Ethnography · Educational migration

Introduction

Via a three-stop flight, Victor¹ travelled from a West African city to start his undergraduate study at a Chinese university. At registration, he was required to pay the first academic year’s tuition and fees, CNY 12,800 (about USD 1950). This devastated him, for he had been told by the local agency handing his application that he was awarded a full scholarship to attend this university. He could not afford this amount, nor did he have money to

¹ All names of research participants in this article are pseudonyms.

✉ Song Hou
housong@stu.edu.cn

¹ School of Foreign Languages, Zhejiang University of Science and Technology, Hangzhou, China

² College of Liberal Arts, Shantou University, 243 Daxue Rd., Shantou, Guangdong, China

return home. He had used up all his savings and money borrowed from family members to travel to China. Victor recounted this ordeal to the first author when she first met him on campus. The first author could see the worried expression on Victor's face when he handed her his admission letter. She soon noticed that the scholarship box therein was not ticked, confirming that he was a self-sponsored student. Victor was not alone: another six of his compatriots had been cheated in the same way. They had contacted their embassy in Beijing but received little promise of aid. Three weeks after his arrival, Victor had to return home, with the airline tickets purchased with money donated to him by the international students at the university.

This vignette exemplifies how the trajectory of international student mobility (ISM) may unfold in rather unexpected ways. In this case, Victor had to return home without being able to begin his education. His transnational mobility, together with whatever aspirations he had for it, was placed on hold if not permanently terminated. This might be an unusual case, but it well indicates the stratification, mutability, and diversity of ISM. Accordingly, ISM studies should address not only what aspirations motivate students to travel abroad for higher education but also what occurs when their aspirations confront adversities and realities in the host country and how such confrontations influence ISM trajectory navigation. Students may have to travel back home with their aspirations put on hold; they may be able to realise their aspirations; or they may have to revise, shift and/or reconfigure their aspirations in order to transform ISM trajectories.

However, such dynamics of ISM aspiration and trajectory navigation have been largely neglected in extant scholarship. In understanding why certain countries are chosen as study-abroad destinations and what meanings are attached to these choices, aspiration is often taken as a static and unwavering projection of the future. In this article, we attempt to approach ISM a lively process of what might be called “aspiration on the go”. In doing so, we examine not only what students aspire to gain from ISM but also how they navigate their aspirations in the country of education. Specifically, we focus on students from African countries who travel to China, a burgeoning yet under-researched ISM flow that connotes much geo-political significance (Ferdjani, 2012; Haugen, 2013; Mulvey, 2021a, b).

Drawing on 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork, this article examines how a cohort of African students at a Chinese university experience their aspirations on the go while encountering the adversities and realities of life in China. As we will show, these students hold a variety of aspirations for their educational trajectories in China, such as becoming well-paid professionals, conducting transnational business and attaining long-term migration status. We will also show, however, that these aspirations are not static but are variously (dis-)continued, realised, transformed and/or reconfigured as the students confront challenges in a new environment, all of which in turn have an impact on the trajectories of ISM. Through recounting African students' stories, this article explores the dynamic, contingent, and processual nature of international students' aspirations as well as how they navigate educational mobilities. We are attentive to the struggles and agentive subjectivities of these students in such an ISM flow from “periphery” to “semi-periphery” or within the Global South (Ho, 2017; Mulvey, 2021b) under the economic, legal and geopolitical constraints.

In what follows, we will first present a critical review of ISM studies pertaining to aspiration. Next, we propose “aspiration on the go” as a conceptual framework for rethinking ISM. This is followed by a methodological section, specifying the ethnographic field-site, participants, methods, and data analysis used in this study. The following three sections narrate the experiences of African students at a Chinese university. We detail the contradictions many students faced between the aspired to and the experienced, as well as the

impact of such disjunctures on the trajectories of ISM. Finally, we discuss how this ethnographic study enriches our understanding of ISM by highlighting the dynamic interactions between imagination and reality, promise and precarity, and structural force and agency. We conclude with the suggestion of two directions for future research.

ISM: from aspirations to “aspiration on the go”

Why students travel abroad for higher education is one of the most discussed issues in ISM studies and is often examined through the lenses of motivation, plan or choice (e.g., Bamber, 2014; Findlay et al., 2017; Pyvis & Chapman, 2007). The concepts of aspiration and desire are also used by some scholars. In this article, we prefer the term aspiration as it suggests a more balanced sense of rationality, subjectivity, and ambition. To go beyond using the term often as shorthand for “what international students want” (see for example Kim, 2011), we draw on Harrison and Waller’s (2018, p. 917) understanding of aspiration to conceptualise it as a “contextualised,” positive self-concept that involves constructions of “future possible identities, situations or ways of being”. It is well documented that students undertake ISM with manifold economic, social-cultural, and psychological “aspirations”, for instance, to procure positional advantage for future employment and career development (Bamber, 2014; Pyvis & Chapman, 2007), to accrue global cultural capital and maintain class prestige (Brooks & Waters, 2011, p. 60; Waters, 2008), to immigrate to the countries of study (Robertson, 2013; Tran, 2016), to attain an international outlook and cosmopolitan orientation (Oikonomidou, 2019; Pyvis & Chapman, 2007), and to seek adventure or happiness (Waters et al., 2011).

However, as Zhou (2015, p. 720) pinpoints, most studies of international students focus on “the period of making mobility decisions prior to the study” and students’ experiences of aspiration maintenance “from entry to completion have been much less examined”. Commenting on the research on international students in China, Yang (2018b, p. 253) notes that scholars tend to concentrate “narrowly on the educational and intercultural experiences for students who are already in the country”. These seemingly contradictory observations highlight an important gap in research on the possible incongruities between what ISM means in students’ aspiring projection of the future (e.g., Brooks & Waters, 2011; Carlson, 2013; Mulvey, 2021a) and how intercultural and international education are experienced in the countries of study (e.g., Dervin et al., 2018; Oikonomidou, 2019). While the former line of research usually takes aspiration as static and stable, the latter often underemphasises or neglects the influence of aspiration. Even in those few studies that address both facets, the dynamic interactions between the two appear to be little examined (see for example Bamber, 2014).

ISM aspirations, as subjective and future-oriented constructions of possible “ways of being” (Harrison & Waller, 2018, p. 917) or “possible selves” (Henderson et al., 2018), are neither immutable nor insignificant in students’ experiences of ISM. Yang (2016), for example, explores ISM as a process of academic and social sojourning, showing how Chinese foreign talent students in Singapore experience their socially conditioned “educational desires” being met, frustrated, or transformed. Zhou (2015) examines how international PhD students at a US university with divergent aspirations maintain motivation to complete their studies, despite meeting challenges of socialisation and other difficulties. Zhou’s study may not demonstrate aspirational shift or transformation, but it indicates that aspirations need to be actively preserved against challenges: in other words, aspirations are not static or stable. Moreover,

Carlson (2013) contends that even the making of ISM aspiration is itself dynamic. Studying abroad is often not the result of a one-time choice-making but the outcome of various biographical and social processes.

Research exploring the dynamic nature of aspiration in higher education studies (Alpay et al., 2008; Etmanski, 2019) and migration studies (Boccagni, 2017; Carling & Collins, 2018; Wang & Chen, 2021) is robust. For example, Alpay et al. (2008) shows that many engineering students' initial aspirations such as "making a difference to the world" (p. 581) diminish with time; students become more concerned about issues such as financial security. Etmanski (2019) examines the preservation and transformation of doctoral students' academic career aspirations throughout their course of study in US universities, finding that gender and the field of study are two important factors relevant to aspiration changes. In his study of immigrant domestic workers in Italy, Boccagni (2017) finds that these workers' initial aspirations are open to "the systematic postponement, 'downsizing' or 'displacement'" (p. 2) as they face reality checks over time. In addition, Wang and Chen (2021) show how aspirations of the Western scholars working in Sino-foreign universities are nurtured, exercised and reconfigured in "an ongoing emotional unfolding to disruptions, frustrations and redefinitions" (p. 3438). Migration aspirations, as they state, are "highly fluid and constantly being transformed across time" (p. 3440).

Taking insights from the above studies, we contend that international students' aspirations are never settled once for all, but are "constantly generated, exercised and reconfigured across time" (Wang & Collins, 2020, p. 574). To capture this, we propose the term "aspiration on the go"² as an analytical perspective on ISM. This is meant to describe the dynamic and "temporally distributed" (Wang & Collins, 2020, p. 573; see also Boccagni, 2017; Collins, 2018) nature of aspirations for international students and their associated mobility trajectories in order to understand how aspiring students experience ISM vis-à-vis their subjective (re-)constructions of possible selves in the host country. With this concept, we aim to illuminate the dynamics of ISM when students' aspirations meet realities: how these aspirations are sustained, intensified, adjusted, lessened, diminished, revised, transformed, shifted, and more. In other words, we are concerned with how students' aspirations are on the move towards divergent paths over the period of their educational mobilities and how this further (re-)shapes the trajectory of ISM, leading to decisions such as to stay (longer, shorter, or as planned), to change (subject of study, university, or country) or to return home.

This concept resonates with Tran's (2016) theorisation of transnational educational mobility as "becoming", which emphasises the transformative potentials of ISM. As she argues, students seek to move abroad to "transform their life possibilities" and "'become' the kind of person, professional or citizen that they aspire to be" (p. 1269). Connecting aspirations with realities and highlighting international students' (re-)projections of possible selves in multiple temporalities of mobility, this concept also echoes Lipura and Collins (2020) in calling for an "integrative understanding" that transcends some emerged binaries in ISM studies.

Methodology

This article is based on research with African students at a Chinese university. The focus of African students is not meant to imply that they are a homogeneous population or do not deserve to be studied in relation to individual countries. In the context of an ethnographic study limited to one university, this focus was a strategic choice for the fieldwork.

² It is inspired by Holliday's (2013) concept of "small culture formation on the go" that foregrounds a fluid approach to "the everyday business of engaging with and creating culture" (p.56) in intercultural communication.

Throughout this paper, when generic terms such as “African students” are used, they are mostly umbrella words referring to what our study covers and to extend a dialogue with the scholarship on African students in China. We have no intention of generalising and/or essentialising a large population of students with great diversity and heterogeneity.

We adopted an ethnographic approach for this research project because it is well suited to revealing the complexity and dynamics of international students’ aspirations and mobility navigation via relatively long-term participant-observation and engagement. The first author conducted 15 months (from September 2018 to November 2019) of inconsecutive fieldwork at the Chinese university, which is referred to as Friendship for ethical considerations. Since 2000, Friendship has witnessed growing numbers of international students from African countries, especially from the ones where it collaboratively establishes Confucius Institutes with local African universities.

The participants of this project are twenty-one undergraduate and postgraduate students, sixteen males and five females. The gender imbalance of the participants reflects the fact that male African student outnumbers female student at Friendship. While we do not examine how gender affects participants’ aspirations on the go, we recognise that gender is a critical consideration. Its exclusion may represent a limitation of this study. Nevertheless, we believe our findings contribute critical insights into the dynamics of students’ aspirations and how they experience ISM. In this paper, we report on Victor and six others. These students were chosen not to represent African students from their respective countries or the entire African student group at Friendship, but to show the varied forms of “aspiration on the go” and divergent ISM trajectory navigation that emerged from this study. These participants, with ages ranging from late teens to early twenties, were met and recruited in classrooms, university cafeterias, and other campus-related locations or activities. Three of them received Chinese government scholarships (two full-scholarships and one half-scholarship) and the rest were self-sponsored. At Friendship, overseas students are not eligible for student loans or other financial aids from Chinese sources, but they can participate in the fierce competition to win the annual scholarship awarded to students with outstanding academic performance.

The seven participants reported here might be considered less-privileged compared to those “global middle class” students who are “affluent and globally oriented in their lifestyle and mobility patterns” (Koo, 2016, p. 441) as described in many ISM studies (e.g., Brooks & Waters, 2011, p. 46; Kim, 2011; Waters, 2008). The two full-scholarship students sent half of their stipends home to contribute to family livelihood every month. Despite having his tuition fees waived, the half-scholarship recipient had to take on part-time jobs to support himself, which is legally prohibited for overseas students in China. To attend Friendship, three self-sponsored students had borrowed money from their extended family members and/or friends to pay the tuition fees. Additionally, most of these participants chose to stay on campus instead of going home to visit family and friends during vacations in order to save on travel expenses. By focusing on these students, we then wish to contribute to ISM scholarship that has centred predominantly on affluent, globally oriented middle-class students while marginalised others.

The data were collected through methods of (participant) observations, field notes/diaries, photographs, informal interviews, and semi-structured interviews. The research was conducted mostly in English, the primary language of the participants. Sometimes Chinese was used as an alternative if the participant preferred. In this article, we largely draw on the data from field notes/diaries and semi-structured interviews. Diaries/notes were kept so as to record the daily observations and unplanned conversations during interactions throughout the fieldwork. Interviews were conducted with each of the participants and lasted

approximately 1 h. They were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim (translated for the Chinese parts). We then followed Braun and Clarke (2006) to conduct a six-phase thematic analysis of data. To best capture the dynamic nature of participants' aspirations, we shall present stories to show how their aspirations on the move led them towards different paths during their stay.

Placed on hold: when aspirations for engineering careers meet financial constraints

Charlie and Bill came from Liberia, and they had just begun their 4-year undergraduate programme, computer science and technology, when the first author met them. One month after registration, they were required to collect their passports from the city migration station. The first author was invited to accompany them for language facilitation. On their walk to the station, the students were asked about their aspirations to study at Friendship. Both expressed that they wanted to be engineers. As they explained, engineers were well-paid professionals in their home countries. As the conversation went on, it turned out that they both had been raised by single-parent mothers. They aspired to become professionals with a decent salary to alleviate their family living conditions and make their mothers proud. This resonates with Ho's (2017, p.18) observation that, "African students move to China not only for acquiring Chinese educational credentials, but also to enhance the household's economic prospects."

The aspiration of becoming well-paid professionals is prevalent not only among students like Charlie and Bill moving from African nations to China (Ho, 2017; Mulvey, 2021a) but also among students in other ISM flows, for instance, those travelling from Hong Kong to Canada (Waters, 2008). Students travelling from Africa to China, however, represent an expanding population. With growing intensive economic and educational engagement in Africa over the past two decades, China has emerged as an alternative to the West as a place to which African students can direct such an aspiration. The appeal of travelling to China for aspirational education opportunities affords African middle-class students the opportunity to "accumulate cultural capital derived from the Chinese urban experience that together with a Chinese university degree" and to reproduce "social difference and class stratification" (Ho, 2017, p. 18). China's "moderate tuition fees [and] low living costs" (Haugen, 2013, p. 316) as well as generous scholarship offers (Mulvey, 2021a, pp. 5–6) are also attractive to many students from less-privileged backgrounds who seek chances to transform their social-economic status.

Nevertheless, the aspiring future of being an engineer might become fragile if these students' financial support falls unstable. As self-funded students, Charlie and Bill relied on the financial resources from their families to fund their travel to and education at Friendship. Unfortunately, Charlie's mother was laid off several weeks after his arrival, and Bill's mother could not provide more support to him after purchasing his one-way aeroplane ticket. These students became vulnerable to the financial difficulties placed on them. Charlie expressed his concern as follows:

My grandfather paid my tuition, but just for this [academic] year. He said he won't pay it for the next year. There are some misunderstandings between my mother and my grandfather. My mother lost her job [at grandfather's company] and she is looking for a new one.

Without his grandfather's continuous support for his tuition and his mother's buttress for daily expenses, Charlie's aspirations and ISM were in danger. He could not even afford to feed himself. After paying the visa fees with the money sent by his mother, he had not

much left to purchase food. He was unsure about when he would receive a stipend again. As he confessed in another conversation, drinking water was his strategy to cope with the deprivation of food. He would be sometimes invited by friends for a meal, but his life was filled with anxiety, uncertainty, and hunger. Such feelings also permeated the life of Bill. He had soon used up the money he saved. Without further steady financial support, Bill also found himself struggling to make ends meet and was barely able to feed himself.

In this case, aspiring to be an engineer had motivated Charlie and Bill to participate in the ISM flow to a Chinese university. When their aspirations met the reality of financial constraints and living with hunger in a foreign country where they were not legally permitted to work, they fell into struggle to survive. However, they had tried their best to keep their aspirations going. As revealed in conversations with them, they would listen attentively to the lectures. After class, they would head to the library to finish assignments. They would sometimes excuse themselves from talking to the first author for a long time and hurried to study. In short, Charlie and Bill took their studies seriously and worked hard.

Unfortunately, both dropped out when the second academic year began. Though they still had the courage to study hard with oftentimes empty stomachs, they had failed to obtain the scholarship granted to students of excellent academic performance and could not find other means to pay their tuition. Charlie could only turn to his mother, who was yet not paid well enough at her new job to finance his tuition. Bill also failed to solicit enough funding. In the end, with money donated by their classmates, friends, and congregants from the church they attended during their stay, they purchased air tickets to return home.

This is a sad and painful story of students who arduously kept their aspirations on the go while contending with financial constraints. While China has become a desirable ISM destination for its growing value of credentials, relatively cheap tuition, and low living costs for African students, it is still not a harbour of financial security for all. Some self-sponsored students from financially deprived backgrounds do not have sufficient considerations of the problems they might face in Chinese universities, similar to what Irungu (2013, p. 174) has observed of African international students in the USA, where some students' families and communities believe that "once a student is in America, money will no longer be an issue". In China, a belief like this can be perilous.

Nonetheless, despite socio-economic and legal constraints that led them to precarious and uncertain situations while studying abroad, Charlie and Bill had tried hard to maintain their aspirations and fought bravely for an elevated future. But these constraints were too strong for them to overcome, and they were forced to place their aspirations on hold and end their ISM. In such cases, mobilities and educational journeys may "result in a way of curtailing aspirations, rather than nourishing them" (Boccagni, 2017, pp.12–13; see also Alpay et al., 2008, p. 583), and ISM may sometimes become more of a precarity than a privilege. The stories of Charlie and Bill clearly show how international students' aspirations on the go may break down under financial constraints, which further changes the expected ISM trajectory.

Realised or transformed: when aspirations for entrepreneurship meet the hardship of starting up a transnational business

Samuel and Sarah were postgraduate students from Sudan and Togo, respectively. Samuel was studying teaching Chinese as a foreign language, and Sarah was enrolled in a maths programme. However, both aspired to conduct transnational trade. When the first author enquired of his aspiration, Samuel responded in fluent Chinese:

Business! I'm honest. I don't want to do the teaching work. I don't want to work for others. I want to fight for myself, for my own business.

Such an aspiration is also reflected in Sarah's account. In her words, it was the reason she chose China and specifically Friendship as her study-abroad destination. When having in hand two offers with a full scholarship, one from an Indian university and the other from Friendship, she chose the latter with an understanding that studying in China would provide her with more business opportunities. As she said, "I can bring something to sell back to my country."

The aspirations of Samuel and Sarah were in a sense contradictory to what they chose to study: neither had applied for business school nor a programme relevant to business. Samuel explained that speaking fluent Chinese would be crucial for him to conduct business. For Sarah, her choice was a strategy to improve the chances of being admitted to Friendship because her undergraduate major was maths. In this regard, the business opportunities provided by China's trade with African countries appears to be a key motivation for some students to move from African nations to China (Mulvey, 2021a, p. 7). As Haugen (2013, pp. 325–326) describes, there are African "traders-turned students" who apply for a university programme in order to obtain a student visa for a longer stay in China so they can conduct business and African "family firm trainees" who are funded by family or a relative to study at Chinese universities while helping the family with trade (see also Ho, 2017, pp. 22–23).

Indeed, Samuel and Sarah are just two among many African students holding such an aspiration. Many participants in this project confirmed that the business linkage between China and their home countries was not only reported in media but was experienced daily in their local markets. Many of them desired to participate in and gain profits from such business affordances. Although research shows that the volume of commodity trade between countries can facilitate the flow of ISM (Wei, 2013), the aspiration of doing business between the home and host country has rarely been charted in ISM studies.

How would the participants keep their aspirations going while studying in programmes that are irrelevant (or at least tangential) to business? Samuel noted that he used the business networks he had established with the help of his elder brother, a businessman who had been importing Chinese goods to local markets for years. During his first 2 years at Friendship, Samuel arranged to ship goods to his brother. This helped him gain knowledge about the Chinese market and develop networks with businesspersons both in China and Sudan. He also joined an online socialisation group consisting of Sudanese businesspersons in different Chinese cities. He benefited from the conversations and information shared there; for example, he learned how to solve the problems encountered in doing business with Chinese entrepreneurs. Additionally, with the assistance of his established networks, Samuel had internships in Africa-China trade companies during his vacations. With these experiences, he started his own business in the third year of his study, and months later, he informed the first author that he began to receive orders from his customers. This indicates that Samuel's aspirations had gone well towards realisation.

By contrast, Sarah gave up on her aspirations after a year of unsuccessful trying. As a newcomer, Sarah did not have any of the assistance or networks that Samuel fortunately had. She had undertaken many explorations to find profitable commodities to sell to intermediaries in Togo, but unsuccessful. During her first year of stay at Friendship, Sarah often travelled to a local market near the campus on weekends to search for goods. Several months later, Sarah expressed that conducting transnational business was not as easy as she had thought. Satisfying her customers' needs for goods of high quality but cheap price

was hard. However, she said she would keep on trying. One interesting thing to note is that Sarah insisted on speaking Chinese during informal conversations and interviews. She was also convinced that proficiency in Chinese would facilitate her business work. Despite all these efforts, she made little progress in realising her aspirations. In the last visit to the field-site, the first author was told by Sarah that she nurtured a new aspiration—to go to France to study for another post-graduate programme. She explained:

Going to France is easy for us [French speakers] because we don't need to prove our language abilities. Studying in France also requires tuition fees, but for public universities, they don't charge much.

Sarah is a fluent French speaker, which influenced the redirection of her ISM to France with a new aspiration. This is not an uncommon path for African students from former colonies. As Wang and Collins (2018, p. 576) find, aspirations are potentially “enhanced by different experiences such that instances of migration can lead to aspirations and actions towards future migration”, and for African students, this may also be related to “past colonial and new neo-colonial structures of power” (Ho, 2017, p. 29).

The aspiration of becoming a businessperson had mobilised Samuel and Sarah to attend a Chinese university for postgraduate education, though the programmes they attended did not clearly fit with their ultimate goals. However, experimenting with participation in China-Africa trade pushed their aspirations in different directions. Building up experiences and networks to run his own business with a successful start, Samuel's aspirations had been going smoothly on the track towards realisation. However, Sarah gave up after a series of unsuccessful attempts and subsequently transformed to embrace a new aspiration. As different individuals might have different family backgrounds, social networks and “evolving and changing terms of reference” (Boccagni, 2017, p. 15), such divergence in paths of aspiration on the go and ISM navigation are not unanticipated.

ISM scholars have shown that international students' aspirations and choices of studying abroad were complicatedly shaped by their backgrounds, experiences, language proficiencies and many other personal, familial, and social factors (Bamber, 2014; Waters et al, 2011; Yang, 2016). The stories of Samuel and Sarah demonstrate that these factors also influence their aspirations on the go. If these factors are favourable, students may find that their aspirations progress well. Otherwise, aspirations may transform. It is important to note that this does not mean that some African students are less capable or agentive than others in managing their aspirations on the go. ISM, as a process of “becoming”, unfolds within individual students' developing perspectives, “their imagining of the future life chances, their awareness of the ‘possibles’ and particularly their dynamic interaction with the broader world shaping [transnational trade] practices” (Tran, 2016, p. 1279).

Persisted or reconfigured: when aspirations for migration meet stringent policy

Another aspiration of the participants in this study is seeking long-term migration. Jim and John were two students with such an aspiration. Jim came from Republic of Congo, whilst John was from Rwanda. They both were studying international trade. In casual conversations with Jim, he occasionally expressed his “dream” of having a Chinese wife. When asked why, he would respond, “don't you want me to stay?” With rapport developed with him, it gradually became clear to the first author that this dream was connected to his aspirations of migrating to China. Jim said:

I want to stay in China. Don't you know Africans travel for migration? When Africans travel to other countries, they don't want to go back [...] Because the living conditions in African countries are not so good; roads can be muddy, and we don't have high-speed trains like yours.

These words reflect what Jim thought transnational mobility means for most Africans. This might not be accurate of every African who moved out of their home country, and not even of every African student at Friendship, but this statement can be read as an indication that long-term migration is one of the aspirations motivating some African students to study at Friendship. Additionally, John similarly expressed that he aspired to seek migration opportunities to China because it is more “developed.”

Jim and John's plans for migration resonate with research showing that in ISM flows, in particular to Anglophone Western countries, international student aspirations of long-term residence and migration to these destinations are common (e.g., Robertson, 2013; Tran, 2016). However, few studies have observed this aspiration in ISM flows to periphery or semi-periphery countries. As Yang (2018b, p. 253) notes, “we know as yet very little about how studying in China intersects with migration objectives and/or trajectories for international students”. Compared to many Western countries, ISM to China is much easier for African applicants (Ferdjani, 2012); but it is more difficult for them to secure permanent residence, as China has not yet officially established an “education-migration nexus” (Robertson, 2013) to retain highly skilled or talent foreign graduates to the country. It is argued that China's international student recruitment is intended to promote higher education internationalisation, to educate “seed talent” for other nations and to improve China's soft power and geo-political standing (Wu, 2019, p. 83). Given this, how do the participants manage their aspirations of long-term migration on the go?

As they gained more information, Jim and John came to understand that China is not a migrant country. Jim's plan of migrating to China via marriage also did not progress well. He sometimes acknowledged his frustration at being declined by Chinese females with whom he tried to develop a romantic relationship. However, he did not give up his aspirations. Finishing his master's programme, he was busy applying for a doctoral study at different Chinese universities. He hoped that this would give him more time and chances to realise his dream. By contrast, John's aspirations went on a different path. He decided to change his strategy, shifting to seek possibilities of migration to Sweden. He explained that it was too difficult for him to meet the requirements of China's permanent residence grant, but that for Sweden, it would be easier. His decision to change the migration destination was affected by his experienced precarities of working part-time beyond legal constraints and having a friend in Sweden. John stated:

My friend is in Sweden. He is telling me Sweden is good. If you get work, then the salary is good, the money, then the way of living is good, so you can get a working visa easily, not like here in China [...] I'm afraid one day the police would catch me, if they catch [me], they will deport me.

John relied on his part-time jobs to support his living at Friendship. As noted earlier, this was illegal. John was cognisant of this danger. Experiencing such jeopardy and perceiving difficulties in migrating to China, John reconfigured his aspiration of migration to a new target country, as he learned from his friend it has more friendly migration policies and better salaries. In the second year of his study, John informed the first author that he received an offer from a Swedish university for a master's programme and was applying for a visa to Sweden.

As we can see, Jim and John's ISM to Friendship was embedded within a longer-term migration project. While it is increasingly difficult to obtain student visas to many Western countries, China holds a comparatively welcoming attitude towards African students (Ferdjani, 2012, p. 12). This may lead to a wrong impression that China also welcomes immigrants from Africa. In Jim and John's case, they came to understand that seeking long-term immigration to China was difficult after their arrival. Nonetheless, they did keep their aspirations going, though on different paths. As demonstrated, while Jim was looking for opportunities for doctoral study to further his ISM stay to persist his weathered aspiration of migrating to China, John maintained his aspiration but revised its destination, turning China into a springboard for migration to Sweden. This suggests that when students' aspirations of long-term migration meet the realities of stringent policies in the host countries, different paths of ISM navigation possibly unfold. These divergent forms of aspiration maintenance reflect students' different hopes for the future and agentive subjectivities as they navigate a complex terrain abroad. ISM entails "imagining and practice of 'becoming'" (Tran, 2016, p. 1280), with which students negotiate their aspirations and ways of being in the world.

Discussion and conclusion

In this study, we have presented stories of African students at a Chinese university to show the dynamics and diversity of their aspirations on the go and their divergent pathways of ISM navigation. Travelling to China for higher education, these students aspired to become well-paid engineers, to conduct transnational business and to seek opportunities for long-term migration. Among these aspirations, conducting business between China and their home countries appears to be unique in this ISM flow within the Global South. Critically, however, we have demonstrated that the aspirations of African students are not static or stable. They are instead dynamic and mutable and may move on divergent trajectories over time. Confronting varying realities in China, the students found that their aspirations are placed on hold, realised, transformed, persisted and/or reconfigured, each of which then leads to different paths of ISM navigation, such as returning home, preparing for staying longer or travelling to another country/university.

The study highlights that international students' aspirations should not be read merely as a "'choice' that individuals make about the best present action to achieve future goals" (Wang & Collins, 2020, p. 574) prior to the initiation of ISM (cf. Bamber, 2014; Kim, 2011; Pyvis & Chapman, 2007). As one type of migrant, international students may have their aspirations articulated with multiple temporalities in the migratory process of experiencing ISM. Following researchers in recent migration studies (e.g., Boccagni, 2017; Carling & Collins, 2018; Collins, 2018; Wang & Chen, 2021; Wang & Collins, 2020), we argue that ISM scholars need "a time-sensitive understanding" (Boccagni, 2017, p. 4) of aspirations in order to explore the continuous unfolding of students' future-oriented projections of possible selves and ways of being in different phases or timepoints of ISM and that this should be considered in relation to the encountered realities and varying contexts they are in. However, it should be noted that adopting such a dynamic, temporally distributed "aspiration on the go" approach does not mean that aspirations will definitely change or transform as students experience ISM (see Etmanski, 2019; Waters, 2008). What we

wish is to call for more attention to the conditions, contingencies, and complexities of ISM aspirations: how they may fluctuate, transform, and/or actively preserved over time when students encounter difficulties of learning and living abroad and the impact that such an aspiration-reality nexus may have upon actions of ISM navigation.

In bringing together some issues in ISM scholarship that are often treated separately, the approach we outline here could enable us to rethink current understandings of ISM. Firstly, we are led to see how imagination, reality, and action work together to (re-)shape ISM, both in terms of aspirations for ISM and pathways of ISM once it is in process. Lipura and Collins (2020, p. 351) have pointed out the delinking of students' imaginations of ISM from their actual actions to undertake educational mobilities. We would like to add that there is also a disassociation between imaginations and the realities they encounter on the ground. As evident in the stories of the African students recounted above, students' imaginations and the encountered realities interact with one another in continuous and complex ways to shape their aspirations on the go and actions of trajectory navigation; for example, the moving to and then leaving China before (finishing) their education for Victor, Charlie, and Bill, which were results of the negotiation between aspiring imaginations and encountered challenges. We see this also in Sarah's acceptance of the offer from Friendship and then her pivot to preparing for ISM to a new destination. Neither the imaginative aspirations nor the actions of ISM navigation are fixed once for all. We argue that this dynamic, processual perspective enables us to see aspiration, reality, and action proceed in an interactive process over time, diversifying our understandings of what ISM is and does for different individuals.

Secondly, we foreground the precarities of ISM and how international students cope with them with promise and hope to sustain their aspirations, albeit sometimes unsuccessfully. In ISM studies, especially those that focus on aspirations, international students are usually portrayed as or assumed to be the "privileged". As such, Lipura and Collins (2020, p. 352) call for more critical attention to the precarities international students experience in understanding ISM. Our ethnographic narratives show that some African students might face significant economic, social, and legal precarities in China. Like international students in Dublin described by Gilmartin et al. (2021), these students worked hard to maintain their aspirations on the go, holding onto hopes for the future. However, when such "promising precarities" (ibid) became too perilous to handle, students' hopes or aspirations might be suspended, transformed, or reconfigured. Yang's (2018a) ethnographical study of Indian medical students at a Chinese provincial university illustrates similar issues, as international students may face "unproductive, even cruel, consequences of education" (p. 705). Our study with a focus on African students at a Chinese university provides further support for this observation.

Indeed, like any other type of migration, ISM might become a "risky venture, [...] regularly interrupted by reality checks that bring into question the potentials of aspirations as individuals undertake and experience mobilities" (Wang & Chen, 2021, p. 3451). Nonetheless, this does not mean that these "unsuccessful" students were unwise for having ISM aspirations and actions, or that their experiences were not worthwhile. Following Yang (2018a), we argue that these relatively less-privileged students within the Global South flows may have other logics of thinking and acting than that assumed in a neoliberal calculation of undertaking ISM, for example, taking chances on opportunities no matter how unrealistic the odds seem to be. We might see these students' actions as "ingenious solutions devised by social actors who try to materialise their educational desires, social aspirations and organizational objectives [...] amidst realities of class disadvantage and resource inadequacy" (Yang, 2018a, p. 705).

Lastly, we further validate the view that ISM aspirations are conditioned and shaped by structural forces, but we also shed light on the agency of African students to sustain aspirations amidst precarities and varying forms of structural constraint. Our ethnography has demonstrated that the structural forces not only influence students in their choices of where to go and with what aspirations but also impact their maintenance and remaking of aspirations (see Gilmartin et al., 2021; Zhou, 2015). For example, the economic constraints of Charlie and Bill, as well as the restrictions that forbade them to work or apply for student loans and other financial aids in China, fundamentally endangered the continuity of their aspirations and ISM trajectories; Samuel's social networks had enabled him to move his aspirations of transnational entrepreneurship towards realisation; and stringent Chinese migration policies were critically influential in Jim's and John's divergent strategies of moving their migration aspirations forward.

Alongside these factors, we should not ignore the agency of international students in their proactive interactions with and within these structural constraints. As shown in the students' narratives, the participants had exercised various "agency in mobility" (Tran & Vu, 2018) in dealing with the adversities and challenges brought by structural forces. This refers not only to those who enacted "agency for becoming" (pp. 175–77) in preserving their aspirations and making progress in realising them but also to those who shifted or reconfigured their aspirations with "agency as struggle and resistance" (pp. 179–81) and even those who put their aspirations on hold. Unsuccessful in some senses, those students who did not finish their planned ISM trajectories did exercise their "needs-response agency" (pp. 177–79) to survive, to continue to attend learning and to find resources to return home. Their travelling to and staying in China for higher education, albeit shorter than anticipated and without the expected end, might also be meaningful for them in one way or another, such as life adventures, lessons or memories. By probing into structural forces, students' capacities for agency and how they work together to shape and reshape students' aspirations on the go, we can largely move beyond either a Marxist or neo-liberalist interpretation of ISM.

To recap, we argue that by tracing international students' aspirations on the go vis-à-vis the realities of living and studying in the country of study, researchers could develop a more dynamic, processual, and interpretative perspective on ISM, revealing how it is a complex process of becoming possible selves within fluid and diversified interplays between imagination and action, promise and precarity, and subjectivity and structure. Looking ahead, we offer two suggestions for future research. A dynamic, processual perspective on student aspirations implies that studies of ISM may need to be prolonged to include different time periods in relation to different mobilities. For example, scholars may go on to explore how (African) international students sustain their aspirations on the go after leaving China and studying in another country. Additionally, in recognising the dynamic and transformative nature of aspirations, we may need to ask what educators, universities, and policymakers can do to help (African) international students, especially those from less-privileged backgrounds, to maintain their aspirations on the go. This important question shall be addressed not only from prescriptive perspectives but also by engaging with action research.

Acknowledgements We sincerely thank the two anonymous reviewers and Dr. Cora Lingling Xu at Durham University for their critical and constructive comments on earlier drafts. We are also grateful to the African student participants whose valuable contributions made this article possible.

References

- Alpay, E., Ahearn, A., Graham, R., & Bull, A. (2008). Student enthusiasm for engineering: Charting changes in student aspirations and motivation. *European Journal of Engineering Education*, 33(5–6), 573–585. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03043790802585454>
- Bamber, M. (2014). What motivates Chinese women to study in the UK and how do they perceive their experience? *Higher Education*, 68(1), 47–68. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-013-9679-8>
- Boccagni, P. (2017). Aspirations and the subjective future of migration: Comparing views and desires of the “time ahead” through the narratives of immigrant domestic workers. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 5(1), 1–18.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in Psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
- Brooks, R., & Waters, J. (2011). *Student mobilities, migration and the internationalisation of higher education*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Carling, J., & Collins, F. (2018). Aspiration, desire and drivers of migration. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44(6), 909–926. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1384134>
- Carlson, S. (2013). Becoming a mobile student—A processual perspective on German degree student mobility. *Population, Space and Place*, 19(2), 168–180. <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.1749>
- Collins, F. (2018). Desire as a theory for migration studies: Temporality, assemblage and becoming in the narratives of migrants. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44(6), 964–980. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1384147>
- Dervin, F., Du, X., & Härkönen, A. (2018). *International students in China: Education, student life and intercultural encounters*. Springer.
- Etmanski, B. (2019). The prospective shift away from academic career aspirations. *Higher Education*, 77(2), 343–358. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-018-0278-6>
- Ferdjani, H. (2012). *African students in China: An exploration of increasing numbers and their motivations in Beijing*. Centre for Chinese studies, Stellenbosch University. Retrieved March 14, 2020, from <https://scholar.sun.ac.za/handle/10019.1/70764>
- Findlay, A., Prazeres, L., McCollum, D., & Packwood, H. (2017). ‘It was always the plan’: International study as ‘learning to migrate’. *Area*, 49(2), 192–199. <https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12315>
- Gilmartin, M., Coppari, P., & Phelan, D. (2021). Promising precarity: The lives of Dublin’s international students. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 47(20), 4723–4740. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2020.1732617>
- Harrison, N., & Waller, R. (2018). Challenging discourses of aspiration: The role of expectations and attainment in access to higher education. *British Educational Research Journal*, 44(5), 914–938. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3475>
- Haugen, H. (2013). China’s recruitment of African university students: Policy efficacy and unintended outcomes. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 11(3), 315–334. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2012.750492>
- Henderson, H., Stevenson, J., & Bathmaker, A.-M. (2018). *Possible selves and higher education: New interdisciplinary insights*. Routledge.
- Ho, E. (2017). The geo-social and global geographies of power: Urban aspirations of ‘worlding’ African students in China. *Geopolitics*, 22(1), 15–33. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2016.1149697>
- Holliday, A. (2013). *Understanding intercultural communication: Negotiating a grammar of culture*. Routledge.
- Irungu, J. (2013). African students in the US higher-education system’. In H. Alberts & H. Hazen (Eds.), *International students and scholars in the United States* (pp. 163–180). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kim, J. (2011). Aspiration for global cultural capital in the stratified realm of global higher education: Why do Korean students go to US graduate schools? *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 32(1), 109–126. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2011.527725>
- Koo, H. (2016). The global middle class: How is it made, what does it represent? *Globalizations*, 13(4), 440–453.
- Lipura, S. J., & Collins, F. L. (2020). Towards an integrative understanding of contemporary educational mobilities: A critical agenda for international student mobilities research. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 18(3), 343–359. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2020.1711710>
- Mulvey, B. (2021a). “Decentering” international student mobility: The case of African student migrants in China. *Population, Space and Place*, 27(3), e2393. <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2393>
- Mulvey, B. (2021b). Conceptualizing the discourse of student mobility between “periphery” and “semi-periphery”: The case of Africa and China. *Higher Education*, 81(3), 437–451. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-020-00549-8>

- Oikonomidou, E. (2019). *Critical cosmopolitanism in diverse students' lives: Universal and restricted expressions*. Routledge.
- Pyvis, D., & Chapman, A. (2007). Why university students choose an international education: A case study in Malaysia. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 27(2), 235–246. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2006.07.008>
- Robertson, S. (2013). *Transnational student-migrants and the state: The education-migration nexus*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Tran, L. (2016). Mobility as 'becoming': A Bourdieuan analysis of the factors shaping international student mobility. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 37(8), 1268–1289. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2015.1044070>
- Tran, L., & Vu, T. (2018). 'Agency in mobility': Towards a conceptualisation of international student agency in transnational mobility. *Educational Review*, 70(2), 167–187. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2017.1293615>
- Wang, B., & Chen, J. (2021). Emotions and migration aspirations: Western scholars in China and the navigation of aspirational possibilities. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 47(15), 3437–3454. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2020.1764841>
- Wang, B., & Collins, F. (2020). Temporally distributed aspirations: New Chinese migrants to New Zealand and the figuring of migration futures. *Sociology*, 54(3), 573–590. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038519895750>
- Waters, J. (2008). *Education, migration, and cultural capital in the Chinese diaspora*. Cambria Press.
- Waters, J., Brooks, R., & Pimlott-Wilson, H. (2011). Youthful escapes? British students, overseas education and the pursuit of happiness. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 12(5), 455–469. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2011.588802>
- Wei, H. (2013). An empirical study on the determinants of international student mobility: A global perspective. *Higher Education*, 66, 105–122. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-012-9593-5>
- Wu, H. (2019). Three dimensions of China's "outward-oriented" higher education internationalization. *Higher Education*, 77(1), 81–96. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-018-0262-1>
- Yang, P. (2016). *International mobility and educational desire: Chinese foreign talent students in Singapore*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Yang, P. (2018b). Commentary: International students in China—What we know, what we don't, and what next. In F. Dervin, X. Du, & A. Härkönen (Eds.), *International students in China: Education, student life and intercultural encounters* (pp. 249–255). Springer.
- Yang, P. (2018a). Compromise and complicity in international student mobility: The ethnographic case of Indian medical students at a Chinese university. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 39(5), 694–708. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2018.1435600>
- Zhou, J. (2015). International students' motivation to pursue and complete a Ph.D. in the US. *Higher Education*, 69(5), 719–733. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-014-9802-5>

Publisher's note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.