

Educational Voyage across the Chinese Languages and Cultures: Experience of an Ethiopian International Student

Abera Ayele Adare¹ and Li Yan Ping²

¹Faculty of Education, Shaanxi Normal University, China

²Faculty of Education, Shaanxi Normal University, China

³Faculty of Education, Shaanxi Normal University, China

Date of Submission: 09-01-2023

Date of Acceptance: 19-01-2023

ABSTRACT

Located on the wide-ranging setting of transnational education and well-versed by theories of language and culture route, this story loosens an African PhD student's story of living and learning in China. Using integration and storytelling as the study technique and form of representation, the article discloses his initial struggles and professional growth in his PhD journey of examining and re-examining language and culture in his life and study. In China, he is known as 'Mr. Storyteller' because he would memorize so many stories in the Chinese language and tell those stories in public parks, sports fields, marketplaces, and university compounds again and again. It demonstrates how this African student, one-time University lecturer continuously battled against the popular notion that mastering the Chinese language and culture is an unwinnable war. As time went by, slowly he became a profound Chinese speaker and was offered high position with good salary across Chinese companies and educational institutions. The conversation features the significance of personal activity and storytelling in the Chinese language, integration into the Chinese communities and due diligence in a global PhD student's professional identity. It also highlights the importance of containing cultural and linguistic diversity in overseas education.

Keywords: Personal activity, African international student, Language study, Storytelling, integration, Transnational education

I. INTRODUCTION

Overseas student migration across national and continental borders for higher education is a

growing event that touches countries and their academic systems (Bhandari & Blumenthal, 2010). Highest number of nations now see global academic mobility and educational exchange as crucial apparatuses for sharing knowledge, building scholarly capital, and remaining competitive in a progressively varied and interrelated world. Policy makers, government agencies, and scholars gradually acknowledge the advantage of assisting a diverse and globally minded society, and of enabling their populations with the finest thoughts and skills that are delivered by foremost colleges and universities. The existence of global students advances the excellence of education and adds to a knowledge society and e1. conomy (Overseas Trade Administration, 2016).

Among all nations of the world, China proved to be the highest and fastest receiving nation of overseas students. The education of overseas students in higher educational level has received great attention in China in the last two decades. This is mainly due the dramatic transformation in Chinese economy. From a level where overseas students were minority; the education segment has experienced a dramatic expansion. The development of foreign students with higher education has blasted into a global market. "moe.gov.cn" published in 2019-04-18 shows a stunning figure of the dramatic increase of overseas students in China in 2018. The figure shows there were a total of 492,185 overseas students from 196 nations around the world doing their studies in 1,004 higher education institutions in China. In an increase of 3,013 students or 0.62% compared to 2017.

II. NUMBER/PERCENT OF OVERSEAS STUDENTS BY CONTINENT IN 2018

Continent	Number	Percent
Asia	295,043	59.95%
Africa	81,562	16.57%
Europe	73,618	14.96%
America	35,733	7.26%
Oceania	6,229	1.27%

Table 1. 1: Overseas students in Chinese higher education (moe.gov.cn published in 2019-04-18).

However, after the 2018-2021 peak, there was a substantial decrease in the number of overseas students. This was mainly because of the Covid-19 outbreak in the world. Even in United States higher educational establishments have gradually depended on the enrollment of overseas graduate students to build internationally competitive knowledge economies (Halse & Mowbray, 2011). Open doors report (2019), overseas doctoral students represented approximately 15.2% of the foreign student population. Likewise, in China so many PhD students from around the world, mainly Africans, Asians, and Latin Americans, come and experience life, acquire knowledge from ancient culture intertwined with modernity and go back to their respective countries as transformed individuals who can change societies across the world. They learn or advance knowledge of Chinese language, build up friendships in an intercultural context, or practice modern ways of thinking and behaving in the field of research (Institute of Overseas Education, 2016). In the meanwhile, overseas students help to diversify the work force for upper positions in the higher education faculty and administration and for the study of scientific research (Bair & Haworth, 2004; Haworth, 1996).

In spite of the multi-layered advantages of overseas studies, they face numerous difficulties while studying abroad. As doctoral students, their main aim is usually making high-quality academic research that contributes to knowledge, which is remarkably challenging and mentally demanding (Cotterall, 2013, 2015). Studying in a country which is not their own, they also encounter the extra layer of challenge because of the sociocultural differences between their home and host countries (Elliot et al., 2016).

African PhD students to China, compared with their Asian counterparts, experience more acculturative pressure because of the striking difference between Africa and Asia mainly Chinese

cultures and languages (Zhang, 2016). They attend the classroom with different perspectives and different cultural backgrounds, previous educational experience, and Chinese language proficiency (Kim, 2016). Greater level of difficulty understanding the dynamics of Chinese educational environment and academic loneliness involved by undertaking a postgraduate study in a Chinese context.

While preceding research have branded the experiences of overseas African PhD students as potentially challenging because of differences in academic hopes and Chinese language ability, more current research highlight the value of in-depth examining the experiences of overseas PhD students (e.g., 2013)., 2015; McAlpine, 2012; Samimi et al., 2011). In response, this article uses the story of an overseas PhD student from Africa to discover how his PhD voyage developed in the Chinese language and cultural context. It also assesses how his knowledge of the Chinese language evolved through storytelling and friendly interaction with Chinese people. The social and academic experiences of this overseas PhD student in building his professional identity and broad vision of overseas education.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research uses a comprehensive framework of theoretical viewpoints to show the story of an African overseas PhD student studying and living in China. First of all, it adopts the theoretical outline of identity routes to assess PhD from the viewpoint of endurance and mutual interaction (McAlpine, 2012; McAlpine & Amundsen, 2009). The structure of identity routes highlights past-present-future integration in the academic work experience and the desire of PhD students to formulate objectives and expectations over time. This opinion of identity as an identity route places the academic experience of PhD students in the wider

context of life and highlights the processes of learning evolving from numerous contexts, past and present, not only via work, but also via the perception of work. Reflection (McAlpine, 2012). With a specific attention on personal institutions, the Identity Routediscovers the fact that PhD students build their own histories in terms of individualdetermined and capability to impact the experiences they have. It also acknowledges the significance of institutional impacts on the identity construction process of PhD students (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2009).

The identity of overseas doctoral students working in a foreign culture is influenced by the difference of cultural, social, and academic norms in a cross-cultural context and lies in their constant negotiation between cultures and the meaning making process. In a similar vein, language is an important channel for us to consciously reflect and shape our unique personality of self as expressed in the way we use a specific language or dialect, lexical items, or phrases (Coleman, 1988). As Weedon

As the academic experiences of overseas PhD students take place in a wider range of life, this study also focuses on the interplay between culture, language and identity build up. Identity buildup is the process of reflection and settlement among numerous community members, is one of the relative learnings in which overseas PhD students move from marginal members to more central positions (Craib, 1998; Hall, 1996; Wenger, 2008). The identities of overseas PhD students working in Chinese cultureareinfluenced by differences in cultural, social, and academic norms. Likewise, language is a significantcanal through which we deliberately reflect and shape our unique self-personality, as articulated by the way we use a particular language or dialect, word or phrase (Coleman, 1988). AS Weedon (1997) stated, it is via language that an individual conveys a sense of self within and across a variety of positions at various points in time. For overseas PhD students who speak Chinese as a second language, language provides them a place to continuallyshape and reshape a sense of who they are and how they relate to variouspeople in the foreign land (Norton, 2010).

Despite the growing literature on overseas PhD students, particularly the difficulties overseas PhD students face in terms of culture, language, and academic engagement (e.g., Mukminin & McMahan, 2013; Zhang, 2016), current study is different from previous studies as it syndicates different study

interests: identity routes, cultures, and languages in overseas education. Portraying an all-inclusive framework of identity routes, language, and culture, this article concentrates on the activities thatoverseas PhD students apply when challenged with the norms of their new setting and experience feelings of clumsiness, isolation, and misgivings about PhD competence. procedures (Elliot et al., 2016). It also assesses the recognizedimpacts that formed her identity build up. By incorporatingnumerous theoretical frameworks, this article intends to answer the study question: How does an African overseas PhD student address linguistic and cultural encounters and build up his professional identity?

IV. RESEARCH METHOD

The purpose of this research was to know how overseas PhD students overcome various obstacles and strive to complete their PhD (Li, 2018). Ake (pseudonym) was one of the study participants, and his story provided a wealth of detail about how language and culture functioned together in his multifaceted growth. Therefore, I have selected him as a persuasive case (Mitchell, 1984) of how he navigated his personal and professional voyages across languages and cultures through the support of Shaanxi Normal University in Xi'an, China.

In 2018, I invited Ake to be my contributor and kept checking with him until today, which is 2022. Throughout this time, I did some observations, interviews and informalconversations with Ake and collected data in various forms. For this article, I primarily used the two formal interviews with Ake because they made it clear that Ake's own voice told his story of being an overseas PhD student. The first interview was conducted in spring 2018.

In the third Ake's PhD was when he was about to defend his dissertation proposal. By then, he had written the three chapters of the thesis, including the introduction,literature review and methodology. he also completed part of the data collection and planned to collect the remaining data with his study participants. The second interview took place earlier in 2020, shortly after he left China because of his father's death in his home country. It was by this time that he defended his dissertation.

I led two open-ended in-depth interviews with Ake in Amharic which is his heart language and recorded the interview with my iphone 6 recorder.

We conducted our interview schedule in person in advance and did interview at WSU /Wolyita Soddo University campus. The first interview began when Ake told me about his reasons for coming to China and the preceding questions for more details, including his difficulties, coping mechanisms, and aspirations of studying in China as an overseas PhD student U.S. The second interview took place after he effectively defended his thesis.

It reexamined questions about these difficulties and investigated more details concerning Ake's experience with his final year in the PhD program. He completed his studies and waiting to receive his degree in the Summer of 2022 in the fifth year of his studies. Each interview conversation took approximately one and half hour. I take notes throughout the two interviews, they were then transcribed in a word document. After typing the word transcription documents, I read it again thoroughly, putting my clarifications in parentheses to clarify unclear languages points and sent them back to Ake for a "validity check" (Plummer, 2001). Then I also wrote reflections after I did transcriptions to capture thoughts and ideas from the interview data.

Furthermore, I joined several events during Ake's academic voyage, including the online defense of his dissertation proposal, the defense of his final dissertation, and two academic conferences where Ake presented his research. I took notes at academic conferences and his defense, and then wrote reflections. Furthermore, I recorded email correspondence with Ake and composed in writing some of our informal conversations as supporting data in my study journal to ensure that I interpreted Ake's experiences and viewpoints correctly.

In data investigation, I drew the route of Ake's identity, socially and professionally, using narrative as the technique of investigation and data presentation (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Investigators in various arenas have started to acknowledge that narrative is the medium most likely to capture the contingency of human experience, such as living in context and over time (Craig, 2007). Narratives can offer a means to understand an individual's ongoing insight of identity as well as the insight of identity changing over time (Elliott, 2005). Looking at his story from a combined viewpoint of steadiness and interactivity (McAlpine, 2012), I read the data repeatedly, charting his story

from past, present, and future, concentrating on how he dealt with language and cultural conflict and constructs his professional identity. Following his schedule of academic activities, I paid particular attention to the problems and advancements he highlighted in our interview. After analysis, I divided Ake's story into the following three sub-stories: (1) difficulties in language and personal activity, (2) cultural consciousness and PhD research, and (3) institutional support and professional identity. I shared my initial analysis with Ake and got his confirmation.

V. INTRODUCING THE STUDY CONTRIBUTOR

When Ake was started the research project, he was an overseas doctoral student in a faculty of psychology as a full-time student. Before coming to China, Ake already earned a master's degree in clinical psychology at a Gimma university in Ethiopia and taught psychology in Wolyita Soddo University. While talking about why he came to China, Ake shared with me how much he struggled to join Wolyita Soddo University as a psychology lecturer for the bachelor's degree course.

It was extremely hard to become a university lecturer with only MA degree. There are number of requirements which include, comprising academic rigor, pedagogical demonstrations. I passed the written test, and I also had a classroom lecture. There were so many other so the possibility of being accepted was less than 5%. It was very competitive situation.

This interview selection was obtained from the commencement part of the first interview. Ake's stress paved the way to our common understanding that he was a highly qualified university lecturer chosen out of a modest job via arduous procedures. Throughout his university years in Wolyita Soddo University, he was also selected as the program manager in his faculty of psychology and prepared numerous psychology related activities for students in the university. However, after working as a psychology lecturer for three years, Ake decided to pursue additional study in China. He shared with me that was because he desired to challenge himself, to experience the Chinese culture, language and to advance his teaching career. His decision also received support from his family,

friends, colleagues, and the Wolyita Soddo University itself. He submitted his application to a PhD program in psychology at a Shaanxi Normal University in China and received the acceptance.
Writer: Sowhydidyou choosetocometo China?

Ake: My brother is here in Shaanxi Normal University. I also expressed my desire to study in China with my principal and he supported my notion to study overseas, to learn more, to experience the Chinese culture, to see more and share more, to challenge myself. He was very helpful. With his help, I applied and was admitted.

With his brother in China and assistance from previous contemporaries, Ake began his overseas voyage. His initiative to come to China for a PhD degree in psychology acknowledges previous studies findings that the PhD responsibility is seen as a device for doctoral students to improve themselves with their emerging skilled knowledge and experience (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2009). It also demonstrates his strong desires to experience Chinese culture and language when trying to attain professional growth (Institute of International Education, 2016).

VI. FINDINGS

1.1. Difficulties in language and individual activity

Grounded on preceding literature about obstacles to international PhD students, I began the interview with the difficulties Ake encountered as an international student living and learning in China. This led to the following story, “I attempt to use my way of expression to make it sound like indigenous speakers.” It demonstrated how Ake was experiencing his Chinese language obstacle, sailing through his struggles about the Chinese language, and advancing in his overseas learning voyage:

Writer: Would you please share with me about overseas students’ challenges in learning?

Ake: In the first year of my Chinese class, I had no idea of what the teacher was teaching. I shared with my Ethiopian and other international friends, more than 70% of the class didn’t understand as well. I didn’t know what the teachers were talking about.

Writer: The same was true for me when I was attending Chinese classes.

Ake: The first and foremost thing is getting used to the Chinese expressions of things. How do they express their ideas? It is totally different from how we as African do. I mean, the intonation, the accent, sign languages and so on are very different.

As a student and former university teacher, Ake stated the diverse ways of learning and teaching Chinese in Chinese universities. The Chinese expressions in his school books are more formal, concentrated on grammar and reading. As such, they are rather different from what people speak in shopping malls, public squares, neighborhood parks and the streets of Xi’an in general. Moreover, real life Chinese language in Xi’an required more ranges of expressions and language richness which was very frustrating at times. Therefore, this increases difficulty for Ake’s understanding in his academic circle. There are several occasions that he felt lost, embarrassed, confused, and didn’t know what to do because he couldn’t understand what his Chinese friends are talking about. This difficulty was repeated again and again in various social gatherings that SNNU organized throughout the year. Ake shares about his classroom experiences where other students were participating, asking questions, giving answers yet he kept quiet because he did not understand what was going on. (Research Notes, April 16, 2018).

The differences can clearly be seen in the way of dialogue conversation were also seen in the diverse styles of writing, and it affected his involvement in professional activities. Ake stated this challenge he had confronted:

I found out that the Chinese mental mapping, Chinese perspective is not the same as mine. The way how Chinese see things is very different from the way how I see things. These differences are reflected or seen in the way how they narrate stories, see a certain issue. After I have learnt the Chinese language very well, when I speak with them on phone, they still recognize that this is not a Chinese person speaking. After I submitted my academic paper to a blind reader, they still find out that the paper wasn’t written by a Chinese student, because the way we address things is so different. In classrooms when we have some group discussions, the flow of ideas different.

He did not want to reveal the details of his peer-review. experience. Ake referred to a Chinese writing class he took and how stunned he felt when reading his Chinese story paper refined by his professor. The professor did not make many changes while editing Ake's article. Instead, the professor requested Ake to read the reviewed version first and then to compare it with his original one and see the power of language for himself. Here is what Ake said:

When I got my written assignment back from the professor, I didn't think she spent time revising it. But when I read my original copy, Oh My goodness! Almost everything was changed, but the ideas were there. The professor did not change my ideas. That was stunning for me, I was amazed. It is a different way of thinking...

Seeing the dissimilar way his professor stated the same ideas in the article, Ake believed that his language obstacle had affected his professional growth:

"I was greatly stunned. It was common that when submitting a paper, that the paper gets rejected, it is all because of the language.

Amharic was the media through which this interview was conducted with Ake, yet I was speak with him in Chinese. I would deliberately ask him questions in Chinese. Every time I asked him questions in Chinese, I was amazed that he would provide as many details as possible, and his Chinese was fluent. It was no wonder because Ake was in Chinese class for a year and the remaining three years, he stayed in China conversing with Chinese people. Therefore, when Ake told me his lack of confidence in language, I queried further for the reason, and he provided the following clarification:

Ake: Whenever I converse with the Chinese people, I was not confident in my language.

Writer: That is exactly what I wanted to know, I see you are very fluent in Chinese language, why do you lack confidence?

Ake: It is probably because I think in my culture but speak the Chinese language. Many times, I also wanted to make it sound like a native speaker which I would never ever do. Often, I memorize a story and try to narrate it to a local Chinese person, I learn a word or a phrase and tried

to practice it with a shop keeper or an old man in the community park or a neighborhood, but they sometimes do not understand what I wanted to say. So many times, my phone conversation was cut short because the person on the other end of the line would use a term or a word I don't understand.

Writer: So, what do you hope to achieve from your Chinese language proficiency?

Ake: My problem with the Chinese language is that it is a tonal language. Often, I don't get the tone right and it affects the meaning severely. I don't think accent is the only reason but also the pronunciation of the word, usage of each and every terminology and so on.

Prior to the first interview, I appeared on one of his Chinese classes with him and discovered that he could actively ask questions, give answers and so on and so forth. Therefore, in the interview, I pointed out how he was proactive in communicating with his classmates and he clarified:

It took me a lot of energy to actively participate in class discussions. One can never succeed in language studies unless he or she participates in various activities with others. Not only the teacher but also friends helped me know more about the Chinese language and culture. That is the reason why I expose myself to everybody in China even though I'm a shy person.

These selections about language as an obstacle and cause of inner struggle were taken from the first interview with Ake. A year and half later, 2019 and mid 2020 during his second and third years in China, most of his teachers, local and expatriate friends approved the quality of his Chinese. Encouraged by his achievements, the second interview asked about the schemes he had used in the previous year. Ake precisely described the help he had got from classroom interactions with his classmates and the teacher as well as his conversation outside the classroom. He also highlighted the time he got out of the students' dorm and went out to live with local Chinese people for a year. This greatly helped him improve his confidence during his conversation with the local people, increased his Chinese vocabularies and then afterward he became worthy of working for a Chinese company. The Article underneath demonstrates how Ake employed his personal activity to advance his Chinese proficiency.

Ake moved back to the student's dorm in the fall of 2021 but kept visiting his local friend's home and described the benefits of maintaining good relationship with the local people.

I visited my local Chinese friend's house at least twice a month. As it is a Chinese culture, I always have had something in my hand during my visit. It was often fruits of that particular season. Whenever I visit, I make sure that it was convenient time for conversation. I never went to their homes during their high time or busy time. They would ask me to narrate a story from what I learnt in the classroom. Most of it of course I memorized and know the flow of the story, but the difficult part was when the begin to ask me questions based on my narrations. The answer for those questions are not found in the story, I had to think, understand and respond. That really s my ability to think, find out the answer and articulate them in Chinese language.

These continuing visits and conversations assisted to explain his views, ideas, desires and so on.

Ake: ... Conversation to individuals makes you understand why you think a certain way and also helps you know about your Chinese proficiency level.

Furthermore, Ake shared about his struggles to advance his Chinese pronunciation. He underlined the help she gained from the audio part of his classroom listening courses in Shaanxi Normal University. English pronunciation training project at her university. He copied those audios into his mobile phone and spent years listening to those audios.

Ake: ... Once thing I discovered was that a common man in the streets of Xi'an may not pronounce a Chinese word as it is supposed to be. He may be affected by his local dialects. The standard 'puton hua' pronunciation is the one in the book. Getting used to those standard pronunciation helped my Chinese sound like a standard Chinese better than the local people in some ways.

Author: That was really cool.

Ake: Yes. Before I made the decision to maintain contact with the local friends, by the way it was a very conscious decision,

I didn't feel confident, though. Because I was told by others that my Chinese accents and pronunciations of words were wrong. So, I kind of felt like, I was not good enough, this is not for me so on and so forth. Some people gave me only 35% accuracy in my Chinese.

Writer: 35% accuracy?

Ake: Yes sir

Writer: How come? That is below the average

Ake: People's evaluation was low because they don't know my background. When I came to China, I was already over 35 years old and had a strong accent of my own language that couldn't change easily. I knew myself that I was making 100% progress and my confidence increased as a PhD student. Right.

The interview did not investigate deeply into how and why the issue of accent and pronunciation was only assessed at 35%. When Ake clearly highlighted the percentage, as a senior international student in the same university, I shared an understanding. I knew how much progress Ake has shown. The people's evaluation was based on specific local Chinese pronunciation standards. After acquiring so many new vocabularies, sentences, stories and practices, Ake felt proud of the outcomes and progress. Reflecting back Ake commented on his progress in Chinese proficiency "I feel it's developing. There is a clear progress both in my Chinese language and cultural awareness."

1.2. Cultural consciousness and PhD Studies

The influence of China in African continent is obvious. To make a communication bridge with Chinese living and working in Africa, Ake knew that he has to experience the Chinese culture in China where the culture is embodied. Ake explains about his deliberate, conscious decision to participate in various Chinese cultural activities during his first and second years in China:

So, in the first and second years of my studies in China, I attended several cultural events organized by Shaanxi Normal University and also events like wedding, funeral and other Chinese traditional festivals like, 元宵节、清明节、端午节、中秋节等, and I went to various restaurants, and discovered that some occasions are more culturally rooted. How do the Chinese celebrate the Chinese new year 春节, what do they make for Chinese new year dinner. Putting up decorations, eating reunion dinner with

family on New Year's Eve, giving red envelopes and other gifts, firecrackers, and fireworks, and so on and so forth.

After having increased understanding of the Chinese culture actually on the surface via these activities, Ake also wanted to develop a greater understanding of the culture via linking up with Chinese. He gladly shared with me that his outgoing, extrovert character helped him to make local Chinese friends without any difficulty.

Writer: Have you made Chinese friends?

Ake: Yes, I did. In fact, I made more Chinese friends more quickly than my other classmates. There are two reasons for that. One, I lived the first year of my studies outside the university compound in a neighborhood called 'Mingde Men Xiaoqu'. 明德门校区。 There is a big community part where Chinese come to rest, play music, dance, and do exercise. This happens every evening and it is a wonderful location to make local friends. The second reason was that I'm a very sociable man with extrovert character. I like talking to people, communicating and practicing my little Chinese with the locals. They love to hear me telling them stories in my foreign accent. I spent a good amount of time with my local Chinese friends...and also it is easy to have Chinese friends if you know about some of the Chinese movies, basketball stars like Yao Ming ...I do watch the Chinese basketball matches often, I'm so much of a fan... I did everything I can to get involved in the way they live...

When I asked him about his motive why he went deep into the culture? Why there was such eagerness? Why there was such assimilation? Is it to become a Chinese? He reflected on these experiences, he concluded that the aim of his earlier efforts of participation was mainly to know China and the Chinese culture, that is all. Ake knew that this would help him to develop a working relationship with the Chinese diaspora, wherever he would go. There are so many Chinese diasporas and Chinese companies in Ethiopia, he could easily find work inside Chinese companies because he already knows how to relate to the Chinese bosses and workers in culturally effective way. He further stated:

I began to feel that culture and language are very significant to a person and began to contemplate

about my culture and language that I brought from back home to China. And I fully understand what I should do not to go through so many difficulties of adjusting into a new culture. When I reflect, I realize that it was a right decision. I would never ever become a Chinese but could adapt to the Chinese language and culture and as a result develop a good working relationship that would give me a bright future.

Ake engaged in his doctoral dissertation research on educational psychology in Xi'an, China. When he went out to gather data, conduct interviews with his study participants who spoke various Chinese dialects, he encountered nearly no problem. There was not much language or culture barrier during their communication. Instead, he felt connected to his study participants and credited this smooth flow of communication to his hard work, local Chinese connections focus on mastering the local Chinese language and culture. He expounded further:

Because a good amount of cultural understanding is made, relationships built with the locals in my first two years of living and studying in Xi'an, China, I didn't feel there was that much cultural boundaries between me and my participants. We were able to understand each other because I already acquired sufficient knowledge and experience into the Chinese language and culture. When we addressed various cultural topics, any pieces of conversation went on smoothly. I didn't have conflicts about ideas, value of multi-cultural education, or diversity in education. So, it turned out to be a way to connect us together, instead of breaking us apart.

Furthermore, Ake and his study participants all understood him and had empathy for him as they knew that even though he spoke fluent Chinese, he is still from a different cultural background. Ake continued:

Because my study participants understood me that I'm from a different cultural background, this even prompted further effort to get closer and understand each other. There was no superior and inferior cultural approach as it was in history. This helped them to develop a deeper understanding and higher working relationships were built.

1.3. Growth as a PhD student

Thinking back on his development of understanding of culture and language, Ake underlined the assistance he got as a student in the PhD program. He appreciated the encouragements and corrections of his classmates. He explained that it was this support that accelerated his learning of diverse components of cultures and cultivated his appreciation for diversity and unity.

Writer: Would you share with me the areas that you improved more during your studies here in China?

Ake: I think, my understanding about the Chinese culture grew. It is not because I have read a lot and gained knowledge. That can be done from any corner of the world. My understanding of the Chinese culture grew because I experienced it personally. That is the benefit of studying in country. I celebrated the Chinese traditional festivals /春节、元宵节、清明节、端午节、中秋节等/ together with them. I ate with them, I had drunk with them, I sang with them, I cried with them, I did everything the Chinese would do and as a result I grew in my knowledge and experiences of the Chinese culture and language. I feel comfortable whenever I'm around the Chinese people.

Writer: Why safe?

Ake: In China you are encouraged to spend time with the local Chinese people so that you can practice your Chinese. Whenever I went to any Chinese social activity, I felt very comfortable. The social activities deal with cultural issues. Those local friends know their culture very well. The good thing about the local people is that they know that we are foreigners, and they tolerate us. They allow us to share, explain issues gently, speak slowly and laugh even when we make silly mistakes.

In addition to the benefits that Ake gained from his social life with the local Chinese people, he also benefited tremendous amount of knowledge from his campus life. He benefited from formal and informal communications with his classmates and professors, his research paper presentation in the field of psychology and adequately addressed questions posed by them. Ake's extra ordinary character, his progress, his ability to articulate his

ideas, his cultural awareness, and his ability to relate to both professors and classmates was appreciated by everybody.

Furthermore, Ake expounded on the direction he got from the department of Psychology, instructors, and his doctoral advisor.

It was in his third year in the PhD program that he started teaching English online to some of the local people which gave him greater connections and closeness. The level of understanding English for these online students was very low. Whenever they fall short of asking questions or expressing their ideas in English, they immediately switch into Chinese which enhanced Ake's Chinese further. He also observed not only their questions but also how they ask which has Chinese characteristics and cultural components. Ake explained his thoughts about this in details:

She was also embracing

Those formal online classes were very beneficial to keep us on track... they gave us some focus and consistency. I learnt how to work in an academic field and how to communicate with local Chinese people. I got to know the culture of various provinces through teaching online classes. It was beneficial both ways as the students also observed how a foreign teacher's teaching methodology is different from their own teachers at local schools. Ake highlighted that there are several advantages of sharing different perspectives with his online students:

We were very flexible in our curriculum. For instance, we discussed together and decided what to learn, when to learn, how to learn and so on. Even though the Chinese people look alike for a foreigner's eyes, but I discovered that their desires and approaches to education are varied. That is really an exciting and astonishing experience, to talk to people, to share different outlooks, about how we conduct a lesson, a curriculum . . .

Ake concluded that it was those various occasions and events that he experienced helped him grow in his knowledge and experiences of the Chinese language and culture. that contributed to his professional growth:

Ake: . . . So, I learnt a lot from those sorts of small and big events, some of them are not that much but

they'll add up, right? By the time we conducted our second interview, Ake returned to his home country Ethiopia and also in Wolyita Soddo University teaching psychology to undergrads and graduate students. When I asked about his plan after he graduates from Shaanxi Normal University, Ake disclosed that he sees his future connected to China, Chinese or a Chinese company anywhere in the world. He explained that was because he has acquired knowledge and experienced Chinese and China.

VII. DISCUSSION

1.1 Becoming an authentic Chinese speaker

As an African PhD student who came from a different culture, particularly the Ethiopian culture, I didn't speak Chinese at all. I didn't know how to say 'how are you' '你好' in Chinese language. That was very frustrating at first. Ake stated Of course my academic research was in English language, yet I lived in China, almost everything was Chinese including my professors who spoke English with their Chinese accent and I struggled to understand them. Ake discovered that language and culture were the foremost obstacles in his academic journey, which were repeated by many other international PhD doctoral students about their previous academic and acculturation experiences (Cotterall, 2013; Samimy et al., 2011; Zhang, 2016). Ake had difficulty understanding his doctoral class discussions, professors' lectures and felt lacked confidence not only because of language and cultural differences but patterns of thinking, mental mapping, world view differences between the African and Chinese. He vividly remembers the time in his daily life, he was not confident to go to the bank or the grocery store or supper market by himself because he felt that he wouldn't be able to explain what kind of food he would want to order, what color or size of clothes he wanted to buy in Chinese language. In those initial years, the main challenge that he encountered was he got the 'tones' 语言 wrong. Chinese language is a tonal language, 汉语是一种声调语言。 If the tone is wrong the meaning is wrong 如果语气错误, 意思是错误的。 He said how to pronounce the word in order for the others to understand him or get the tone right was a challenge.

In spite of his lack of confidence in Chinese language, Ake took the initiative to adjust to the new norms. He often visited the Shaanxi Normal

University library, explained himself to his peers and professors, and received their assistance. He really "forced" himself to communicate with the local Chinese people, classmates, and professors even though he was sometimes "scared to open his mouth". He also volunteered to participate in school dramas and storytelling classes. Eventually, as time went by, he felt more confident in his Chinese language ability.

While Ake was in the process of learning and incorporating the values, beliefs, language, civilizations, traditions, and manner of the Chinese people, to the new norm of Chinese it showed his individual activity as an African international PhD student, it also showcased how the beliefs about standard Chinese had affected his understanding of himself and how he interrelated to the academic community. As a successful Chinese language student, Ake gradually developed confidence but never arrived at the level where his Chinese sounds like native speakers. Of course sometimes friends would 'butter' him 拍马屁 yet Ake in reality his Chinese was far lower than the natives. Every student wanted to sound like the natives but only few, after many years of practice would arrive at that utopia. International students inclined to hold the belief that they should speak like the native speakers and that gives them a reputation and good image. (Sung, 2016). They also try to copy the accent of the native Chinese speakers viewing them as more proper (Jenkins, 2006; Kaur, 2014). In Ake's case, being able to speak, read and write the Chinese language affected him positively back in his home country. There are so many Chinese language speakers throughout Ethiopia. Ake in his return home due to covid 19 outbreak met so many Chinese businessmen, project workers, diplomats, teachers, and tour agents. Almost all of them would offer him job opportunities, friendship and so on. In some ways being able to contact the Chinese in Ethiopia helped reinforce his Chinese language deficiency.

Though Ake knows that his Chinese language is not perfect, he positions himself with the Chinese communities in Ethiopia so that he would practice his conversational Chinese. He does not feel bad about the mistakes he makes during various conversations. He does not see himself as a second class. He is aware of the value of cultures and languages. For Ake this awareness came from increasing Chinese

influence in Africa and the recognition that the future socio-economic and political system would be dominated by China, therefore, Ake chose to be part of the raising world superpower.

1.2 Becoming a developing academic:

The discipline of postgraduate studies is branded as isolating and solitary (Johnson et al., 2000), which is true predominantly for African international PhD students before they get to know the local culture and language. Where there is a sense of belonging in a community of a group of students with similar purposes of the host culture, it is helpful for the personal and academic growth. (McAlpine, 2012). This belongingness “the experience of personal involvement in a system more environment so that persons feel themselves to be an integral part of that system more environment” (Hagerty et al., 1992, p. 177), is taken as a significant component in strengthening and supporting one’s relationship with others. This sense of belonging especially the time that he got out of the Shaanxi Normal University compound and lived with a Chinese family in 长安 neighborhood led to Ake’s assimilation into the Chinese culture and assisted him to move from a foreigner’s sense of life style to a position where he feels a sense of belonging.

During his life in China, he reflected back on his initial presupposition that he would never get to know the Chinese language and develop a sense of belonging in China was actually wrong. He was able to reconcile his home culture, host culture and his ambition to develop a new identity, a sense of belonging in Chinese community.

In the fourth year of his academic research, he was able to prove that it is possible to develop that critical belongingness and through his strenuous effort to know the Chinese culture and language. From the very early days he endeavored to make Chinese friends resulted in his subsequent success in establishing a “meaningful relationship” (Ortaçtepe, 2013). Ake learnt how to adjust between diversity and common care for English language learners. This change was marked by regulating an effort of assimilation to a process of integration (Berry, 2005). As an African international PhD student in China, Ake conducted his life and studies in a professional way in China. This also opened him multiple opportunities in

Chinese communities and companies across Ethiopia. Ake also built a sense of belonging in Chinese communities in Ethiopia. Discussions, association, and reflections were vital components in working for Ake to make sense of the Chinese culture of the community, to construct and enact his professional identity during the assimilation process. Ake’s experiences in working with Chinese also approved preceding life and studies in China. He improved his feelings of competence and his sense of community with his peers and compatriots (Connolly et al., 2016). This sense of community is particularly significant for international PhD students because it helps them to move from peripheral positions to more central positions in the community.

While life and job opportunities in Chinese companies provided Ake with ways to build his professional identity as a China graduated PhD student, service engagement surfaced as another way to facilitate his assimilation and to construct this sense of connectedness to the community. Service engagement has been considered an integral element to the Chinese community and preparing him even for a greater responsibility. (Behar-Horenstein et al., 2016; Felten & Clayton, 2011; McAlpine & Amundsen, 2007). Ake explicitly stated his time back in China as a PhD student and how he profited from living in China for four years. Meanwhile, by applying his personal lifestyle in China, reflecting on his experiences, Ake discovered himself to be a valued member of the Chinese community in Ethiopia. Through company’s support in various forms, together with his work activities, Ake is empowering himself as a more poised Chinese speaker, a developing scholar, and a practitioner who understood diversity.

1.3 Personal and professional:

Studies in recent years have highlighted PhD studies as a personal and social learning experience (Hopwood, 2010; McAlpine, 2017). This is true in Ake’s personal and professional life. For him these two things are separate yet intertwined. It is demonstrated in his past-present-future life and his continuous negotiation between himself and his surroundings as a PhD student in China.

Ake shared that when he decided to come to China to learn and experience China, his personal and professional life was placed in an intertwined trajectory. His preceding experience as a psychology

teacher in Wolyita Soddo University in Ethiopia and his unending thirst for further knowledge directed him to chase after a PhD in psychology in China. As he said his language and culture were among the key things, he desired to know and experience, but they became the biggest challenges especially in his first and second years of his studies. Nevertheless, when he started doing his best 全力以赴 things began to change, he improved his understanding of the language, culture, food and diversity. It was slow but change eventually came. This change, in his academic and professional life became the main base for his aspiration and added value to his growth.

With the eventual development of his Chinese language, cultural and social life inside the academic community in Shaanxi Normal University, with his PhD studies participants and with the wider Chinese community, Ake established a meaningful relationship. He developed that vital inner confidence to converse, live and work with the Chinese people. Constructing on his present experiences, he intends to continue to grow in his knowledge of Chinese language and culture along with his professional work which is psychology.

VIII. SUMMARY

This research paper has contained numerous theoretical frameworks of language and cultural routes to understand the experience of an African PhD student studying and living in China. The findings disclosed his previous inner convictions (Chinese language and culture are impossible to master are wrong). Ake is a living proof that if one puts effort, nothing, absolutely nothing is impossible! With Ake's academic journey being explored from numerous viewpoints, his personal activity, cultural awareness, his peers, and friends' assistance and also the Shaanxi Normal University's unwavering support surfaced as the main components contributing to his improvement of the Chinese language and culture. Ake's Chinese language, culture and his personal identity has been reshaped. Ake's story supported McAlpine's (2017) argument that PhD education cannot be separated from other wider areas of life which includes language acquisition, cultural awareness and developing a new identity in a diverse surrounding. It also added proof to the claim that PhD students are active agents and have numerous identities, varied backgrounds, and

culture that can change over the course of their education (Pearson et al., 2011).

Ake's previous inner convictions, fears, of the Chinese language and culture proved to be wrong. This was demonstrated by his astounding improvement in his second year. Of course, there is an additional layer of challenge for African PhD students who are distant for the Chinese language and culture. No matter what these additional layers of challenges are, they cannot be taken as an excuse for failing. Ake is a living proof that it is possible for Africans to become legitimate Chinese speakers and contributors to the global research community, spread of the Chinese language and culture in the world. For this to happen the role of individual activity, university's support, in such a foreign land played a vital role.

It also emphasized the significance of critical awareness for PhD students to understand their own cultural and linguistic assets in education. When most countries view international academic mobility and educational exchange as critical components to improve the quality of education and to facilitate a multicultural and internationally minded society, Stacy's story of being and becoming an international doctoral student showcases the significance of building an inclusive environment to embrace diversity and critical awareness in international education.

The writer took Ake's life experience as an African student in China as a case study. There is no way that this single case study be taken as a representation to all international students, not even African students. Nevertheless, Ake's life, this single case study could open up an avenue for those who want to do further research on international students mainly Africans. This is a place for other investigators and to those who have been engaged in educational research to "see big from seeing small" (Green, 2005) and to rethink that education in a cross-cultural setting is always a process rather than a finished product. It is all about integrating into the host culture yet not forsaking the home culture.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude Prof. Li Yang Ping Laoshi for going line by line through this article and providing helpful advice over

the completion of this article. Those anonymous reviewers whose considerable comments helped enhance and explain in this paper. The research participant, Mr. Ake gave me time from his busy schedule, he deserves my thanks. I thank my dear wife who stood in my side in all these hustles, my response to her is 'I love you dear'.

REFERENCES

- Bair, C.R., & Haworth, J.G. (2004). Doctoral student attrition and persistence: A meta-synthesis of research. In J.C. Smart (Ed.), *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research* (pp. 481–534). Springer. http://doi.org/10.1007/1-4020-2456-8_11
- Berry, J.W. (2005). Acculturation: Living successfully in two cultures. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 29(6), 697–712. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2005.07.013>
- Bhandari, R., & Blumenthal, P. (2010). *International students and global mobility in higher education: National trends and new directions*. Springer. <http://doi.org/10.1080/15348450903130439>
- Cotterall, S. (2015). The rich get richer: International doctoral candidates and scholarly identity. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 52(4), 360–370. <http://doi.org/10.1080/147032297.2013.839124>
- Craib, I. (1998). *Experiencing identity*. Sage.
- Elliott, J. (2005). *Using narrative in social research: Qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Sage.
- Felten, P., & Clayton, P.H. (2011). Service-learning. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 128(128), 75–84. <http://doi.org/10.1002/tl.470>
- Green, B. (2005). Unfinished business: Subjectivity and supervision. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 24(2), 151–163. <http://doi.org/10.1080/07294360500062953>
- Hagerty, M.K.B., Lynch-Sauer, J., Patusky, L.K., Bouwsema, M., & Collier, P. (1992). Sense of belonging: A vital mental health concept. *Archives of Psychiatric Nursing*, 6(3), 172–177. [http://doi.org/10.1016/0883-9417\(92\)90028-H](http://doi.org/10.1016/0883-9417(92)90028-H)
- Hall, S. (1996). Whose 'identity'? In S. Hall & P. DuGay (Eds.), *Questions of cultural identity* (pp. 1–17). Sage.
- Halse, C., & Mowbray, S. (2011). The impact of the doctorate. *Studies in Higher Education*, 36(5), 513–525. <http://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2011.594590>
- Hopwood, N. (2010). Doctoral experience and learning from an asocio-cultural perspective. *Studies in Higher Education*, 35(7), 829–843. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070903348412>
- Institute of International Education. (2016). *International students in the United States*. Institute of International Education. <https://www.iie.org/Research-and-Insights/publications/International-Students-in-the-United-States>
- Institute of International Education. (2019). *Open Doors 2019*. Institute of International Education. <https://www.iie.org/en/Research-and-Insights/Open-Doors/Data>
- International Trade Administration. (2016). *2016 ITA Education top market report*. Department of Commerce, United States of America. https://legacy.trade.gov/topmarkets/pdf/Education_Top_Markets_Report.pdf
- Jenkins, J. (2006). English pronunciation and second language speaker identity. In T. Omoniyi, W. Goodith, & M.M. Tommaso (Eds.), *The sociolinguistics of identity* (pp. 75–91). Continuum.
- Kaur, P. (2014). Attitudes towards English as a lingua franca. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 118, 214–221. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.02.029>
- Kim, J. (2016). Global cultural capital and global positional competition: International graduate students' transnational occupational trajectories. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 37(1), 30–50. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2015.1096189>
- Li, Y. (2018). Rethinking education through self-study: An international doctoral student's narrative. *Reflective Practice*, 19(4), 530–542. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623943.2018.1538946>
- McAlpine, L. (2012). Identity-trajectories: Doctoral journeys from past to present to future. *Australian Universities' Review*, 54(1), 38–46.

- McAlpine, L. (2017). Building on success? Future challenges for doctoral education globally. *Studies in Graduate and Postdoctoral Education*, 8(2), 66–77. <https://doi.org/10.1108/SGPE-D-17-00035>
- McAlpine, L., & Amundsen, C. (2007). Academic communities and developing identity: The doctoral student journey. In B. P. Richards (Ed.), *Global issues in higher education* (pp. 57–83). Nova Publishing.
- McAlpine, L., & Amundsen, C. (2009). Identity and agency: Pleasures and collegiality among the challenges of the doctoral journey. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 31(2), 109–125. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01580370902927378>
- Mitchell, J. (1984). Typicality and the case study. In R. F. Ellen (Ed.), *Ethnographic research: A guide to general conduct* (pp. 237–241). Academic Press.
- Mukminin, A., & McMahon, B. J. (2013). International graduate students' cross-cultural academic engagement: Stories
- Ortaçtepe, D. (2013). "This is called free-falling theory not culture shock!": A narrative inquiry on second language socialization. *Journal of Language, Identity & Education*, 12(4), 215–229. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348458.2013.818469>
- Samimy, K., Kim, S., Lee, J.-A., & Kasai, M. (2011). A participative inquiry in a TESOL program: Development of three NNES graduate students' legitimate peripheral participation to fuller participation. *The Modern Language Journal*, 95(4), 558–574. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2011.01247.x> <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2016.06.002>
- Zhang, Y. L. (2016). International students in transition: Voices of Chinese doctoral students in a US research university. *Journal of International Students*, 6(1), 175–194. <http://doi.org/10.10106/26494>