

The emergence of multipolarity in global higher education: The Belt and Road Initiative and African students' motivations to pursue postgraduate education in China

The past decade has witnessed an unprecedented transformation of China into an important “receiving” nation for international student mobility (ISM), underscored by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)-tied African countries becoming the main import markets. The emerging China-bound ISM, driven by contextually-specific motivations, necessitates a re-theorisation of the Western-centric, neo-liberalism-driven push-pull model within the broader context of multipolarity in higher education. Through semi-structured in-depth interviews with eight international students from BRI African countries pursuing postgraduate programmes in Beijing, this study explores the dynamic macro-micro interface of push and pull factors. These narratives of how the push (e.g., the under-developed higher education system in the home country) and pull factors (i.e., host nation’s financial support for international students, economic and political links between the home and host country, and host nation’s exponential growth) intersected with individuals’ desire, reflect the multipolar shifts in global higher education landscapes. By extending the macro-focused push-pull model to incorporate these complexities, this paper echoes the need to recognise contemporary multipolarity when explaining the ISM in diverse contexts.

Keywords: The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); African students; push-pull model; multipolarity

Introduction

The global landscape of higher education is emblematic of the increasingly complex and multipolar nature in which China, over the past decade, has emerged as an important “receiving” nation for international student mobility (ISM), while also being commonly perceived as a leading “sending” nation (Gao, in press). According to the Chinese Ministry of Education data (MOE, 2019) (the latest available), in 2018 the number of international students in China reached 492,185, an all-time high, before dropping during the Covid-19 pandemic. In the same year, there were approximately 987,000, 452,000 and 445,000 higher education enrolments of international students in the USA, the UK and Australia respectively (OECD, 2020). Simultaneously, China sent as many as 662,100 students to study abroad at tertiary and higher levels. Inbound international students had increased by nearly 400% since the China’s reform and opening from 1978, when it recruited just 1,236 international students. These inbound international students hailed from 196 countries/regions and pursued either full degree credentials or non-degree courses, such as exchange and short-term language/culture immersion programmes, in 1,004 higher education institutions spread over China’s 31 provinces, autonomous regions and provincial-level municipalities (MOE, 2019).

China’s diplomatic grand strategies, represented by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), have been contributing to the popularity of full-time degree-bearing study in China among students from BRI countries. The BRI, inspired by the old Silk Road, was launched in 2013 and includes the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road, with the aim to connect China with Central Asia, Europe, Southeast Asia, South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. As stated in the “Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road”, the basic principle of the BRI is to encourage countries along the BRI route to cooperate in the following five aspects: policy coordination, facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people bonds (State Council, 2015). Although the BRI focuses on “hard infrastructure”, economic cooperation and development, education is deemed as “soft infrastructure”, in which higher education is considered a tool for soft power development (Peters, 2022). In 2016, the MOE issued “Education Action Plan for the Belt and Road Initiative”, stating that China would work with BRI countries in order to build a joint education community, and in turn to meet the BRI “people-to-people bonds” goal and support the achievement of the other four goals (MOE, 2016).

The surge of BRI-country students from Southeastern and Central Asian countries, and notably Africa, in China reflects the close economic and political ties among BRI countries. In

2018, 260,600 international students from 64 BRI countries studied in China, accounting for 52.95% of the total ISM population (www.yidaiyilu.gov.cn, 2019a). In the same year students from all 54 African countries (including 52 BRI countries), such as Sub-Saharan countries of Tanzania and Nigeria, comprised 16.57% (81,562) of the total international students in China. They were only second to Asian students who constituted 59.95% of international students in China, but higher than Europe (14.96%), America (7.26%) and the Oceania (1.27%) (MOE, 2019). The educational migration of African students to China is not new, but their numbers have increased significantly, making China the second most popular destination after France, a phenomenon that is now entangled with the bilateral relations and political economy of trade within the BRI context.

African students flocking mainly to Chinese cities such as Beijing, Guangzhou, Nanjing, Shanghai, and Wuhan (Ho, 2017) benefit from various policies and support measures that have been instituted by the Chinese government and the African country authorities to expand higher education opportunities in China. The main actions include: (1) establishing the “Silk Road” Chinese Government Scholarship (tuition fee waiver with living allowance) to attract talents from BRI countries to study in China, and (2) optimising the mutual recognition of academic qualifications among BRI countries (www.yidaiyilu.gov.cn, 2019b). Pledged both in the above-mentioned 2015 BRI Vision and Actions and 2016 Education Action Plan, China provides 10,000 government scholarships to the countries along the Belt and Road every year. Following the Chinese government scholarship, provinces, cities, and universities set up their own scholarships/stipends to expand financial support for enrollers from BRI route countries. In 2018, 63,041 international students received scholarships for study in China, and 15.59% of students from BRI countries were awarded Chinese government scholarships, higher than the 12.81% of overall international students receiving such scholarships. China has surpassed the USA, UK and France to become the largest provider of higher education scholarships in Africa (Hodzi, 2020). Furthermore, China has signed a mutual recognition agreement for higher education qualifications with 24 BRI countries (www.yidaiyilu.gov.cn, 2019b).

The increasing value and global recognition of Chinese academic qualifications, driven by the increasing proportion of world ranked universities in China over the last decade, also increase the appeal of Chinese universities among students from these BRI countries which have limited high ranked universities. In the league table of the Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) World University Rankings 2023 (Top Universities, 2023), for instance, Peking University, Tsinghua University, and Fudan University ranked 12, 14, and 34 respectively, reflecting the success of a huge government push to foster elite Chinese universities, through the “Project 985”, “Project 211”, and “Double First Class” University Plans. China’s re-emergence as a global power and the focus of its BRI on cultural exchange and cooperation in training and education, along with the much lower fees and living costs it offers, appear to strengthen China’s attraction to international students. It is within this new knowledge-power nexus that Chen Bao-sheng, the former Minister of Education, claimed that “BRI is the road map that will lead China’s education to the centre of the world” (Sohu News, November 9, 2019, http://www.sohu.com/a/119917350_387157).

The approach of Chinese higher education to become a destination for Asian and African students is perceived fundamentally different from the market-driven neoliberalist approach prevalent in the West. For example, Pan (2013) argues that China’s rise as a principal destination for ISM is attributed not to neoliberal ideology or economic pursuits but to state-directed efforts aimed at bolstering international political and diplomatic relations. Similarly, Wen et al. (2018) delineate the contrasting ideologies of neoliberalism and the developmental-state thesis underpinning the increasing ISM across the world. They identify the mass recruitment of international students as both a political strategy to strengthen China’s soft power and international competitiveness, and a cultural strategy to promote the Chinese

language and sinology. This is explicitly confirmed in the “Study in China Plan” by the Ministry of Education in 2010, emphasising that ISM in China is to train international personnel who are well-versed in Chinese and friendly towards China (MOE, 2010).

In this view, different from some destination countries such as the USA and Australia that have framed ISM within the education-migration matrix as a neoliberal pattern of “brain gain” in the context of low birth rates and/or population aging (Brown & Tannock, 2009), China shows little intention to capitalise on international students “as a way of developing its national human capital” (Yang, 2022a, p. 317). Furthermore, Yang (2022a) indicates that unlike many Western higher education systems that recruit large numbers of international students to fill revenue gaps resulting from neoliberalisation and financial turmoil, approximately half of the international students in China are non-degree-seeking and contribute relatively modest economic gain for the country. Similarly, Wu (2019) argues that China’s outward-oriented higher education internationalisation, including ISM, has started with cultural and diplomatic purposes rather than profit and thus reflects the competition and charity features. Such cultural and diplomatic purposes are substantiated by the enormous financial supports for inward ISM flows, specifically from developing BRI countries. However, in recent context of the BRI, international students also become human resources for Chinese enterprises in their home countries along the BRI route. Meanwhile, some underfunded universities began to see ISM as a source of income. Hence, Wen et al. (2018) propose a nuanced view that China’s higher education internationalisation strategy occupies a middle ground between neoliberalism and state-development ideology.

Amidst this multifaceted and seemingly contradictory landscape, there is a pronounced need to scrutinise the motivations behind ISM within the Chinese context. This reflects the critique of the epistemological domination by the West or Global North and of the classic South-North flows of traditional ISM. The influx of students to China signals a shift in the understanding of ISM and its implications for education amidst changing multipolar global landscape, partly propelled by China’s BRI (Peters, 2022). In this connection, this study employed the push-pull model (Altbach, 2004; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002) to explore the factors influencing African students’ decisions to study in China. Through a literature review focused on how push and pull factors influence the international mobility of students and empirical research involving inbound international students from the BRI route, this study seeks to elucidate the evolution of the push-pull model and identify significant gaps in existing literature. By examining the motivations of eight African international students pursuing postgraduate degree programmes at a university in Beijing through semi-structured interviews, the study uncovers distinctive patterns of study abroad motivation. This extends the conceptual understanding of the push-pull forces for cross-border flows, underscoring the complex dynamics that contribute to the evolving patterns of ISM in the context of global multipolarity.

The push-pull model in international student mobility within a multipolar landscape

International student mobility (ISM)—a core component of the internationalisation of higher education—is commonly investigated by the push-pull model. A student seeking an international education will first make the decision to go abroad, then select a host country/institution based on a variety of “push-pull” factors (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). The push-pull model was first proposed by Everett Lee (1966) to analyse motivating factors that facilitate or retard migration. Lee divided the factors informing the decision to migrate and the process involved into four categories: (1) factors associated with the area of origin; (2) factors associated with the area of destination; (3) intervening obstacles; and (4) personal factors. According to Lee, in every area, there are “countless factors which act to hold people within the area or attract people to it, and there are others which tend to repel them” (1966, p. 50). Lee highlights that some of these factors affect most people in much the same way, while others

affect different people in different ways, such as a good school system in the destination country counted as a positive pull factor for a family with young children.

When converting from migration research into international education to explain ISM, the push-pull model mainly operates from a macro perspective and focuses on those external educational, economic, sociocultural, and political rationales in South-North flows (Altbach, 1998; 2004; McMahon, 1992). For example, Altbach categorises students' reasons for deciding to study abroad as push factors that are negative or unfavourable for the home country or location, and pull factors that are positive or favourable for the host location and university. The primary push factors in the home country may include limited higher education opportunities, competitive college entry requirements, and the unavailability of specialisations that students want to study. Social discrimination and political instability also push students out of their home countries. McMahon (1992) also notes that the level of economic wealth, the degree of involvement of the home country in the world economy, and the priority placed on education by the home country serve as positive push factors. The primary pull factors are higher quality of education, ranking of the target universities, scholarships and financial aid by the host country/institution, and generally more favourable economic and sociocultural conditions.

While the macro-focused push-pull model recognises the importance of the educational, cultural, social, economic, and political contexts within which decisions are taken, the model foregrounding external forces was considered to undermine the internal/personal factors (e.g., personal characteristics, motivations, aspirations, relationships, and life experiences) (Li & Bray, 2007; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). It was subsequently modified by integrating internal or individual factors into the macro push-pull analyses. Although empirical research on the reasons for international (African) students coming to study in China is still at its early stages of development, existing evidence indicates the macro-micro factor conflation. The geopolitical significance of China (Ma, 2017; Mulvey, 2021), prospects of China's economic development (Ma, 2017; Wen & Hu, 2019), the significant lower tuition fees and living costs, and the provision of scholarships by the Chinese government (Ahmad & Shah, 2018) are the chief pulling forces undergirding choice of international students from less-developed Asian and African jurisdictions. In addition, on the macro level the improved educational quality of Chinese universities (Ahmad & Shah, 2018), easing of admissions policies, and welcoming visa policies (Wen & Hu, 2019) reveal other important pull reasons. In this regard, China is increasingly desirable compared with Western developed countries, with their multiple barriers such as high economic costs, and increasingly tight visa and immigration control regimes. On the sending side, Yang (2018) and Li (2017), despite not concentrating on the push-pull model, found that the lack of educational options and increased domestic university entrance examination pressure in the home country were the main macro push factors, negative in nature, for pushing students to study in China, a trend that exemplifies the shift towards multipolarity. The emergence of multipolarity in global higher education, with its expanded and diversified educational opportunities, demands a nuanced understanding of the interplay between macro and micro motives that influence students' educational choices (Glass & Cruz, 2023), thereby extending the conceptual boundaries of the traditional push-pull model.

Indeed, apart from macro-level factors, existing research have converged around describing the advantages that can accrue to individuals and their families in terms of potential economic, cultural, educational, and social gains. Interest in the Chinese language and culture (Ahmad & Shah, 2018) and the pursuit of job prospects and commercial opportunities (Haugen, 2013) are salient personal motivations for studying in China. These motivations reflect not only the diverse personal reasons behind choosing to study abroad but also underscore the emergence of multipolarity in global higher education, where destinations like China are becoming increasingly attractive due to their unique offerings that extend beyond traditional

Western educational landscapes.

However, the extant push-pull literature on ISM in both the Western contexts or others, falls short in capturing the complex interplay of macro and micro motives that students face when making their educational choices (Chen, 2017). This limitation can stem from a methodological bias, as push-pull studies are predominantly quantitative and thus may not fully capture the nuanced push-pull dynamics of international students' decisions to study abroad (Marginson, 2014). Instead, qualitative research, albeit limited, has revealed that international students opt to study overseas based on the macro and micro factor interface. For example, Choi and Tang (2016) studied the cross-border decisions of two Chinese-descendant students from Malaysia and Indonesia in Hong Kong. Their study found that ethnic discrimination Chinese encountered in the two students' home countries pushed them to come to Hong Kong where their personal exploration of Chineseness was facilitated by the plural and fluid identities of Hong Kong Chinese people.

The current study breaks the parochial framing of the push-pull model which is characteristic of the external-internal binary and the push-pull juxtaposition. By acknowledging the rise of multipolarity in global higher education, this study aims to illustrate a dynamic interplay of the macrolevel and microlevel academic, economic, social and cultural, and political factors. This approach highlights how broader structural conditions in both the sending and receiving contexts, including the strategic positioning of global powers like China within a multipolar landscape, influence individual agency in the decision to study abroad. Such an approach is crucial for understanding the multifaceted motivations behind the mobility of international students today, reflecting a shift towards a more interconnected and diversified global educational landscape.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research approach and utilised in-depth interviews to obtain nuanced data that could contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the research participants and the meaning they made of their study abroad decisions (Seidman, 2006). Eight African students participated in this study. These participants were enrolled in a higher education institution which was established in 1902 in the city of Beijing, initially for teacher education. Over one century, the institution has become a comprehensive university listed in the "Project 211" and "Project 985" initiatives with the result that it has secured a positive reputation among locals as well as internationally. As of 2023, the university had approximately 1,800 international/non-local students from over 100 countries and regions pursuing degree programmes, the scale of which ranked towards the top among Chinese universities. The internationalisation of higher education has been reflected in the university's vision and development plan. For example, the university's 13th Five-Year Development Plan spotlights its institutional strategy for improving the quality of education for international students and attracting world-class university students from neighbouring Asian countries, BRI Asian and African countries and other emerging countries to study at the university. Although Mandarin is designated as the medium of instruction, the university offers postgraduate programmes in the English language to international students. In addition to the Chinese government scholarship, the university offers its own scholarships (e.g., the "Silk Road Muduo" scholarship, and the Belt and Road School scholarship) to expand financial support especially for enrollers from BRI route countries.

Students who were interested in participating in the study were contacted and screened according to the selection criteria: (a) the participants are full-time students who are taking a postgraduate degree at the university outside one's country of usual residence, and (b) they are citizens of BRI African countries. The study sample was not delimited by nationality in order to capture the diversity of African students represented in China. A purposive and snowball

sampling was used to allow individuals who met these criteria to participate. A verbal briefing of the nature of the study and participants' rights and responsibilities were ensured by the researchers. Signed consent forms were collected. The eight participants were first- or second-year master's or doctoral students at the university in the 2021/22 academic year, when the research was undertaken (see Table 1). A brief background survey indicated that they were aged 30 to 35 years, with five males and three females. Three of them hailed from Tanzania, two from Ghana, and the rest from Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Malawi respectively. On top of their respective mother tongues (i.e., Swahili, Amharic, and Yoruba), four out of eight participants self-evaluated their English as excellent, and the other four as good. At the time of research, six of them were studying master's programme in Comparative Education, one enrolled in a master's degree in Public Health, and one as a PhD candidate in Educational Economics and Administration. All the postgraduate programmes were instructed in English and "stand-alone" from regular postgraduate programmes for domestic Chinese students (Kuroda, 2014). All of participants were fully supported by Chinese scholarship programmes.

[Table 1 near here]

Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with the eight participants in English and were about an hour in duration each. Each interview was held by phone call or via video call as international students often moved back to their home countries and attended online classes in the university during the pandemic. We asked broad and more focused questions about the reasons for them to choose Chinese higher education with a view to exploring the dynamic interactions between the macro structural and micro personal push and pull forces. Core questions asked during the interviews concentrated on the student's perspectives about the major macro/micro push and pull determinants underlying their choice (e.g., Why did you choose to study in China (and in this city, this university?). The interview questions specifically addressed the macro-level BRI and the role it played in the participants' decision to study in China. Each participant was interviewed once, and all interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. The objective of the qualitative analysis was to reduce the interview data into a manageable set of themes and patterns (Creswell, 2008). Categorising and connecting strategies were employed to entail fragmenting discrete sets of texts, comparing, and clustering similar fragments into meaningful categories. Categories (e.g., push and pull factors) were then compiled to formulate themes deductively from the push-pull conceptual framework and ISM literature and inductively from the transcripts, the latter to remain open to emerging themes throughout the course of the analysis.

Findings

The narratives of participants unearthed the conjunction of macro and micro motives and showed that access to scholarships, prospects for enhanced employment opportunities in Chinese companies of their home countries, and a desire to obtain a strengthened understanding of the host society were key micro pull factors influencing African students' decisions to study in China. The individual-level factors were mediated by the pull factors and had their equivalents at a macro scale including: host nation's financial support for international students, economic/political links between the home and host country, and host nation's economic and educational development. The different levels of pull factors were bound up with the underdeveloped higher education system in their home countries, pushing them to study in China in order to contribute to the comprehensive advancement of home nations. Individuals' decision-making also involved the third countries which represented another set of factors pushing the African students away from other destinations and pulled them toward studying in China.

Pull factors influencing African student mobility into China

When asked why they chose China as their destination for overseas study, all the participants referred to the scholarships provided by the Chinese government as well as China's booming economic and higher education development, and economic and trade linkages and political affiliations between China and their home country as main stimulants. For example, Participant 4 said:

There are many factors which made me want to study in China. I think the main one is the scholarship in China. But the most important thing is, as you know, Tanzania and China... China is a communist country and Tanzania also is... Tanzania and China have had a good relationship for a long time since PRC China was established in 1949... That relationship pretty much influenced me to study in China.

Similarly, Participant 5 described how scholarship opportunities on the hosting side served as a crucial financial incentive for him to pursue master's study in China, while China's investment in his home country had been useful in pulling him into China:

I got a full scholarship to study in China... I know China because of the two countries' relationships, Ethiopia and China's relationship. There are so many Chinese companies in Ethiopia so I know more about China. There are so many Chinese here... That is the other reason that led me to think about China [as a destination choice].

In an effort to attract international students, various types of scholarships were available for BRI international students in the host university. These financial resources effectively alleviated economic concerns for international students from developing BRI countries and revealed how international mobility promoted by the BRI is viewed as a strategy to overcome local systemic challenges (Lee et al., 2021). Participant 8 specifically mentioned the BRI and how the "Silk Road" Chinese Government Scholarship and the collaboration in BRI countries motivated her to study in China:

The reason first must be scholarship, but the reason was also the BRI [that instituted the Silk Road Scholarship Programme]. So, I believe it [China] is the best place to study when you want to, like, broaden the horizon or reinforce the good relationships between the two countries [China and Tanzania].

All of the above-mentioned macro factors contextualised the students' desire for personal advancement and career development. When asked what individual factors prompted them to come to China, accruing the higher education qualifications and learning the Chinese language were considered advantageous for job prospects in African countries, such as working for companies doing business with Chinese partners (Participant 4), and in the diplomatic sector or government positions (Participant 3). Participant 1 paid attention to the interface between micro and macro gains, and cited the expectation of the experience of Chinese modernity, which he aspired for African development in relation to individual's growth:

I wanted to come to China to study because, you know, China has advanced development in all fields, for instance, in education, economics, and advanced technology. So, I wanted to experience more, especially in education, and to see how China did develop its education sector... We are trying to imitate a lot of things from the Chinese government, the Chinese system of education, and the Chinese system of economy. So, it's a very good opportunity to come to China to learn their skills and learn how to make things properly.

In this sense, coming to study in China provided them a means to realise their modernity aspirations by being part of the spectacular growth of China. Notwithstanding, divergent from the existing literature indicating that the quality and reputation of the higher education institutions in China was the most important pull factor (e.g., Ma, 2017; Wen & Hu, 2019), this study found that the generosity of financial support as well as China's economic and political ties to their home nations seemed to take precedence over the perceived level of prestige for higher education in China. However, despite their eagerness to link with China's prosperity for the development of their home nations, the participants reframed the BRI to focus primarily on connections with China, rather than embracing it as the global framework intended by Chinese policymakers (Lee et al., 2021). This finding sheds light on the concept of multipolarity within the context of China's rise. Moreover, the participants unanimously concurred that China has successfully built world-class universities and advanced the overall reputation of higher education, yet denoted China's semi-peripheral position when compared with elite universities in the USA and the UK:

I think it's still a little bit more [time needed] to catch up because over the years, there have been the USA and the UK, and China is gradually, you know, joining them. So yeah, there is a difference, you know, when it comes to accept a Chinese higher education certificate. But the difference is not that much. I think that China is getting there and even will become stronger one day because China has both the Chinese philosophy and the Western philosophy in combination to run the higher education system. (Participant 7)

This narrative expressed the ambiguous position of semi-peripheral states such as China, which have been subordinated to the global core but also have a mission to catch up with it. The narrative thus reveals continuing tensions between "centres" and "peripheries" within the world knowledge system (Wu et al., 2023). According to Mazzarol and Soutar (2002), once the decision to study abroad has been made by students, the next decision is the selection of a host country when the third countries emerge, "making one host country relatively more attractive than another" (p. 83). From a comparative perspective, participants were content with the ranking of the host university (top 300 in the world university ranking) and especially alluded to the fact that "a certificate from China is very well recognised in my country" because "China attracts a lot of international students compared to the Western countries and provides a wide range of opportunities [e.g., scholarships] for different international students to come and study" (Participant 2).

Push factors influencing African student mobility into China

The participants' decision to study abroad was highly interrelated with the push factors of their home countries. While China was envisioned by them as a land of rapid development of its economy and higher education, the disadvantage in the higher education system and national language/cultural development on the sending side were the major push factors. Participant 1 argued:

Tanzanians should learn from China because Chinese people stick to own culture and language... You need to focus on your language. You need to focus on your culture to protect it from the foreigners, to protect it from the outside world. That's what the Chinese people and the Chinese government do... I think that is a good thing... in terms of preventing the invasion of other cultures or other languages when compared with Tanzania.

In a similar vein, Participant 2 pointed to China's position within the global higher education

system relative to African nations which enabled his decision to study in China through more self-reflexive and responsible engagements with the issue of quality of higher education:

I wasn't so much in love with that idea about pursuing a master's degree in Ghana because I wanted to explore other educational systems, as the Ghanaian education system was still outmoded. The educators rely on the stuff they heard from the colonial masters. Nothing has really changed. I wanted to see what... how education in the advanced countries was like and compare it with what we have back home in Ghana.

This excerpt underscores the relevance of decolonisation to higher education development in much of the non-Western world, whether ever colonised or not, where the higher education system was largely adopted from the Western academic model (Altbach, 2004). This is the case in Africa as educational systems in contemporary Africa seem to be the “products of colonialism, and closely mirror educational systems in former colonial powers” (Hodzi, 2020, p. 2). Subsequently, colonisers' languages (e.g., English and French) have been the dominant mediums of instruction in African universities so that indigenous languages are less legitimised and valued in both colonial and post-colonial periods of time (Wolff, 2017). This triggered the participants in this research to compare their own country's educational and cultural institutions with those of emerging destinations (e.g., China—Participant 4). Such comparison pushed them to pursue postgraduate education in “a developed country like China” (Participant 2) in the light of their personal and collective commitment to the prosperity of their home countries post-graduation. Such delineation of China as a developed country and as a source of knowledge substantially challenges the theorisation of the global higher education landscape that is underpinned by cultural hegemony generated within the unequal world-systems hierarchy in knowledge (Marginson & Xu, 2022; Wu et al., 2023).

The following interview excerpt further showed how the macro push rationales enabled the student's micro motives to return home to Tanzania after graduation with a desire to contribute to its educational and economic development:

I have two things in my mind. One is that I want to take part in changing our education system. We have the best people with great knowledge but we cannot develop the education sector to a great level. So, I want to be on the decision committee, trying to change the education system of my country... I think I'm going to use the skills I receive from China in an attempt to change our education system. Apart from that, I want to become a very good businessman, trying to link the Chinese business partners and Tanzanian business partners because we have a very fertile land back home and we can produce a lot of crops and so we can export crops [to China]. Those are the two things that I want to do, to accomplish within the next ten years. (Participant 1)

Given the colonial histories of many African countries, the accumulation of various forms of individual gains was not only valuable in their own right but was also employed as a strategy for the collective action to legitimise the heritage languages and cultures and re-construct the higher education system in the postcolonial era. Participant 3, alike, expected to apply what he learned in China for “the betterment of the education system” in the home country:

The knowledge gained from China will help me know the elements that help our country to develop the education system, because China has really developed very well in its education system over the past years. Its development has been so rapid and made people surprised to see how it is now... China has very prestigious universities you know, and they're like bringing more students from different countries. So, you are looking at the

chance to cooperate with others from different countries, which allows you to gain different experiences and knowledge. The experiences and knowledge will help me to facilitate the betterment of the education system in our country. I will be able to contribute by incorporating and tailoring the Chinese policies for our system.

By the same token, Participant 4 mentioned his goal to learn the “different levels of technology” such as the artificial intelligence (AI) system in China, while Participant 8 expected to learn from China’s healthcare system to “improve the quality of healthcare” in her home country. Both participants also showed their willingness to take on the role of agencies to behave “like a bridge” (Participant 8) and to “help more African students to know more about study abroad in China” (Participant 4). These excerpts exemplify how the diplomatic purposes of ISM has been accomplished (cf. Mulvey & Lo, 2021) through China’s development-oriented approach to internationalisation (Ge & Ho, 2022).

Discussion

While the existing push-pull theory around students’ mobility decisions has largely been developed with reference to “rest to West” ISM, this study enriches the limited literature on the decisions of internationally-mobile students not heading to the West to study. By embedding the analysis within the increasingly complex matrices of push and pull power that characterise the contemporary multipolar landscape, this study highlights the importance of local politics, legacies, and individual agency in the decision-making process (Gao, in press). To explicate the education migration, this study drew upon, expanded and adapted the push-pull model and captured the interplay between macro- and micro-level forces at the sending and host countries (Chen, 2017).

On the hosting side, the pull power suggested that African student attraction to China was influenced by China-Africa diplomatic relations and trade engagement. Opportunities to study in China were also paved through scholarship offers. The findings resonate with much of the discussion on China’s aid, trade and investment, and diplomatic activities in the African continent (Ho, 2017; Hodzi, 2020). Inbound students from these countries chose to study in China to take advantage of the economic opportunities that could lead to improved economic prospects and potential financial benefits. In addition, the deepening economic exchanges and diplomatic relations during the BRI era further precipitated educational migration of African students to China where participating individuals expected to develop a better understanding of China’s rapid development as China’s development achievement “presents the developing world a recipe for success” (Joshua Cooper Ramo cited in Gill & Huang 2006, p. 20), thereby learning to tell China’s story well, achieving the diplomatic purpose of ISM (Mulvey & Lo, 2021).

On the sending side, the pull force was closely tied with or driven by participants’ perceptions of the educational systems in their home nations, which were still characterised by participants as under-developed (Madge, Raghuram & Noxolo, 2009), pushing the African students towards the emerging international higher education destinations. This shift enabled them to respond to the scholarship opportunities that arose in China for their plans to study overseas. Viewing studying in China as a means to not only advance their individual career prospects but also to gain knowledge and skills valuable for their home nations reflects Rui Yang’s (2018) soft power perspective. It envisions that African students post-graduation will be influenced by China’s political, cultural, and educational systems and, in turn, spread relevant norms and ideologies at home.

The findings from this study go beyond the conventional framing of the push-pull model which restricts motivational analyses to a macro and micro juxtaposition and the structure-agency binary (Altbach, 2004; Mazarol & Soutar, 2002). The evidence from this study evinces

that African students' educational migration trajectories are conditioned by the intersectional relationships between the emigration and immigration contexts and individual agency as they navigate transnational journeys within a multipolar educational landscape (Marginson, 2014). Thus, migrating for education is not merely a household strategy directed at optimising individual and family welfare through transnational capital (re)production (Brooks & Waters, 2011), but also a strategy to enhance the home nation's economic and educational prospects by leveraging growing geopolitical and geo-economic ties between China and African countries (Ho, 2017).

Beyond the facade of altruism, the underlying motives for China's education aid and support in Africa are intimately connected with its ambitions to develop soft power and further its political and diplomatic interests. While the hidden agenda for education aid is not unique to China, the long-term impacts of African students' mobility to China in meeting the expectations of both the demand and supply sides remain to be thoroughly assessed (Findlay, 2011). As patterns of ISM often mirror the wider hierarchical structuring of international capital flows, it remains uncertain how studying in China could improve the higher education inequalities in Africa or contribute to a form of neocolonialism. However, the critique of China as a neocolonial power (Vickers, 2020) or the claim of "China as a new scientific superpower" (Olechnicka et al., 2019) reinforces the importance of recognising contemporary multipolarity beyond the traditional bipolar or unipolar Global South-North binary when explaining ISM in diverse contexts (Peters, 2022).

Conclusion

This study employed an interactive push-pull framework and put the primary focus on the macro-micro, push-pull interplay to explore educational choice and unveil the rationales by which China-bound African students made such decisions. Its findings suggest that China's pursuit of increasing international students cannot be separated from its policy initiatives (e.g., BRI), as part of China's soft power development and the country's overall development, aligning with its economic investment, trade and technology development in Africa (Peters, 2022). However, the narratives of African students highlight the importance of financial support for inbound students from less-developed countries and the need for institutional and curricular developments (e.g., high-quality English-medium degree programmes) in Chinese higher education institutions, especially at universities located in the relatively less-developed western and central parts of China. These institutions have recently emerged to accommodate self-funded international students for profit (Ge & Ho, 2022). China's higher education ascendancy, may redefine the structure of ISM and present a challenge to the prevailing higher education resource and access inequality. However, the pursuit of equal educational opportunities must also address the widespread corruption in some African countries, where scholarships are often awarded to children of those well connected to government officials, and the concentration of Chinese government scholarships in elite (e.g., "Project 985") universities, thus mainly benefiting mobile elites (Hodzi, 2020).

While this research aimed to generate a nuanced understanding of the decisions of African students to study in China within the BRI context, its findings may not be generalisable to other international students in China and to self-funding African students in particular (Haugen, 2013). Future research can compare the experiences of African students on scholarships with those of self-funded African students and other international students, both receiving scholarships and not, within a purposive sample of universities in China. Moreover, the patterns of study abroad motivation identified are reflective of this specific period. Changes in these push and pull forces are expected to continue, especially at the intersection of post-pandemic realities and increased global uncertainties, heralding a "post-globalisation" world (Flew, 2020) that may destabilise ISM (Yang, 2022b). Within these evolving contexts, a deeper

understanding of the interplay of push-pull forces will add to the complexity of rationales shaping cross-border flows for higher education, reflecting the nuanced dynamics of a multipolar global educational landscape (Gao, in press).

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Table 1: Student characteristics

Student	Gender	Age	Sending Country	Major
1	M	30	Tanzania	Master in Comparative Education
2	M	33	Ghana	Master in Comparative Education
3	F	32	Malawi	Master in Comparative Education
4	M	35	Tanzania	Master in Comparative Education
5	M	32	Ethiopia	Master in Comparative Education
6	F	32	Nigeria	Master in Comparative Education
7	M	32	Ghana	PhD in Educational Economics & Administration
8	F	32	Tanzania	Master in Public Health



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