



Original Article

International Higher Education and Public Diplomacy: A Case Study of Ugandan Graduates from Chinese Universities

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The number of international students studying in Chinese universities has expanded rapidly in recent years, and this expansion is undergirded by a public diplomacy rationale. However, there is a lack of research which seeks to understand how graduates of Chinese universities may be contributing to Chinese foreign policy goals in specific contexts. This article presents a case study which explores the experiences of international study, resulting attitudinal changes, and post-graduation trajectories of a group of Ugandan graduates from Chinese universities. The findings underscore issues with the assumptions around how international higher education provision contributes to public diplomacy. The evidence from the case study highlights the previously neglected relevance of students' agency and decision-making to the process of soft power accumulation. The participants in this study expressed ambivalence towards study experiences and Chinese foreign policy, but still chose to engage with China post-graduation, as doing so represented an opportunity to leverage knowledge of Chinese language and culture in the Ugandan labour market. This also highlights the how students' agentic decision-making is related to global geopolitical competition, and the nature of the bilateral relations between host and sending nations.

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Introduction

This article addresses the recruitment of international students by Chinese universities as a means of public diplomacy. The Chinese government invests heavily in recruiting international students to study in Chinese universities, with the rationale that this will lead to improved relations between China and students' respective home countries. However, empirical evidence for, and understanding of, the mechanisms through which international study leads to improved relations between host and sending country is weak (Wilson, 2014).

Students from Africa appear to be of particular importance within China's international student recruitment. In total during 2018, the Chinese Ministry of Education indicates that 81,562 African students studied in China (Ministry of Education, 2019). This means that the number of African students in China is now greater than the number in the UK or USA, making China the second largest destination country for internationally mobile African tertiary education students. Whereas historically, the majority of African students in China were scholarship holders (King, 2013), in recent years this group has tended to make up a smaller proportion of the total, as the number of self-funding students has risen exponentially. For example, during 2011, the Chinese Ministry of Education reports that there were 20,744 African students in China, of whom only 6316 (30%) were funded by Chinese government scholarships (Gu, 2012).

At the same time, China's 'outward-oriented' higher education internationalisation is characterised in the literature as primarily driven by political considerations, as opposed to neoliberal marketisation, as in the UK, USA, and other major destination countries for international students (e.g. Pan, 2013; Wu, 2019; Zha *et al.*, 2019). Whilst there is a level of agreement within the literature around the Chinese state's intent to use international student recruitment as a means of meeting strategic geopolitical goals, little empirical research has actually been carried out with the aim of exploring how China may be accumulating influence through international student recruitment in specific contexts. A handful of studies (e.g. Dong and Chapman, 2008; Haugen, 2013; Tian and Lowe, 2018) have examined current students' opinions towards experiences in China, using these factors as a proxy for the soft power potential of international study, but whilst students' opinions of the host country are relevant, there is a broader range of potential mechanisms through which political influence may be accumulated by the host beyond fostering positive opinions about the host nation in individual students.

Uganda is chosen as a case study of interest with regard to Chinese influence abroad and geopolitical strategies. Uganda is of great geopolitical importance to China. The current government of Yoweri Museveni, which has been in power since 1986, is almost unique in that it was one of the first African governments to both follow China's development model, and to explicitly claim its economic reforms as inspired by the Chinese model (Waldron, 2008; Shen and Taylor, 2012). It is also a member state of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), announced in 2013, which has rapidly become the dominant representation of China's foreign policy practices. Various large-scale infrastructure projects have been funded through the BRI—for example a highway between Entebbe airport and the capital city of Kampala, and two hydroelectric dams, amongst others (Xinhua, 2019). International student mobility, then, is just one facet of an expanding network of social, political, and economic ties between Uganda and China. It is clear that higher education has an important role to play within this nexus, in that Ugandan graduates of Chinese universities are effectively political and social actors with the

potential to influence whether Uganda welcomes or even acquiesces to China's attempts to build closer ties with Uganda.

This article, through the use of qualitative methods of data collection and analysis, explores the experiences of international study and resulting attitudinal changes of a group of Ugandan graduates from Chinese universities. Additionally, the post-graduation lives of this group are investigated, with a particular focus on employment and continued links with China. The aim is not to quantify the impact of international study provision by China for Ugandan students on Chinese state influence in Uganda, but rather to explore the means by which individual student mobility between Uganda and China may be contributing to the furthering of China's foreign policy goals.

The article consists of three sections. The first consists of a review of literature and construction of a theoretical framework, focusing on public diplomacy through international student recruitment and on China's efforts in this regard. The research design is then outlined before findings are discussed with reference to the previously outlined theoretical framework. The paper concludes that the assumptions surrounding China's public diplomacy are flawed in two main ways. First, the individual agency of graduates is not accounted for. The public diplomacy rationale for international student recruitment implies that graduates would, first, develop position opinions towards their host nation, and second, act upon these positive opinions to improve relations between the host and the graduate's own nation. However, the participants in this study expressed ambivalence towards the experiences in China, holding critical, sometimes negative views towards some aspects of the study abroad experience and towards the host nation's foreign policy, whilst simultaneously expressing some positivity towards the host nation's culture. Second, policies and literature on international education as public diplomacy have not paid sufficient attention to the specific national return context of graduates. The geopolitical and economic position of Uganda relative to China proved to be an important factor in students' post-graduation engagement with China. Participants were willing to acquiesce in Chinese involvement in Uganda, because of the fact that such acquiescence represented an opportunity to gain employment in Chinese companies, or do business such as importing goods from China.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The public diplomacy rationale for international student recruitment

There are a number of mechanisms outlined in the literature through which higher education could feasibly lead to influence for the host country in a students' home country. This section aims to construct a theoretical framework to clarify and understand the potential means through which alumni in Uganda could contribute to furthering the interests of the Chinese state. China's motivations for expanding



higher education provision for international education broadly reflect the principle of international education as a means of public diplomacy. Activities which fall under the term public diplomacy are effectively tools employed with the intention of building ‘soft power’ amongst citizens of other countries (Metzgar, 2016).

Soft power refers to the shaping the behaviours of foreign countries without resorting to coercive measures (Nye, 2004). Soft power is one potential source of influence, defined in relation to others (Nye, 2008), that is, coercion such as military force or sanctions, and inducements, in other words payments or bribes. Opinion and behaviour changes arise largely from the values the country expresses through its culture, and if these are not deemed attractive by the individual students, soft power is not accumulated by the host.

There is a general lack of empirical evidence for the link outlined above, made in the literature on soft power, that international education changes opinions and attitudes towards the host nation in the sending nation. Whilst there is a clear link between positive attitudes towards a country and studying abroad in said country (Han and Zweig, 2010), the evidence for a link between study abroad and attitude change is weak. Wilson’s (2014) study of political attitude changes amongst Marshall Scholars found that attitudes were not significantly altered by international study, and that positive attitude changes of individual students tended to be offset by the negative changes of others. In a later study of Chinese students in the UK, Wilson (2016) also found that students’ political attitudes towards the host nation remained stable over time. Additionally, for political influence to be garnered, alumni behaviour must reflect the attitudinal change. Changed attitudes do not necessarily lead to changed behaviour, yet in the small amount of literature on international higher education in China as a diplomatic tool, positive attitudes towards experiences in China are seen as a proxy for ‘soft power’ accumulation (Dong and Chapman, 2008; Haugen, 2013).

Further, Wilson (2014, 2017) highlights that it is not enough to change the attitudes of individual students—given that soft power is a macro-level phenomenon, the micro-level effect of international study on a relatively small number of individuals must be amplified somehow to affect the behaviour of the state. Wilson puts forward two possible mechanisms through which individual attitudes towards the host could be multiplied: either alumni move into positions of power themselves, for example becoming senior government officials, or are able through other means to disproportionately influence public opinion, for example by becoming journalists or university lecturers. Similarly Atkinson (2010) argues that accumulating soft power through international higher education is possible, but that it is dependent largely on the following three factors: (i) the quality (‘depth’) and extent of social interactions in the host country, (ii) sharing a sense of common identity with hosts and (iii) the attainment of a politically influential position by the student after their return home.

Lomer (2017a, b) makes the point that assumptions surrounding international study and influence were discursively established with reference to scholarship programs in the Cold War era, but are applied to self-funded international students who constitute the majority of international students today—this also applies in the case of China. There is limited evidence (Papatsiba 2005; Atkinson 2010; Wilson 2014) of feelings of obligation towards the nation supplying funding in the case of scholarship programs. However, the assumption that this extends to self-funded students is unfounded.

Lomer (2017a) argues that in the public diplomacy rationale, international students are conceived of as relatively passive bodies, when in actual fact the evidence demonstrates that influence in foreign countries is not easily predictable, as ‘individual agency plays a major role’ (2017a, 116). In other words, one cannot assume, as the public diplomacy policy narrative does, that alumni will *choose* to return home and work in the interests of the host nation. Even if positive predispositions towards the host are held, alumni may not choose to support their policies.

To summarise, the above framework suggests that students should undergo an attitude change during their time abroad, and as a result, be positively predisposed towards the host country. During their time abroad, students should experience deep and positive social interactions and develop a sense of common identity. Upon graduation students will act upon their positive disposition towards their host and work in some way towards the interests of the host country in their home nation. Importantly, students will be in a position to influence wider society. The aim of the following study then is to explore in what ways a group of Ugandan graduates met these conditions, and in what ways their experience has differed from the trajectory that is implied in public diplomacy model of international higher education provision.

China’s higher education internationalization and public diplomacy

This section provides a brief overview of existing literature which has examined international student experiences in China through a soft power lens. The motivation for international student recruitment is conceived in publicly available documents, speeches and reports released by the Chinese Government primarily as related to cultural diplomacy and building lasting ties with students from foreign countries (Pan, 2013; Pan and Lo, 2017). For instance, a document released by the Ministry of Education (2015) indicates that the main role of international alumni of Chinese universities is to ‘tell China’s story and spread China’s voice’ (Ministry of Education, 2015).

Given this clear motivation for the expansion of international student recruitment in Chinese universities, a small number of previous studies have examined Chinese international student recruitment, some focusing specifically on African students. Ho (2017, 2018) seeks to shed light on African students’



experiences in China and highlights an awareness amongst African students of China's 'soft power manoeuvres', arguing that students seek to displace these manoeuvres by aligning their identities with globalized Western cultures, due to encounters with prejudice and exclusion in Chinese society. King (2013), on the other hand, finds that reports of racial prejudice towards African students are contested and suggests that African students often highlight admiration of the Chinese work ethic.

Dong and Chapman (2008) focus on international students as a whole, finding that students were generally satisfied with their experiences and most suggested that the scholarship acted as an effective means of improving China's international relations. Tian and Lowe (2018) surveyed students in a medical university in China and suggest that reports of discrimination were uncommon, but that students spoke negatively of academic experiences. On balance, the authors conclude that, given the wide range of experiences and attitudes reported by students, to assume simply recruiting students and having them come to China would lead to soft power accumulation would be 'cultural arrogance' (*ibid.*, 242). Haugen (2013) explores how Sino-African relations are affected by the increasing number of Africans studying in China, suggesting that Africans are largely dissatisfied with educational experiences in China and seek to make up for this dissatisfaction by conducting trade. Whilst these three studies provide useful insight into the individual African students' opinions of China, they are limited in that they assume students' attitudes before graduation are a good proxy by which they judge the success or failure of a public diplomacy initiative. Additionally, they do not take into consideration the widely varying political, social, and economic contexts of students' home countries. Students' positive attitudes towards China are described as 'necessary conditions' (*ibid.*, 318) for soft power to be accumulated. However, there are potential cases in which positive attitudes may not be necessary conditions for influence abroad. For example, a student may educate others about in their home country about the host, increasing understanding, without necessarily having strongly positive opinions of the host themselves. A focus on current students is also somewhat limiting, as it assumes that students' opinions will not change upon graduation. The accumulation of soft power through academic exchange is a protracted process, and therefore, simply examining student's views before graduation is not enough. That is why Wilson (2014) suggests that there remains a critical lack, within the literature on higher education for public diplomacy, of research on post-sojourn experiences.

Methodology

The aim of this study is not to quantify the net benefit accruing to the Chinese government as a result of its recruitment of Ugandan students—rather it is to

explore, in the specific, critical, context of Uganda, the mechanisms through which individual graduates contribute to furthering Chinese interests in Uganda. With this in mind, qualitative methods were deemed appropriate, given that a depth of understanding of students' attitudes towards experiences in China and of post-graduation life trajectories is necessary in order to achieve the goals outlined. Ugandan graduates were selected as an 'instrumental case' (Stake, 2005) in helping to understand the ways in which Chinese influence in foreign countries is accumulated. The willingness of individual Ugandan alumni to acquiesce in and support the study was a key reason for its selection as the case study. The instrumental case also allows the examination of existing theory, examining how the theory surrounding public diplomacy through higher education outlined in the conceptual framework apply here, generating an in-depth understanding of the specific mechanisms at play in the context of mobility between Uganda and China.

Semi-structured interviews with 12 Ugandan graduates of Chinese universities were undertaken. Ten of the 12 participants had received full scholarships for their study in China. National-level data detailing the number of students holding scholarships and the number self-financing study in China are not publicly available. Hence, it is difficult to know exactly how well these 12 students reflect the body of Ugandan students who have studied in China in terms of their funding status. However, a purposive sampling technique was employed, and the researcher selected students with the aim of sampling for maximum variability. Criteria were determined in advance in order to differentiate between the potential participants (Creswell, 2007). Those selected were quite different on the criteria in order to gather a sample that would shed light on a broader range of experiences and means through which Chinese influence is developed in Uganda. Participants studied in a wide range of cities and institutions in China, some in large, relatively cosmopolitan cities such as Shanghai and some in smaller provincial locations. Likewise, some were enrolled in elite universities, and some in less prestigious institutions. The 12 graduates studied in various different fields, at different levels (See Table 1).

Additionally, participants within the sample graduated and left China as early as 2011, and as late as 2018, at least one year before interviews took place. Thus, in terms of these criteria, the participants represent a broad range of Ugandan students in China. One potential limitation of this study is that participants who had graduated before 2011 were requested to take part in interviews but declined, citing employment in relatively senior positions and a resultant lack of free time. This means that insight into the impact that China graduates in more senior roles, over the long-term, are limited. In order to indicate generally the standing of the university attended, which has implications for future potential for influence, without compromising the anonymity of respondents, the rank position of the university within China, according to the 2018 Shanghai Ranking (ARWU, 2018)



Table 1 Background information of participants

<i>Participant</i>	<i>University ranking within China (ARWU, 2018)</i>	<i>Subject of study</i>	<i>Level of study</i>	<i>Medium of Instruction</i>
1	11–50	Marketing	Undergraduate	English
2	11–50	Civil Engineering	Undergraduate and Master's	Chinese (Undergraduate) and English (Master's)
3	100–200	Tourism Management	Master's	English
4	1–10	Oil and Gas Engineering	Master's	English
5	11–50	Communications Engineering	Master's	English
6	1–10	Electronics and Information Engineering	Undergraduate	Chinese
7	1–10	Management and Engineering	Undergraduate and Master's	Chinese (Undergraduate) and English (Master's)
8	11–50	Medicine	Undergraduate and Master's	Chinese
9	11–50	Education	Master's	English
10	11–50	Education	Master's	English
11	100–200	Economics	Undergraduate	Chinese
12	11–50	Chinese Studies	Diploma	Chinese

is included. To protect the anonymity of respondents, the time periods and cities of study in China are withheld.

Each participant was invited to take part in a one-to-one semi-structured interview, lasting between 60 and 90 min. Some were conducted face-to-face and some using VoIP technology. Interviews were broadly structured by themes. These included students' motivations for study in China, assessment of their experiences of China, attitudes towards their host, and the relationship between China and Uganda, as well as life experiences since graduation, focussing on employment and maintenance of transnational social or business ties. Interviews were audio-taped with the consent of the participants and then transcribed. Interviewees were also asked to share any other relevant written material from the sojourn period, in order to shed light on the process of attitude changes and on students' lived experiences in China more generally, and several agreed to share social media and blog posts written in China. Data from the interviews and written reflections were entered into NVivo 12 qualitative data analysis software and thematically analysed with the aim of interpreting the data and constructing a story in relation to the research question (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Research Findings and Discussion

This section highlights findings related to the assumptions of the theoretical framework. Collected data highlight that this group of alumni's attitudes towards China can generally be described as ambivalent and somewhat sceptical, especially with regards to China's economic engagement with Uganda—some spoke of experiences of racism in China or struggles with cultural differences, but at the same time most viewed their academic experience and the interactions associated with it positively. However, regardless of opinions towards experiences in China, the majority in this sample maintained ties through post-graduation employment, and in doing so worked to further Chinese interests. Some had positions in industries which are relevant to Chinese economic influence in Uganda or were involved in international trade between the two countries.

Motivations for study in China

The participants in this study who received scholarships unanimously articulated that the decision to study in China was related primarily to the availability of scholarships. As participant 5 summarises:

“Initially most of my applications were to the UK, but those scholarships were harder to come by... So I applied not so much because at that point I wanted to go to China, but just to see how that would pan out. I took the scholarship because I had decided I wanted to further my education in that area...” (Participant 5)

The two self-funded students opted for China because they each had a family member already in the country. The first had a relative working in the country, and the other had a sibling already studying in a Chinese university—as such China represented a relatively ‘safe’ study abroad option. This points towards the limited existing soft power of China in Uganda—students mostly expressed indifference towards China as a study abroad destination. Han and Zweig (2010) note that international students often choose their destination country due to an existing positive opinion towards that country. Hence, international education sometimes is ‘preaching to the converted’ as opposed to changing attitudes for soft power accumulation (Lomer, 2017a). In this case, however, students matched the assumptions within the public diplomacy rationale in that they did not previously have positive opinions towards China, thus representing an opportunity for attitudinal change.



Experiences of social alienation

As outlined in the theoretical framework that international students will undergo attitudinal change, have ‘deep’ positive social interactions, and resultantly develop a sense of community or common identity with their hosts, are key assumptions of the public diplomacy rationale. Participants generally reported experiences of discrimination on the basis of race in China, and this emerged in the interviews as an important potential barrier to positive social interactions and a sense of community between participants and local people. It is important to note, however, that these negative interactions were largely outside of the university, rather than with faculty or local students. Participants described experiences involving seeking employment and in day-to-day interactions which they saw as important in shaping their attitudes towards China:

“Socially, apart from the university community, outside the university, we had a kind of isolation. On the bus, if you are African, whoever is near you, they move away. They won’t even shake hands with you. They won’t even talk to you. On the train, if there are two seats, and an empty seat, no-one sits near you. Our teachers were really enthusiastic to help us, but many of them didn’t know how to speak English. So communication was difficult.” (Participant 9)

“There is racism in China, when we were trying to get jobs in China, as a black African, actually, we were completely undervalued... People don’t know this but Africans rarely experience racism until we leave Africa. But in China it is right there, but no-one wants to talk about, nobody cares about it, everyone is just indifferent. Actually that’s one of the reasons why I wanted to leave China. Racism in the workplace was one thing I completely didn’t like about China.” (Participant 1)

These excerpts were typical amongst the 12 respondents, and point to the type of social interactions that shaped the international study experience. Some, like participant 9, expressed a feeling of alienation as a result of perceived racist incidents in everyday life. At the same time, the majority praised the attitudes of faculty members towards students, but criticised their lack of English-language ability. These perceptions and experiences of isolation were common. Most cited examples of what they perceived to be anti-African racism in everyday interactions, or when trying to find part-time work—this echoes some previous studies on African students in China, and research on anti-African racism in China more generally, in which there is a common argument that the Chinese perception of Africans is essentialized and racialized, creating a negative image of Africa in China, and often leading to negative experiences for Africans who study or work

there (e.g. Cheng, 2011; Haugen, 2013; Ho, 2017; 2018; King, 2013). In particular, Ho (2018), exploring the gastronomic practices of African students in China, echoes these findings, writing that '[t]he “Western” experience continues to hold allure for the African student migrants in China, reinforced by their encounters with prejudice and social exclusion in Chinese society'. In other words, the experiences of social exclusion highlighted in both Ho's study, and this one, effectively act to subvert Chinese soft power. Given the focus on the importance of deep social interactions in precipitating attitudinal change in the public diplomacy framework, these experiences highlighted by respondents, and in other studies, represent barriers to attitudinal change, and thus, to soft power accumulation. Studies in other contexts (see Lee and Rice, 2007; Brown and Jones, 2013 for the cases of the USA and UK, respectively) highlight how the discrimination of international students can hinder not only public diplomacy, but also intellectual growth and the development of intercultural friendships. Whilst beyond the scope of this study, the experiences described here point to an important direction for future research on international student experiences in China.

Positive academic experiences leading to understanding

Although the participants in this study expressed how feelings of social alienation and discrimination shaped their experiences in China, when asked to reflect on how attitudes towards China had changed over the course of study, most participants focused on academic experiences, which were largely positive, and on a sense of 'understanding' of Chinese society.

Participants often mentioned learning not only from faculty members but also from the attitudes of Chinese students. A previous survey of African students in China highlighted that a constant refrain from students was the impact and transfer of Chinese attitudes towards work and study (King, 2013). Similarly, participants in this study emphasized learning from Chinese counterparts:

“for me, when we would go to class late a couple of times, we would try to explain to the lecturer why... they wouldn't want to hear it, and we thought that they are being so unfair. But later on we learnt that it's their way of showing commitment” (Participant 12)

“I have learned so much from the Chinese. The first time I went to school [in China] I actually said I would go to class early. I said I would go to class at six. When I was going to class at six, I found all the Chinese sitting in class, you know?” (Participant 2)

These excerpts highlight a process of attitudinal change. Whilst some students noted a feeling of alienation, there was a consensus amongst participants that some facets of Chinese culture were admirable. In line with King's (2013) findings, these



students in particular gave positive accounts of the Chinese work ethic and its influence on their own habits. Students described a process of attitudinal change whilst abroad but ultimately their views were more nuanced and critical than wholly positive as the public diplomacy framework implies. The following excerpts highlight student's conclusions when asked to reflect on how their attitude had changed between leaving for China and returning home:

“I think I had a negative opinion before I left, before I got myself immersed in the Chinese language and culture. But after we started the Chinese language course... I think that started changing, slowly. I got to understand them as humans with different cultures. I kind of learned how to co-exist with them.” (Participant 11)

“When people look at us coming from China, they want to be like us, they want to know how can I get there, how can I learn Chinese, everybody is trying to imitate what you are doing. We always tell them it's not so different, people are different but that is it.” (Participant 2)

These two participants, asked to reflect on how their attitude towards China has changed over the course of their study, highlight two important points. Participant 11 had a negative view of China before receiving a scholarship to study there, due to previous negative interactions with Chinese nationals in Uganda. However, the excerpt above indicates a process of attitude change towards China and Chinese people during the course of study. The comment reveals an attitude of understanding but provides little evidence of the admiration or wholly positive disposition highlighted as an important outcome of public diplomacy through higher education (Lomer, 2017a). Likewise, participant 2 highlights how his perception of China has changed, in that he views China as ‘not so different’ to his home country. This excerpt also highlights a key point to be explored further in the next section: Participants tended to perceive that their study abroad imbued them with social status and a means to gain economic advantage in Uganda.

Attitudes towards Sino-Ugandan relations

It is axiomatic that in order for international higher education to lead to influence for the host nation, graduates must view improved bilateral relations between their host and home countries positively. Although in the case of China, policy texts do not seem to distinguish strongly between scholarship holders and self-funded students in terms of rationale for recruitment, the literature suggests that scholarship holders in particular might feel a sense of obligation to engage with their host country. Papatsiba (2005) for example highlights that some Erasmus students who received mobility grants felt a moral obligation to engage with European Union political projects. However, as Lomer (2017b) notes, it does not

necessarily follow that self-funded students would have the same feeling of obligation. Most participants were somewhat sceptical about Chinese involvement in Uganda, despite the fact the majority, including the following two students, received full scholarships from the Chinese government:

“Most of the time they look at how to promote their business. I think we can call it a sweet colonial ideology. Like they are colonising us softly, and in a very sweet way and a polite way... they win favour with your government.”
(Participant 9)

“it feels like, in my opinion, that China is here to make money, as much as it feels like they are here to help, they like to portray that they are here to help, that they are here to help Africa and Uganda in particular, but from my interactions and my analysis, it feels like they are here for them, kind of like they are colonizing us. It feels like they are doing it in a very soft way, in order to use their wisdom to colonise us indirectly. Especially economically.”
(Participant 11)

These quotes highlight graduates’ agency and the resulting unpredictability of influence (Lomer, 2017a). As the previous section established, most participants expressed admiration for some facets of Chinese culture, and increased understanding of Chinese culture, but also a sense of alienation from local people. The result of such relatively multifaceted positions held by graduates is that an unquestioning sense of obligation or positivity towards the host nation cannot be guaranteed. Chinese policy texts imply that international students, especially those receiving scholarships, will go on to positions of influence and work to further Chinese interests, perhaps due to a sense of duty towards the benefactor in the case of scholarship holders. Waters (2018, 306) writes that a result of the soft power rationale for international higher education provision is ‘the dehumanizing of the international student’ which ‘means that they are rarely seen as political or social actors in their own right’. This flaw within the rationale is highlighted by the excerpts above. Students left China with a better understanding of relationship between the two countries, but ultimately held critical views towards their host as a result of this understanding. The participants in this study were highly aware of what they perceived to be self-serving reasons for the provision of scholarships to students from developing countries. Scholarships were seen as one form of broader economic involvement in Uganda which participants viewed sceptically.



Post-graduation trajectory—the importance of individual agency in continued ties with China

“Chinese investment in Africa is also promoting us who have studied in China... because when a Chinese company, or some people in my community, they know I’m from China, I have a degree from China. They see me as a resourceful person” (Participant 10)

The above excerpt summarises well the experiences of Ugandan graduates of Chinese universities as they enter the Ugandan labour market. Despite reporting some negative or alienating experiences in China and scepticism towards some aspects of Sino-Ugandan bilateral relations, this participant found that undertaking employment related to China’s interests in Uganda was also a means to gain economic advantage. Engaging in mobility to China allowed participants to accumulate a variety of resources which, due to the relationship between Uganda and China, are increasingly easily convertible into advantages in the labour market. The rapidly changing position of China in relation to Uganda means that credentials which theoretically offer proof of the holders’ China-related competencies (in this case an understanding of Chinese language and culture) are highly valued by employers and can be utilised for economic gain through trade or business consulting. This incentivises Ugandan graduates to leverage their China-related competencies for their own benefit—as opposed to a desire to forward China’s national interests.

Most participants had either found employment in Chinese companies, conducted informal trade (importing goods from China for sale in Uganda), or worked as translators. Whether or not participants spoke positively of experiences in China, there was a tendency to continue to engage with China after graduation. Crucially, all cited previous experience in China as important in enabling continued engagement post-graduation. For example, participant 2 found work in a Chinese construction company which had been contracted to build a Chinese loan-funded highway:

“I had to go through an interview, I was interviewed by a Measurements Engineer, and eventually he was like ‘the good thing is you can speak Chinese, I think you will fit so well.’... once the Chinese guy [the interviewer] actually had me speak their language, he was impressed.”

In a similar vein, participant 5, despite a somewhat negative account of experiences in China, found employment in a Chinese company in Uganda upon graduation:

“people always find it interesting that I studied in China. They assume, sometimes correctly and sometimes incorrectly, that I can interact with them

better because of it. Mostly correctly, because I have an understanding of how the Chinese think.”

Participant 6 found employment in the same field as participant 5, citing Chinese language proficiency as important in finding employment:

“In getting this job, having been in China helped me a lot, because most of the Chinese professionals in Uganda are not so comfortable speaking English... Where they are having issues understanding English I can just switch to Chinese.”

These participants perceived that Chinese language ability and, more broadly, an understanding of the nuances of Chinese culture gained whilst in China have been important in post-graduation career trajectories. Strikingly, all other than one who had studied medicine and worked in a Ugandan hospital corroborated claims here about the value of understanding Chinese language and culture in the Ugandan job market. Participant 4, working in the oil and gas industry—which has seen Chinese investment since the discovery of oil deposits in the country several years ago—suggested that his Chinese language ability was valued by his employer because it enabled him to communicate with Chinese representatives from the corporations investing in Uganda’s oil fields. Participant 11 had found work in a Chinese logistics company and suggested that he was employed mainly for his ability to speak Chinese. Similarly, participants 3, 7, 9, 10 and 12 had some experience in Chinese translation—3, 9 and 10 had taken part-time work as translators for Chinese businesses on return to Uganda, and 7 had started a Sino-African business consulting company, with one of the services offered being Chinese-English translation. Participant 1 had started a business importing goods from China, and participant 12 was a full-time translator for a Chinese business owner in Uganda. These participants were all engaging with China through their employment after graduation, but due to the economic benefits that this engagement garnered, rather than due to their disposition towards China. Additionally, existing literature appears to suggest that the micro-level impact of an individual’s international study must be amplified somehow to achieve soft power aims on a national level. The trajectories outlined above suggest that participants, other than perhaps one graduate who held a senior position in a government body, were not in a position to ‘multiply’ their China knowledge and understanding. However, it should be noted that the participants in this study graduated after 2011, and as such, it is not possible to speak to longer-term trajectories.



Conclusion

This paper aimed to explore some of the assumptions underlying China's attempts to use international higher education as a form of public diplomacy. Existing literature on this form of higher education provision highlights a number of assumptions surrounding higher education public diplomacy programs and suggests that in order for the goals of such programs to be met, participants should undergo a process of attitudinal change, based on deep social interactions and the development of a sense of common identity with the host. In addition, students should reach positions of influence after graduation and choose to use this influence for the benefit of their host.

To summarise, study in China has led to an increased understanding of and engagement with China for these particular students. However, this engagement is, thus far, small in scale and unlikely to influence large public audiences, as the model underpinning the rationale of these scholarships suggests it should. The article's main contribution is that it highlights an issue with the assumptions of the framework underpinning public diplomacy through higher education. The framework fails to account for firstly, the individual agency of students, and secondly, for how students' agentic decision-making is related to the structure of the global political economy, and the sending and host country's relative positions within it. The evidence presented here highlights the nuanced and complex views of graduates towards their host and demonstrates that students are in fact political actors in their own right, rather than passive diplomatic tools, as policy sometimes implies (Waters, 2018).

The evidence presented here makes clear the relevance of students' agency and decision-making (Lomer, 2017a) in relation to personal development and economic advantage, which has been neglected in the literature in policy around international student recruitment as a form of public diplomacy. Findings highlight that individual agency can lead to unpredictable outcomes in terms of influence. Participants tended to have ambivalent attitudes towards China, and largely held sceptical views towards China's involvement in Uganda. Yet, the same participants also tended to make career decisions which, it can be argued, progress Chinese foreign policy and national interests, albeit in small ways. These decisions, however, are not related, according to participants' own accounts, to any kind of sympathy towards or a sense of common identity with China. Rather, students are able to secure economic advantage from the combination of their own prior engagement with China, and their nation's position economically in relation to China.

These graduates are able to convert Chinese language ability into employment or other income-generating opportunities. The process of conversion is highly dependent on the context that students return to. It appears that the broader political and economic relationship between Uganda and China was central to post-

graduation trajectories. Participants were able to take advantage of Chinese economic involvement in China, leveraging skills and knowledge associated with China that may be of limited use in the Ugandan job market as a whole, but proved valuable when participants specifically targeted employment and income-generating activities related to Chinese economic involvement in Uganda. On the basis of this, the suggestion is made that higher education as a means of influence abroad should not be viewed as discrete from other forms of interaction between nations, but rather as part of a broader nexus of political, economic and social ties. There is thus a clear need for more research into the specific contextual factors in students' home countries and how these factors shape students' post-graduation trajectories and behaviours relating to public diplomacy in other contexts.

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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