

# Structure and Agency: Africana Immigrants in China

by

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## Abstract

This article addresses some of the challenges faced by Africana immigrants in China from the perspective of structure and agency. Following a review of the core concepts in the literature is discussion of the structural changes currently evident in China and how these impact on the sense of agency of domestic migrants and foreign immigrants. This is followed by an overview of the literature of Chinese perceptions of race. That structural framework sets the stage for a discussion of the features of the contemporary Africana population in China followed by an explanation of the methodology used and profiles of the subjects. In the results section issues of home, reflexivity, structure and agency, relations with the Chinese, enclaves, race and religion and intimacy are discussed. The tentative conclusion is that for Africana immigrants agency is often enhanced by the deployment of their intellectual skills that are in demand in China but is constrained with regards to the exercise of religion and the pursuit of intimacy. Many Africana immigrants therefore experience an enhanced sense of subject well-being in the areas of cognition and material resource acquisition, impact positively on some aspects of Chinese structure, even while being constrained by other features of that structure.

## Introduction

China with its integration into global markets, and its expanding economy, has firmly embraced modernity with regards to its emphasis on knowledge mastery, innovation, and wealth accumulation. This in turn drives an insatiable demand for both local and foreign talent, making China an increasingly attractive destination for new classes of immigrants (Skeldon, 2012). As part of this demand the Africana population has increased considerably since the 1998 Asian financial crisis and has become more diverse.

African immigrants are drawn to China as a site for an enhanced sense of agency in relation to self-development, recognition of talent and the generation of wealth. Immigrants that have tertiary level intellectual skills and who possess valid visas, experience high degrees of mobility and status, and this allows them to garner well-paying work in China. This is in contrast to the experiences of some low-skilled African traders who might not have valid visas, experience little mobility and low status, and are always at risk to be exploited and deported (Haugen, 2012).

While self-growth in the areas of knowledge and wealth are abundant in China, extant structural arrangements as manifested in socio-political policies can constrain self-growth in areas such as spirituality, and rights advocacy. In addition Chinese antipathy toward foreigners, alongside the structure of African immigrant communities, makes it challenging for both groups to build substantive personal relationships with each other. Despite the apparent marked increase in the African migrant population over the past two decades research that documents issues of subjective well-being and mobility is quite scanty (Bodomo, 2010, 2012; Haugen, 2011, 2012). There is a modest sense of the degree of mobility that informs their exercise of agency. Also coming into focus are the features of a host structure that offers cognitive and material opportunities but strictly limits advocacy, discriminates on the basis of race and religion, and is ambivalent and at times hostile toward foreigners and other sources of socio-political difference.

The degree of agency and mobility experienced by the African migrant population is diverse. The most mobile are those with highly desirable skillsets, valid visas and an established and legitimate income source. Employees of western and Chinese corporations, credentialed teachers of English with contracts, and traders with valid visas and a thriving export business experience high degrees of agency and mobility (Bodomo, 2012). By contrast immigrants on expired visas with poor paying jobs or intermittent work tend to experience constrained agency and low degrees of mobility (Haugen, 2012). Some traders, former students and some consultants and teachers of English can be found in this group.

So the degree to which immigrants to China can expand their sense of agency hinges, in part, on possessing a valid visa, being technically qualified, and being curious, reflexive, and creative. A robust sense of agency is also influenced by such structural features as the socio-economic demand for high value products, the balance between the historical antipathy toward foreigners and the contemporary desire for their talent, the ability to curb racist thinking and the degree of mobility permitted to immigrants.

In this paper, using an interdisciplinary approach, I explore the interaction between the structures in which African immigrants are embedded and their capacity to enhance their sense of agency. I introduce the concept of adaptive ambivalence to explain the stance taken by immigrants who have reaped clear cognitive and material benefits from being in China but are also unfulfilled with regards to their communal, spiritual and intimacy needs. I will also discuss the theoretical approaches to structure and agency with regards to China in the context of dealing with its own development agenda in a globalized world. This will be followed by a discussion on the opportunities and challenges for African immigrants.

## **Literature Review**

### **Structure, Agency, and Mobility**

Increased economic opportunities as a result of changes in the structure of the global economy, alongside an increase in the accessibility, affordability and convenience of air transportation and communications, have fuelled increased levels of migration. The economic nature of much of this migration favors those immigrants who are technically skilled and creative, are psychologically resilient and are embedded in well-resourced support networks. Structure therefore facilitates but can also limit the opportunities for immigrants to work on their varied self-projects.

Structure speaks to a set of schemas or ways of thinking that facilitate or constrain social actions (Sewell, 1992). Traditions, ideologies, policies, and laws all speak to influential schemas that guide social action and are not necessarily conscious. (Sewell, 1992). These actions tend to be recurrent, to the degree that entities within the structure can command resources to increase the likelihood of such reproduction.

At the same time, a given structure is comprised of relationships between a diverse set of stakeholders with often differing schemas and access to resources (Bakewell, 2010). Some are in comity and others in tension with each other as a result of competing schemas or differing interpretations of a given schema. Structures therefore do not faithfully and automatically reproduce themselves. Schemas developed for a given context are often used creatively in other contexts thereby generating unanticipated outcomes, hence change and increased space to exercise agency (Sewell, 1992).

Agency can be defined as the degree to which the individual has some authority over his actions and resources (Hitlin & Elder, 2007). Agency extends beyond the physical and psychological assets of the individual and extends to the social. Sewell speaks to this when he states, “Agency entails an ability to coordinate one’s actions with others and against others, to form collective projects, to persuade, to coerce, and to monitor the simultaneous effects of one’s own and others’ activities.” (p. 21).

The interpretive room within a given schema makes possible the capacity to generate surprise, difference, and therefore change. Structures are therefore not homogenous, monolithic or immutable and this makes possible the exercise of a form of agency that facilitates the individual acting in concert with others to bring about both personal and social change. “Personal agency is, therefore, laden with collectively produced differences of power and implicated in collective struggles and resistances.” (Sewell, Jr., p. 21).

The individual’s sense of agency is influenced by multiple factors including the interpretations that elements of the structure attach to his social markers such as race/ethnicity, nationality, gender, religion, skills profile, immigration status, and organizational affiliations. In addition the exercise of agency is influenced by how informed the migrant is about such interpretations and his ability to be reflective and devise strategies, where necessary, to limit constraints and expand his sense of agency. Such reflectivity should include the immigrant having a realistic sense of his strengths and weaknesses and being able to objectively assess whether the given structures within which he is embedded will constrain or facilitate him achieving his desired goals. Agency whether enacted by individuals or group entities is an inherent feature of structure and a factor in facilitating or constraining other actors within the structure (Sewell, Jr.).

Mobility then, is a function of the quality of the agency that the immigrant can exercise. As a rule, immigrants who possess skills desired by host countries are granted relatively easy access and therefore experience high degrees of mobility with regards to work and recreation. Creative workers, of which some immigrants are a subset, are drawn to structures that appreciate their skill sets and provides them with the resources that will facilitate them being highly productive (Florida, 2002; Strenger, 2013). Shanghai and Guangzhou are such settings in China (Farrer, 2010).

I will now expand on the links between agency, structure and personal development for an emerging and under-studied cohort of African immigrants in China. Immigrants embed in a host structure, some aspects of which they find attractive, hence their presence, and other aspects that can somewhat constrain the optimal degree of agency necessary to fully and successfully pursue their life projects.

Some African immigrants with whom I spoke to in China speak of the abundant cultural and economic opportunities but others also speak of the sense of being seen as undesirables. This diverse range of perceptions speaks, in part, to larger structural changes in China that have profound implications for ways of thinking about the self in the context of one's sense of agency regardless of whether one is a citizen or an immigrant.

The first of these changes is the halting but persistent push by China, over the past one hundred years to modernize itself (Hui, 2009; Mitter, 2004). The desire to meet the material demands of its citizens and to be a respected and influential nation on the world stage has resulted in profound changes in how China responds to external factors such as globalization (Hui, 2009). One observes demands for a more open Chinese society that is responsive to worldwide market forces and that should also adhere to evolving standards regarding basic human rights and the paramountcy of the rule of law (Fei, 2011).

Given these pressures there is an intense interest in matters technical and materials originating from the West. Less attended to, are the human-scale challenges of modernity such as human rights, and the constraining of gross wealth inequality (Kleinman et. al., 2011).

This pursuit of individual agency is gradually challenging the eons-old model of individuality being subordinated to the group whether it is family, emperor, or state. The demands of its economy and the newly deployed sense of individual autonomy have resulted in tremendous internal migration, creating a vast indigenous internal diaspora on the eastern seaboard (Davin, 1998, 2009; Taylor, 2007). The aspirations of these internal migrants, and the challenges they face are often similar to those of many of the foreign immigrants of African heritage. Chinese internal migrants aspire to achieve higher incomes and greater subjective well-being (Simpson, 2013; Taylor, 2007). They experience high degrees of discrimination, and are often underpaid and have difficulty accessing work permits and social services (Solinger, 1999; Lu & Zhou, 2013). The outcome is often mixed with increased income and a greater knowledge of the world (Davin, 1998), alongside mental health problems (Xiao et. al., 2013).

In its quest to be a fully developed modern state China looks to its citizens and also to the West to provide knowledge and skills to facilitate it achieving the status of a technological super-power. Many immigrants and migrants therefore find themselves embedded in cultural spaces in considerable ferment where there is little of the stasis and lack of imaginative places typical of their original homes.

China faces many structural challenges in its modernization project, three of which will be mentioned here. The first is the legacy of the immediate past in terms of the pain associated with the predations of Britain, Germany and Japan from the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century (Spence, 1990).

Unfair economic treatment, political subordination and the terror and destruction of war still informs how China views the external world. One consequence of this is a periodic heightening of China's longstanding wariness and at times antagonistic stance toward outsiders.

Another consequence of the immediate past is that millions of Chinese citizens bear the psychological scars of the excesses of the "Cultural Revolution era", such as the loss of status or the lack of tertiary-level education alongside many of the younger generations who are also struggling to find their way, given the neoliberal policies introduced by Deng in 1978 (Hui, 2009). These policies introduced neoliberal practices such as unfettered markets, drastic downsizing of the state sector and a concomitant loss of health and housing benefits (Hui, 2009). So the sense of both political and national humiliation, and personal pain as a result of these structural changes, deeply informs how many Chinese go about pursuing their specific life projects.

The second challenge is that while the increased availability of material and improved physical infrastructure in China has been dramatic and relatively quick, the same cannot be said for the structures to address the psychosocial needs of its citizens. This has resulted in what Fei refers to as an 'incomplete modernity' where such features as individual rights, safe consumer products and services and ethical state and corporate actors are less than adequate. As a consequence the individual often lacks the necessary institutional structures to create safe places in which to love and work.

The third challenge is facilitating a sense of community and ethical behavior that manages the tensions between traditional and sometimes archaic rules governing commitment, the new found sense of autonomy and voluntary altruism, and the neoliberal driven risks of mindless consumption, unethical behavior and alienation.

Hope and possibility are however keenly felt, especially among the millions of residents on China's eastern seaboard, many of whom are internal migrants, mostly from rural communities in China's vast hinterlands (Taylor, 2007). Within this era of rapid change and the less than adequate structures, there are myriad opportunities, albeit not without the aforementioned risks, to explore, cultivate and express many aspects of the self in ways previously unimagined. These opportunities are not all limited to Chinese citizens but are also appealing and to some degree accessible to non-Chinese nationals who are open-minded, curious, and psychologically resilient.

So for immigrants there is a sense of being at a time and place in which their desires for adventure and opportunity resonates, however haltingly with the ongoing Chinese project of selectively privileging individual autonomy and creativity. (Kleinman et.al., 2011). This therefore creates places for both internal migrants and foreign immigrants to think of ways to actualize hereto unimaginable or unrealizable self-projects.

These initiatives in self-growth result in ongoing challenges to established schemas. The creativity that China needs to harness requires coordinated aspects of structure, an ethical framework to constrain destructive side effects such as an unfettered individualism, rampant corruption, environmental degradation, and the fraying of the social safety net. China must also make accommodation with a recent past in which many were harmed by systemic failures (Kleinman, et. al., 2011). There are also pressing demands for a more inclusive stance toward both internal and foreign ethnic diversity.

## **Chinese Perspectives on Race**

Peoples of Africana heritage have been documented as being in China as earlier as the seventh century (Wyatt, 2010). They were groups of traders and others who were enslaved persons (Akyepong, 2000; Jayasuriya, 2006).

From the sixteenth century on as a consequence of the trading and colonizing activities of the European powers one sees more mention of Africana persons in Asia and specifically in China. Dikotter in his detailed history of the attitudes of Chinese elites to race from antiquity to 1950 noted a stance that was part xenophobia and part racism toward non-Chinese peoples (Dikotter, 1992). China long ago established a hierarchy of barbarianism, with Blacks occupying the lowest rung, being furthest removed from the civilized as embodied by the Chinese Han people. Whites were also denigrated but were also feared because of their possession of superior technology.

Blackness was not essentialized as meaning out of Africa or peculiar to those with Black pigment but could also speak to any group perceived as ignorant. Fennell in her overview of Chinese thinking on race notes that the Chinese thirst for knowledge meant that it was not immune to the essentialized racism embedded in the enlightenment thinking of the West that was advocated by Western elites residing in China (Fennell, 2013). Such racialized thinking was inextricably linked to Western scientific classification that the Chinese venerated. Social Darwinism as manifestation of racialist scientific thinking was used to justify the inferior outcomes of subordinated persons of color.

This misuse of Darwin was in the context of attempts by Chinese elites to understand what made the Western nations superior. Here Darwin's thinking was misinterpreted to mean that race-based competition would result in the best group succeeding, assuming that such a group was homogeneous and was united in purpose. The Chinese elites made the erroneous assumption that the superiority of the white race had a genetic basis and did not factor in the role of structural racism in contributing to the inferior performance of subordinate groups. Fennell also notes that one lesson that the Chinese Han people took from their long subordination to the Manchus was a fear of foreign domination and of cultural weakening. These concerns co-exist uneasily with a growing awareness of the need to embrace the creative and technological skills of non-Chinese groups in the service of nation building.

With the advent of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1950 there continued to be a stress on a unified ethnic nation but there was a beginning nurturance of the idea of ideological solidarity with peoples of other nations, especially the colonized peoples of Africa in their struggle for freedom (Fennell, 2013). This sense of solidarity would emphasize the commonality of the historical exploitation of China and that of peoples of color by the imperialistic and capitalist West. This resonated strongly with the Chinese's own struggles for political autonomy from the West. Despite such progressive thinking and policies, racism continued to be an issue in China with tensions and at times riots between Black students and their Chinese hosts over issues such as inter-racial dating and racial profiling by the police and immigration authorities (Hevi, 1962).

Among Chinese ethnic groups there was a hierarchy that tended to conflate the Han ethnic group to be representative of all Chinese groups despite the presence of minority ethnic groups. Examining relationships among indigenous Chinese ethnic groups Myers, et. al. notes the dominance of the Han ethnic group that constitutes ninety percent of the Chinese population, and the wariness of the leadership to granting any substantive autonomy to minority ethnic groups. They cite statistics that indicate less than adequate outcomes with regards to income, healthcare and education for most minority ethnic groups (Myers et al., 2013).

Given the wariness with regards to ethnic difference within China it is not surprising that there would be an equally wary stance toward foreigners and resistance to them assimilating into Chinese society. It is only relatively recently that China has begun to articulate an immigration policy suggesting a more tolerant stance toward non-Chinese living and working in their midst (Skeldon, 2012; China Law & Practice, 2012).



In summary China's modern attitudes toward race are informed by the history of subjugation experienced by the now dominant Han group at the hands of the Manchus, the Europeans and the Japanese. These humiliating experiences fostered wariness toward the outsider and to non-Han ethnic groups within China. Historically they have maintained a race-based hierarchy of peoples with themselves as the most civilized and the darker-skinned people as inferior. At the same time they are aware of their technology inferiority in relation to the West and this has led to the complex situation of wariness and a sense of cultural superiority to the West and yet an admiration of its intellectual and technological prowess.

Toward persons of Africana heritage the perception of the Chinese has evolved over the past sixty years. What started as a relationship of solidarity in a struggle against western hegemony has evolved into one informed by multiple factors such as wariness, and yet a need for energy and minerals that are abundant in Africa and an insatiable need for individuals with technical and creative talent that increasingly includes persons of Africana heritage. The resulting upsurge of Africana migration to China has exposed many Chinese for the first time to foreigners and the attendant challenge of seeing them as human and talented in the context of a complex history of admiration, fear, contempt and at times xenophobic thinking.

### **The Contemporary Africana Population in China**

It is difficult to get an accurate sense of the size of the Africana community in China in general and specifically in the large Africana community in southern China as no official statistics are available but unofficial estimates place the population at more than 20,000 persons (Yang, 2010; Skeldon, 2012). The Africana population is distributed mainly on China's east coast with the largest community, consisting mostly of traders, residing in Guangzhou and its environs, and a physically dispersed community of mostly corporate business professionals in Shanghai. Africana teachers of English, like students, can be found across China. The population of traders is predominantly African, unmarried young males, with Nigerians apparently comprising the largest national group (Bodomo, 2012). The trader population is quite diverse in terms of religion, ethnicity, education and migratory patterns. Some traders engage in shuttle migration, moving back and forth between home and host countries. Others are full-time residents and have Chinese wives and children born in China.

Africana immigrants have access to established enclaves and communities in Guangzhou, Shanghai, Macau and to a lesser extent Beijing (Bodomo, 2012; Haugen, 2012; Morias, 2009). Many are also tightly linked to support networks in countries like Mali, Nigeria and Jamaica; places that have a long history of out migration and return.

Based on my own research, some of which is reported here, the Africana community in Shanghai is quite small and heterogeneous by country or region of origin with members from Africa and its diverse diaspora. There is no dominant ethnic or national group. This tends to be a population of well-paid and credentialed individuals, whose creative and technical skills are in high demand with many working for Chinese and international companies. It is also made up of a fair amount of teachers employed in diverse international and Chinese educational settings.

The members of the Shanghai-based Africana community are for the most part formally employed, and have the legal right to live and work in China, albeit on short-term visas that must be renewed annually. This is a physically dispersed community that maintains electronic links among its members and it has a vibrant community organization that is a clearing house for information that organizes social events and engages in community assistance projects in the Shanghai area. China's oldest Africana community has existed since the seventeenth century on the former Portuguese-controlled island of Macau (Morias, 2009).

## **Methodology**

The data cited is based on fieldwork that I did in Shanghai and Guangzhou from 2010 to 2013 and the research was approved by the college's Institutional Review Board. Subjects were recruited through word of mouth and referrals from trusted leaders of community organizations in Shanghai and Guangzhou. I strived to interview a wide range of subjects so as to elicit a diverse range of experiences and to avoid an over representation of any one of the work groups described below. So, for example, it is relatively easy to interview traders, students and English teachers. It is harder to locate and interview artists, affluent entrepreneurs and senior executives.

The subject pool consists of forty one individuals of Africana heritage from Africa, the Caribbean, Europe, and North America with home countries in seventeen different nation states. Twenty three subjects were male and eighteen were female. Ages ranged from twenty one to sixty one with most subjects being in their mid-thirties. Most have resided in China for less than five years, while a few had lived there for over fifteen years. The overwhelming majority did not consider themselves fluent in Chinese but most could negotiate simple social and business transactions in Chinese. Most of the students who had been studying in Chinese universities for more than two years were literate and orally proficient in Chinese.

Subjects belonged to one of the following work groups: students, traders, entrepreneurs, English teachers, and technocrats and managers working in corporate offices. Twenty seven subjects resided in Shanghai, twelve subjects resided in Guangzhou and two subjects resided in small cities relatively close to Shanghai while most of the traders resided in Guangzhou. While I did not inquire directly about their immigration status in China most immigrants described frequent trips abroad which would suggest that they had valid visas. One subject in the pool, who was a trader of modest means, had not left the country in ten years and I wondered to myself about his immigration status.

Two immigrant men had Chinese wives and bicultural children born in China but there were no African women in the subject pool who had Chinese husbands or partners. A few of the female subjects had Caucasian husbands or partners.

The sample described here is skewed towards university educated subjects who have valid immigration documents and earn good salaries. They tend to be workers with formal training who are actively recruited and hired in a talent area lacking in China such as English-language proficiency, creative work or technology and so they are usually well-paid and are assisted in maintaining their immigration status. Most of the traders in the sample by contrast were small business men in an ethically challenged and cut throat business milieu with low profit margins and low levels of social trust between themselves and the Chinese, and with other African immigrants. They rely heavily on unscrupulous brokers to obtain and renew their visas, and must be vigilant against arbitrary arrest by the police or the immigration authorities (Haugen, 2012).

Data was collected using a structured protocol with all subjects, being interviewed in English. Aliases were assigned and subjects were asked to discuss the attractions and constraints of their homelands with a focus on educational choices and career opportunities. Family structures and other network supports were carefully explored in the context of factors that influenced migrating to and adapting to China. Impressions of China from the perspectives of work, ethics, socializing, gender, race/ethnicity, intimacy and spirituality were explored in detail. Transcripts were analyzed based on selected themes arising from psychoanalytic and sociological perspectives on agency, structure, self and identity. The data was also analyzed using themes emerging from the psychologically attuned literature on the experience of being an immigrant.

## Subjects

PSEUDO NYM	GEN DER	A GE	NATIO N-ALITY	IN CHI NA	ETHNIC ITY	EDUCATI ON	OCCUPATI ON	SIT E
DEAN I	M	27	BAHA M IAN	2008	BLACK	BA-CHINA	TRADER	GZ
CHIPS	M	54	NIGERI AN	1997	BLACK / TIV	PHD	CEO	SH
ABDOU L	M	61	GUIN E AN	1988	FULANI	MA	CEO	GZ
MELIND A	F	40	USA	2008	BLK-AM	MA	TEACHER	SH
WILLI A M	M	35	BAHA M IAN	2001	BLACK	BA	DESIGNER	SH
SANJAN A	F	32	COLO M B-	2005	LATINA	MA-CHINA	SALES/MK TNG	GZ
JOHN	M	35	UGAND AN	2005	MUG U	BS	ENGLISH TEACHER	GZ
CIBANA	M	45	BURU N DI	1987	BURU N D- IAN	PHD	CONSULT ANT	SH
RENEE	F	32	USA	2011 /7	AF AM	MASTER S	CORP TRAINER	SH
OMEGA	M	21	USA	2012	AF AM	UNDERG RAD	STUDENT/ MUSIC TEACHER	SH
KRYSTA L	F	29	JAMAI C AN	2010	BLACK	BA	ENGLISH TEACHER	SA O- XI NG
YODA	M	32	AM- BELGI AN	2006	BLACK	MA	SCHOOL COUNSEL OR	SH

HARRY	M	26	FRENCH	2008	FRENCH	BA	ENTREPRENEUR	SH
BILL	M	39	USA	2011	BLACK	BA	ENGLISH TEACHER	SH
OJUKWU	M	41	NIGERIAN	1997	NNEWI	COLLEGE CREDIT	CEO	GZ
FRANK	M	41	NIGERIAN	2001	IGBO	HS	EXPORTEUR	GZ
LAMA	F	29	GUINEAN	2006	FULANI	HS	EXPORTEUR	GZ
DEZITE	M	36	BENIN	2010	FON	HS	EXPORTEUR	GZ
VENUS	F	44	USA	2012 /2	AF AM	BA	LNG TEACHER/ PRODUCER	SH
ALLAYA	M	32	MALI	2005	PELL	ELEMENTARY	EXPORTEUR	GZ
JAY	M	38	CONGO	1997	BLACK	MSC	INVESTOR	SH
CECILIA	F	33	UGANDAN	2003	BLK AFRICAN	BA	INV ADVSR	SH
GARBA	M	35	NIGER	2003	BLK AFRICAN	BS	ADMISSIONS DIRECTOR	SH
ELAINE	F	32	JAMAICAN	2008	BLK CARIBBEAN	MSC-CHINA	ENGLISH TEACHER	?
PERLENE	F	41	JAMAICA	2009	BLACK	MA EN ROUTE	TEACHER	SH
BIGE	M	23	DMNICAN	2008	BLACK	UNDERGRAD	STUDENT/ MUSICIAN	SH
JOY	F	22	ZIM	2009	BLK AFRICAN	UNDERGRAD	STUDENT	SH
KRISTINA	F	46	USA	2011 /5	AF AM	MBA	CORP TRAINER	SH

EMELINE	F	27		2009	GWAD A/ FRCH	MBA	SALES MNGR	SH
JOCELYN	M	43	TOGOL ESE	2002	MOBA	MA	EXPORTE R	GZ
JOHN		29	NIGERI	2012	IGBO	BA	EXPORTE	GZ
			AN				R	
ENVOY	M	27	ANTIG UAN	2009	BLACK	UNDERG RAD	STUDENT	SH
NATASHA	F	31	JAMERI CAN	2010	BLK/JA/ CARIBB EAN	MA	TEACHER	SH
THOMAS	M	39	FRENC H	1994	BLACK	MBA	CRP TRAINER/ ENTREPRE NEUR	SH
MIKHAILA	F	29	JAMAI CAN	2009	BLACK	BA	ENTREPRE NEUR	SH
KOMLA	M	30	TOGOL ESE	2012 /9	EWE	BA	POST GRAD STUDENT/ ECO	GZ
RAOUL	M	35	GWAD A	2002	BLACK	MFA	ENTREPRE NEUR	SH
WEI WEI	F	31	NAMIBI AN	2007	BLACK	MA	REAL ESTATE	SH
ANN	F	29	JAMAI CAN	2009	JAMAI CAN	MA	LNG TEACHER	SH
MIKE	M	38	CANAD IAN	2008	BLACK / BIM	MBA	IT EXEC	SH
MARIE	F	31	USA	2011 /1	AF AM	MBA	STUDENT OF CHINESE	SH

## Results & Discussion

### Leaving Home

In examining the data the focus was on the experiences of professionals, most of who were in Shanghai and some in Guangzhou. Their major motivating factor for leaving was the lack of opportunities for intellectual growth and career advancement in their respective home countries. One heard repeatedly of limited tertiary level curricula and a paucity of intellectually challenging career pipelines. While many felt they would be financially comfortable staying at home, there was a sense of a lack of intellectual growth and of substantive career mobility.

Within their respective home cultures they reported having access to support structures that facilitate migration such as a migratory sensibility, information networks, financial resources and access to knowledgeable and welcoming enclaves in potential host countries (Bodomo, 2012; Lowenthal, 1972). These structures, when used in a thoughtful manner enhance the migrant's sense of agency and increase the likelihood that he or she will thrive in the host culture. It also buffers him or her against the inevitable stresses of being an immigrant.

In addition the support network at home gives the immigrant a sense of continuity and, if not too closely examined, always offers the possibility of return. Here immigrants report that they must be tactical as one of the reasons for leaving home is the restrictive and demanding nature of family. This can continue in the host country with unreasonable demand for remittances of cash and goods. Among immigrants from Africa there was an emphasis on both material and emotional demands, while immigrants from the African diaspora in the West spoke more to the psychological demands of home. So as part of their adaptive strategy many immigrants must manage the tension between the desired aspects of home and those features that resulted in them leaving. As one migrant noted, that upon returning home for a vacation he is reminded of why he loves his country and why he had to leave.

Many of the immigrants with professional degrees had studied and worked legally in Africa, North America and Europe, while others had travelled abroad prior to coming to China. They were somewhat disenchanted with those places, and spoke of the limited opportunities for professional growth, and especially in Europe, the lack of imaginative space. So for these immigrants negotiating borders and being in novel locales was not for the most part a new experience.

This professional cohort is for the most part well informed and always seeking new opportunities. As such they were attuned to reports from peers and relatives that China was the place to be. As one subject stated, *“I was looking for opportunities for young people. I was happy, very happy to leave. The very first time I could make something happen to myself; create something in China without parental help.”*

## **Reflexivity**

As the above subject noted there were also psychological developmental factors at work, such as the need for autonomy and to test oneself in the world. China was thought to offer the possibility of a structural arrangement that would facilitate self-discovery and an enhanced sense of agency.

So the fact that an individual has migrated to China speaks to some degree to the presence of good reflective skills manifested as a need to dis-embed from structures that limit agency and embed in Chinese settings that would facilitate the growth-promoting exercise of agency. One immigrant reported that after a short stint as an English teacher in Guangzhou he found the setting too competitive, so he relocated to a third tier Chinese city where the authorities were effusive in their welcome and generous in the resources they made available to him such as housing, salary and teaching conditions. He was able to save a considerable amount of money and developed substantive relationships that enabled him to acquire better paying work than back in Guangzhou.

Many contemporary immigrants adopt a stance of adaptive ambivalence with regards to both home and host country. They find admirable and constraining qualities in both cultures. As a rule African immigrants closely identify with the aesthetics (food, weather, vistas) and relationships of their homeland while bemoaning its structural limitations as manifested in the lack of opportunities for intellectual growth and access to material goods. By way of contrast China is admired for the availability of resources to develop intellectually and to acquire wealth. At the same time its questionable ethics, its polluted environment and its ambivalence toward foreigners is a source of stress.



## **Structure and Agency**

The interplay between structure and agency is quite complex and nuanced in how it is enacted in China. So in response to its demand for talent China now issues a special visa for creative workers while at the same time streamlining the processes for the enforcement of visa violations (China Law & Practice, 2012). Yet as Bodomo notes, one also observes subtle variations in how policies are enforced with regards to African immigrants, with an often heavy-handed approach in Guangzhou versus a more enlightened approach in Yiwu and of course the near invisibility of immigration enforcement in Shanghai (Bodomo, 2012). One effect is increased agency for a desired class of immigrants and even greater reduced agency for a less desired class of immigrant.

## **Relations with the Chinese**

Work and visa status was a crucial factor in managing the relationship with the Chinese authorities. Credentialed and technically skilled individuals like those found in Shanghai, who are legally resident in China rarely, had contact with the authorities. Unlike the traders in southern China, there were no reports among them of periodic immigration sweeps or being accosted and demanded to produce proof of legal status (Bodomo, 2012; Haugen, 2012). Traders tend to work for themselves; some without documentation and whose interactions with their Chinese suppliers are mediated by cash with no requirement for the verification of their immigration status. In Shanghai the successful migrant invariably must have a legitimate visa and working papers to be employed in a well-paying job with a corporation.

The Shanghai cohort spoke of nuanced challenges in their relationship with their Chinese work colleagues. The perception of them as creative agents and their style of working results in them generating changes within the cultural structures of their workplaces. Their ideas and the ways of thinking that underlie them challenged some of their Chinese peers to think and act differently as creative knowledge workers. There are however constraints on agency within the worksite. Often there is anxiety and an accompanying resistance to change efforts as many Chinese workers do not easily embrace issues of creativity and initiative to the degree that their Western counterparts do. One African manager reported his frustration in trying to mentor his female executive assistant. She resisted his attempts to have her exercise more agency and told him that her job was not to think but to simply do what he told her.

For this cohort ethical interactions in the business sphere with Chinese nationals was an ongoing concern. Immigrants in this study consistently complained about Chinese indifference to honoring contracts and the tendency to try to exploit foreigners in business dealings.

They spoke of a need to be vigilant and to be aggressive in such dealings; behaviors that challenged their typical ways of thinking about ethical behavior and about negotiating. So while the immigrant has a wide range of opportunities to be creative and productive there is little structural protection against unethical business practices. These ethical concerns were cited by many immigrants as being exacerbated by their race and offered this as a major reason why they would not settle permanently in China.

On a personal level the major impediment to substantive relations between the Chinese and many of the African immigrants is the absence of a jointly shared language. Most immigrants are not proficient speakers of Chinese and are therefore limited to speaking with English speaking Chinese peers at work. This lack of Chinese fluency limits the ability of many African immigrants to engage in a socially substantive way with their Chinese peers away from the worksite; engagements that facilitate workplace understanding and creativity are not available and limit the migrant's sense of agency.

When there is Chinese language competency as seen most commonly among some professionals, traders and most foreign students in China, there are reports of more substantive and wide ranging relationships between the Chinese and African immigrants? To the extent that the migrant makes a sustained effort to learn the language and venture out of his or her ethnic enclave there are reports of meaningful relationships with Chinese nationals.

### **Enclaves**

Many in this cohort have access to enriched personal and electronically-mediated networks that facilitated locating jobs and support in China. This is crucial for effective agency and mobility given that many of these knowledge workers are physically dispersed across Shanghai, Guangzhou and in the case of teachers and students across China. Given such access they were able for the most part to avoid the numerous scams that are aimed at foreigners seeking work in China. In one case where a woman was duped, she was able to tap into a network that provided assistance to her.

These various forms of assistance rarely required monetary compensation or the use of brokers, given the quality of networks they tapped into, the demand for their skills and their own experiences in effectively engaging administrative systems. This is in contrast to some of the African traders in southern China who work for themselves, must deal with brokers, are relatively immobile and are often closely monitored and viewed suspiciously by the law enforcement and immigration authorities (Haugen, 2012).

In speaking to Africana immigrants who work as professionals in China, they all appear to have had access to resource rich migrant networks in the home country, to its many other diasporas and access to supportive enclaves in China. Immigrants with university-level education employed in knowledge intensive industries tended to rely heavily on electronically accessible and data rich networks that provide access to jobs, housing and socializing opportunities. Given that this subgroup of immigrants tend to be physically dispersed these networks and this style of relating is vital to their cognitive and material success. It is however limited in its ability to addressing their needs for spiritual and emotional nurturance.

These enclaves however are not without risk, with some immigrants reporting feeling isolated from the larger host culture. With the immigrant knowledge workers based in Shanghai the enclave is a potential bubble that encompasses Chinese colleagues who are fluent in English and are oriented toward a Western world view. The immigrants' technical skills and Western know-how make them attractive to their English speaking Chinese peers but such relationships often prevent them from understanding the larger culture. Most immigrants reported a tendency not to feel the need to learn Chinese and noted the limits it placed on their ability to substantially engage and understand a diverse set of Chinese nationals.

For other immigrants the enclave is a transitional space that acts as a springboard for a deeper involvement with the host culture. They reported taking the time to cultivate relationships with Chinese peers and their families and to consciously explore outside of their expatriate, business, or school communities. Put another way the enclave hosts many subsets of immigrants, one of which is deeply invested in understanding and being embedded in mainstream Chinese culture. Some of these immigrants strive to learn the language, some – mostly men - marry Chinese nationals and have children from those unions.

Africana immigrants also extend their sense of agency through their involvement in their community organizations. In interviews with the leadership of the leading Nigerian community organization in Guangzhou in southern China, there was a focus on managing the perception of Africana immigrants as being crime prone and therefore Subject, at times, to harsh policing by Chinese law enforcement agencies. Community leaders devised strategies to police their nationals and to negotiate a less harsh response by the authorities. In Shanghai the dominant immigrant community organization regularly engages in fundraising activities to assist the children of low income Chinese internal migrants. There is no demand by its members for engagement around indigenous policing or immigration matters.

## **Race**

There was a consistent sense that to be of Africana heritage in China was to experience both curiosity about one's Blackness and racist behavior at the individual and institutional level. Most immigrants reported being stared and pointed at on a regular basis and in a personal business context many reported being discriminated against.

So Africana immigrants who are native English speakers report difficulty getting jobs as language teachers, when competing against White immigrants for whom English is a second language. For some Chinese, Whites are perceived as being more competent merely by being White and are therefore initially accorded a greater degree of status and agency than that given to Africana immigrants. Others reported housing offers being withdrawn or prices for services increasing when the Chinese landlord or entrepreneur realized that the client was of Africana heritage.

At the same time some immigrants observed that such racism was not deeply embedded and that if one was perceived as being talented then discrimination tended to be less likely. As a result Africana immigrants recruited to work in Chinese corporations reported little evidence of racism in the workplace. It would seem that the wariness toward the foreigner in general and the Africana in general alongside a desire for their talent is still unresolved as reflected in visa policies and reported work place discrimination. The tentative trend seems to be that talent and Chinese language competency trumps racism in the arenas where talent is desired.

### **Religion & Intimacy**

Chinese structures also place limits on the Africana migrant's sense of agency in terms of spirituality and intimacy. The Chinese authorities tightly regulate organized religion and while foreigners are allowed under certain circumstances to worship with Chinese nationals there are strict guidelines that limit the degree of sermonizing that is permitted. Some immigrants who attend the officially sanctioned churches portray them as lacking theological depth and denominational specificity. The alternative is to attend 'illegal' churches (Haugen, 2011) which are regularly shut down by the authorities and their officiating priests are often deported.

In the realm of intimacy the skilled migrant is confronted, in the case of women, by the paucity of eligible male partners. Some report that Chinese men show little interest in them and the few that do, want to quickly get married, while non-Chinese men often act like "a child in a candy store" given their wide range of choices. Both men and women are confronted with a disadvantage arising from the sense of mobility that they prize. It means that the cadre of possible intimate partners who are fellow immigrants is always in flux given the transient nature of the foreign migrant population in China. This works against attempts to engage in substantive and enduring relationships and a potential cost of such mobility is loneliness (Strenger, 2013).

## Conclusion

China while experiencing high demand for creative workers is still establishing the necessary structures to fully accommodate their need for personal fulfillment that goes beyond intellectually challenging work and material rewards. Still unresolved is the marked tension between the antipathy to foreigners and an admiration of, and desire for their technical skills.

For African immigrants China is a site of opportunity and risk that leaves many in a position of adaptive ambivalence. In the context of an unblinking assessment of the pleasures and deficits of their home countries, they appreciate and take advantage of the opportunities that China offers in the intellectual and wealth acquisition spheres. They are also keenly aware of its ethical shortcomings, its unsafe environment and products, and the structural constraints that make the pursuit of spirituality and intimacy challenging.

At the same time African immigrants with their enhanced sense of agency are challenging extant Chinese ways of thinking resulting in structural changes in areas such as immigration policy, the response to creative workers, and in law enforcement.

One can conclude that migration in a globalized world might offer economic and intellectual benefits but the psychosocial aspects of agency are under-thematized and the results here suggest that they can be quite costly even for seemingly well-qualified immigrants.

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