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Article: **Global Higher Education Partnerships: Perceptions of Chinese and Sub-Saharan African Visiting Scholars of Engagement in US Universities**

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# Global Higher Education Partnerships: Chinese and Sub-Saharan African Visiting Scholars' Perceptions of Engagement

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on the participants' perceptions of engagement and compares the experiences of visiting scholars from Sub-Saharan Africa and China. We used Mezirow's (2000) Transformative Learning Theory to explore how the scholars made meaning of their experiences while in the U.S. We employed a qualitative research method and conducted in-depth interviews with visiting scholars from two separate programs. The findings of this study showed that the participants considered their time spent at the U.S. university as a professional development opportunity to help advance their career objectives. Scholars from both groups appreciated the high level of resources available in the U.S., since it allowed them to increase their research and teaching skills. They aimed to make an impact on their home societies with the knowledge gained abroad. Each set of scholars was interested in building social networks in the U.S. to help propel their career goals. However, Chinese scholars expressed more interest in personal growth and learning English while in the U.S., compared to their Sub-Saharan African counterparts.

**Keywords:** capacity building, Chinese, international visiting scholars, long-term, short-term, Sub-Saharan Africans

## Introduction

The influences of globalization have altered the way the universities maneuver international education priorities to respond to the needs of the global knowledge economy and other market forces impacting how they promote and implement internationalization activities on their campuses (de Wit & Merx, [2012](#); Stromquist, [2007](#)). According to Stromquist ([2007](#)), "higher education is undergoing substantial change in the face of globalization, which brings a greater emphasis on market forces to the process of educational decision-making" (p. 83). Furthermore, the rapid

diffusion of ideas, information, and knowledge places importance on understanding multiple perspectives and worldviews in the higher education context (Singh, [2005](#)). Universities in the U.S. are responding to the workforce needs of a globalized economy by improving intercultural competencies for faculty and students by designing innovative study abroad programs and developing outward-bound and inward-bound exchange programs with a variety of global institutions (Arden & Piscioneri, [2018](#); Heffernan & Pool, [2005](#); Poole, [2001](#); Sidhu, [2009](#); Tedrow & Mabokela, [2007](#)). Similarly, the students from all around the world have also responded to this global interconnectedness by recognizing the need to expand their worldview and develop skill sets relevant for the 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce. Altbach ([2007](#)) suggests that globalization can be viewed as the “broad economic, technological, and scientific trends that directly affect higher education and are largely inevitable in the contemporary world” (p. 25). Responding to the needs of the rapidly changing global environment, many higher education institutions and governments are supporting internationalization strategies such as recruiting prominent international faculty, promoting education abroad or supporting international partnerships and cross-border research activities (Altbach et al., [2019](#); Deem et al., [2008](#); Nowotny et al., [2001](#); Rumbley et al., [2012](#)).

There are several studies that have claimed benefits of global higher education partnerships (DeLong et al., [2011](#); Kim & Celis [2016](#); Tierney & Langford, [2016](#)). According to Kim and Celis (2016), global higher education partnerships can promote economic benefits and enhance the status of degree programs. DeLong et al. ([2011](#)) has also mentioned that these partnerships can promote greater intercultural awareness. Tierney and Langford ([2016](#)) has described how these partnerships can open new opportunities for innovative research. However, some scholars have critically examined the notion, nature, processes, and outcomes of international education programs and have regarded them as a part of a neoliberal and colonial agenda. According to Falk and Kanach ([2000](#)) a part of the world considers “globalization as providing a leveling up opportunity to overcome poverty and backwardness at breakneck speed” (p.156). However, some people are suspicious of the role of globalization and view it as “a dangerous embrace of decadent Westernized values and lifestyles, or more dramatically, as an American project for the world

domination”(Falk & Kanach, [2000](#)). Buckner and Stein ([2020](#)) argue that the U.S. education related to abroad sector’s focuses on outcomes has primarily been concerned with outcomes that ultimately are located inside the U.S. Reilly and Senders ([2009](#)) have argued that “study abroad is one of the current global cross-cultural vectors” and the political intent of study abroad is “unspoken and is certainly contested” (p.242). The authors argue historically that study abroad has been used for class reproduction and political internationalization. The narratives of idealistic internationalization and the emergence of global competence has fed into the political and economic agenda of the institutions of higher education in the U.S. Overtime outcomes have shifted from institutional outcomes to the student learning outcomes, but even with that shift, the focus remains predominantly on U.S. students and institutions.

Many scholars have criticized the intended outcomes of global higher education partnerships and programs. Particularly, the idea of “global citizenship” came under scrutiny and scholars from the field started examining critically what “global citizenship” really meant in study abroad contexts (Andreotti, [2015](#); Stein, [2015](#); Stein et al., [2020](#); Stein & Andreotti, [2021](#); Zemach-Bersin, [2007](#)). Zemach-Bersin ([2007](#)) argued that international education is packaged as “a remedy for widespread cross-cultural misunderstanding, prejudice, global ignorance, and failed international policy” (p.17). Zemach-Bersin ([2007](#)) also describes how “The discourse of study abroad appropriates the global education to serve the interests of the U.S. by re-naming imperialist and nationalistic projects with the rhetoric of “global understanding,” “international education,” and “global citizenship” (p.26). Zemach-Bersin ([2007](#)) further writes, “The “globe” is something to be consumed, a commodity that the privileged American student has the unchallenged and unquestioned right to obtain as an entitled citizen of the world” (p.26). Zemach-Bersin ([2007](#)) raises concern over the participation of institutions of higher education in this political and nationalist project about the role of education in the globalized world. Stein & Andreotti ([2021](#)) argue for a decolonial approach to the idea of global citizenship and presented global citizenship otherwise approach. According to Stein & Andreotti ([2021](#)), “global citizenship otherwise isan invitation for learners to identify and interrupt these colonial entitlements, trace their harmful and unsustainable conditions of possibility, and engage

in a long-term process of disinvesting from those entitlements so that another way of being might become possible” (p.1).

In this context, we wanted to understand how participants from different regions of the world made meaning of their engagement in international education programs. Several of the papers cited above are theoretical and express scholars’ opinions. However, in our study we wanted to know how participants of these programs from outside of the U.S. perceive their engagement in these global partnerships and made meaning of their educational experiences. It is important to mention that the structure and objectives of the programs are not our focus; rather we wanted to understand participants’ perceptions of their engagement. We focused on two groups of visiting scholars who participated in two different visiting scholars’ programs from China and Sub-Saharan Africa. This study explores the visiting scholars’ perceptions of engagement while participating in their international education partnership programs. In the following section, we define what we mean by the term “visiting scholars” and highlight the role of visiting scholars in global partnerships from the existing literature.

### **International Visiting Scholars and Global Higher Education Partnerships**

Knight ([2004](#)) has argued international visiting scholars are an important component of the internationalization of higher education in the U.S., as the universities strive to compete for students, resources, and rankings in this age of globalization. O’Hara ([2009](#)) has highlighted the positive impact international visiting scholars have on the societies through their research and advancement of knowledge and by sharing cross-cultural perspectives with the next generation of students and scientists. International visiting scholars can contribute to the societies of both the home and host countries (Regets, [2007](#); Saxenian, [2005](#)). For example, visiting scholars positively impact the host institution during their stay through cultural exchange and shared knowledge creation. Furthermore, the scholars’ home institutions benefit from increased knowledge, improved skills, and research collaborations developed in the U.S. Jeong et al. ([2011](#)) stress the need to encourage international academic exchanges because of the ability of visiting scholars to promote international research collaboration between home and host institutions, thus advancing scientific

innovation and improving cultural dialogue between two countries. Kim & Celis (2016) note, “there has been a dearth of empirical evidence to map the structure of global partnerships among higher education institutions in different countries and regions” (p. 357).

### **Who Are Visiting Scholars?**

International students are a diverse and complex body of students varying in age, occupation, education status, migration goals, and family composition. A subgroup of the larger international student body is comprised of “visiting scholars,” defined as individuals with non-degree status who conduct research, study, and teach at host institutions for periods ranging from several months to one or more years, and often maintain their affiliation with their home institutions (Shimmi, 2014; Zhao, 2008). Visiting scholars come to their host country institutions with a wide spectrum of education and experience as many hold a graduate degree or are trained in a professional field prior to coming to the U.S., while some scholars are involved in doctoral or postdoctoral studies. Other terms also encapsulate the profile of international visiting scholars such as, “visiting researchers, visiting professors, visiting fellows, and visiting scientists”(Shimmi, 2014). Visiting scholars are an almost invisible, but are important part of the growing population of international students on U.S. campuses. For many decades, the U.S. has been a leading host country for international students and visiting scholars (Shimmi, 2014). Visiting scholars coming to the U.S. commonly hold a J-1 visa, which is a non-immigrant visa issued to the participants of cultural and educational exchange opportunities. Out of the 975,000 international students enrolled in U.S. higher education institutions, roughly 201,000 are J-1 exchange visitors who are participating in different non-degree exchange programs (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2016; Zong & Batalova, 2016).

Although visiting scholars represent a specific segment of the larger international students’ body, both groups, i.e., international students and visiting scholars face similar challenges, including language barriers, cultural adjustment issues, neo-racism, and discrimination in the host community (Howe, 2008; Shimmi, 2014; Xue et al., 2015; Zhao, 2008). While there are many studies in the current discourse about the experiences

of international students, the experiences of visiting scholars as important participants in global higher education partnerships are underrepresented in the higher education literature, despite the fact this population is rapidly expanding on the campuses in the U.S. (Shimmi, [2014](#); Xue et al., [2015](#); Zhao, [2008](#)). This study seeks to develop a deeper understanding of the experiences of two groups of visiting scholars at a university in the Midwestern United States. This study expands our understanding of visiting scholar programs since it focuses on two different types of programs. The first group of scholars is non-degree visiting scholars from China on a short-term program and the second group are Sub-Saharan African doctoral students who completed coursework in the U.S. and then returned to their home country to complete their degrees. This will highlight how different types of partnerships impact individuals and societies and how these partnerships are perceived from participants' perspectives.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The purpose of the study is to develop a deeper understanding of the perceptions of visiting scholars and how they make sense of their experiences while participating in these exchange programs in the U.S. In many studies, researchers use economic frameworks such as human capital development theory or administrative models to understand these partnerships. However, we chose to use meaning making concepts derived from Mezirow's ([2000](#)) Transformative Learning Theory. Since we aim to understand human experiences in depth, we believe a meaning making perspective will give us a better lens to humanize these experiences and understand the humane aspect of these larger global and economic forces. Mezirow ([1997](#)) believed that "a defining condition of a human being is that we understand the meaning of our experience. For some, any uncritically assimilated explanation by an authority figure will suffice. But in contemporary societies we must learn to make our own interpretations rather than act on the purposes, beliefs, judgements, and feelings of others" (p.5). Mezirow ([2000](#)) also described how enabling this goal as the purpose of adult education and transformative learning helps learners develop autonomous thinking. By applying this framework, we aim to understand how visiting scholars from both groups made meaning of their experiences



at a Midwestern campus and what they hoped to achieve from this learning experience.

### **Research Methods**

We used qualitative research methodologies as suggested by Creswell & Creswell (2018) to explore goals and motivations of international visiting scholars and to understand their meaning making process. This study draws upon in-depth interview data from international visiting scholars who participated in two different programs at a university in the Midwestern United States. The international visiting scholars maintained their affiliation with their home institutions while they were studying in the U.S. and were required to return home as a stipulation of their program requirements. The Chinese visiting scholars in this study were non-degree seeking students engaging in professional development activities in the field of education. The Sub-Saharan African visiting scholars were enrolled in doctoral degree programs, but because of the conditions of their scholarship program, the students had to return to their home country after completing their academic coursework requirements. The Sub-Saharan African scholars did not complete their degrees in the U.S. but were awarded degrees from the U.S. university after they defended their dissertation remotely.

All students held J-1 visa status while they were in the U.S. and were required to pass the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) for their placement at the university. Compared to other international students, participants in this study had less autonomy and control over their experience while in the U.S. and were expected to abide by the rules and regulations of their government or funding agency. The scholars had a fixed timeframe in the U.S. and were required to return to their home institutions once their programs became completed.

### **Research Site**

This study was conducted at a large public research institution, Midwestern University (pseudonym) with roughly 50,000 undergraduate and graduate students enrolled. The university hosts 9,000 students and scholars from more than 140 countries around the world. The university has Carnegie classification as a doctoral research university with the highest



research activity. The university has over 800 J-1 scholars participating in teaching and research across the campus.

## Participants

The Chinese visiting scholars were hosted by the College of Education at Midwestern University, through a program that provided opportunities for professional development and personal growth to the scholars. The Chinese visiting scholars included seven participants: five female master's students, one male Ph.D. student, and one female faculty member studying K-12 education, teacher training, and vocational education. All the scholars were associated with a regional Chinese university. The length of the program in the U.S. varied for each scholar. The five female master's students were in the U.S. for five months and the male Ph.D. student and the female faculty member spent one year at the university. The program was partially sponsored by their home university in China and Midwestern University provided resources and support structure to facilitate the educational exchange. The Chinese scholars were responsible for paying for their cost of living while they were in the U.S.

The program designed by the College of Education provided structured activities to support the learning goals of all the Chinese visiting scholars while the master's students were on campus for the five-month timeframe. After the master's students left and the program activities ended, the Ph.D. student and the faculty member focused their time working on their research and teaching goals for the remaining seven months. These scholars were required to attend weekly lectures about the U.S. education system, visit local schools, and attend social and cultural activities organized by the College of Education. The Chinese visiting scholars were not required to take any formal classes, however, a few students decided to enroll in coursework without receiving academic credit while they were participating in the program.

The degree-seeking visiting scholars included nine students from Sub-Saharan Africa pursuing doctoral degrees in the sciences. Most of the scholars were professionals working at universities, government ministries, or research institutions before coming to the U.S. to pursue their advanced degree. The visiting scholars received a scholarship from the U.S. federal

government to attend Midwestern University, which had strict rules and regulations limiting their time in the U.S. till they completed their doctoral coursework. The scholars' dissertation research and writing had to be completed after they were back in their home country where they were also required to defend their dissertation online.

### **Data Collection**

We obtained institutional review board approval before beginning the study to ensure ethical considerations (Creswell & Creswell, [2018](#)). We conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the research participants. The semi-structured protocol allowed for flexibility in the conversation and exploration of any additional issues (Creswell, [2014](#)). All interviews were conducted in English and the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Each research participant was given a pseudonym and the research participants were given the opportunity to review their transcript and provide comments and explanations they may have after reflection on their interview.

### **Data Analysis**

All the data were stored in a shared Google Drive. The data were analyzed in several steps over the period of six months. First, researchers read and reread transcripts and created codes individually. Then they met and finalized a mutually agreed on list of codes. Second, based on the coding, major themes were organized. Third, these themes were discussed and finalized by the researchers. We used researcher triangulation to ensure validity of our findings as suggested by Creswell & Creswell ([2018](#)). Overall, the data analysis process continued simultaneously during the writing of this paper. We often went back to our data and discussed our findings several times to agree on common themes for the paper. Overall, our data analysis process was non-linear and reflective.

### **Results**

Through the analysis of the goals and motivations of international visiting scholars, the following four major themes were identified: career advancement and contribution to home country; skills development for professional growth; relationship building and network development; and

expanding worldview and self-development. The themes are discussed in detail below.

### **Career Advancements and Contribution to Home Country**

As working professionals at academic institutions, government ministries, and research institutions in China and Sub-Saharan Africa, the visiting scholars came to the U.S. with a focused notion of how their time at Midwestern University would advance their careers when they would return home. The visiting scholars were motivated by the prestige of studying at a U.S. university and desire to learn new methods and tools in their disciplines to increase their competitiveness in the workforce in their home countries. Rebecca, a Sub-Saharan African visiting scholar, described how getting her Ph.D. degree would advance her career as a researcher and policy influencer in her home country. Rebecca discussed her goals for obtaining her doctorate and shared, “Well, my goal has always been to pursue higher education. I want to go as far as I can go in terms of my career. So basically, [my goal for getting my Ph.D.] was career development.” For the Sub-Saharan African visiting scholars, career advancement not only influenced job security through gaining research skills and increasing their technical knowledge, but they also saw how they could position themselves to create sustainable change in their home country as policy advisors. The Sub-Saharan African visiting scholars introduced the notion of how knowledge attainment would advance their careers by making them recognized as leaders and experts in their fields.

Echoing this sentiment about how her time in the U.S. will impact her career development is Lucy, a Chinese visiting scholar who said, “I think [studying in the U.S.] means a lot for me. It’s a really important experience for me. I could get more opportunities in the future and [this experience] opens a door for future career advancement.” Wei Fei, another Chinese scholar, also considered his experience in the U.S. as a mechanism for a better professional future, leading to more opportunities to acquire an academic job in China, and later travel and study abroad through his faculty position at his Chinese university. Wei Fei mentioned, “I think it is a new beginning for my future. First, for my job, I will go back to maybe \_\_ in my school, and second, I will come back again, because \_\_ China \_\_ go abroad and if they have study abroad experiences, it’s easy for the scholars to come

again, so I think it's a beginning for my job and for my come back." For both degree-seeking and non-degree seeking visiting scholars, the time spent at Midwestern University gave them an opportunity for career advancement and provided a means for generating an elevated status as a faculty member and researcher at their home institution.

### **Skills Development for Professional Growth**

All the visiting scholars, regardless of their academic or career level, considered their time in the U.S. as an important and valuable experience in terms of their professional growth. The goals, objectives, and motivations driving the international scholars to study in the U.S. were often defined by what the scholars lacked at their home institutions, including access to resources and knowledge of current theories, trends, and research in their fields of study. The visiting scholars came to the U.S. with a clear understanding of the specific skill sets in need of development, which they considered important for their professional growth in their home countries. The visiting scholars anticipated the benefits they would receive after their program was completed, including the development of research skills, improved teaching methods, and refined English language capabilities. The scholars intentionally decided to prioritize certain activities to develop these skills to further advance their professional growth.

### ***Research Skills***

Increasing research capacity was a common goal for many of the visiting scholars from China and Sub-Saharan Africa as they considered the U.S. the best place to learn the necessary research skills to advance their careers. Developing quantitative skills was also a priority for many of the Sub-Saharan African Scientists, as access to training on specific software programs commonly used in their disciplines is not readily available at their home country institutions. The scholars shared a belief that U.S. research practices are better than the rest of the world and the scholars needed to learn from U.S. academics to improve their research skills and practices. Mary, a visiting scholar from China, shared that she wanted to expand her research skills during her stay in the U.S., "When I came here, maybe the most important goal for me is to enhance my capacity of being a researcher...Because here, the academic atmosphere and the surroundings

and environment, I think is much better than in China.” Jane offered a similar illustration regarding her views on the quality of training offered in the U.S., “I know the best courses [in my field] are offered in the U.S. The U.S. is really good in [my field of study] than any other place I’ve ever been.” Wei Fei also considered his experience in the U.S. important for his research skills development. The doctoral student mentioned he wanted to improve his qualitative research skills and learn interview skills while at Midwestern University. In China, Wei Fei did not learn qualitative research methods at his university, and so he only used quantitative methods in his research.

Publishing in research journals with high impact factors was also a goal for the participants, as the opportunity to conduct research and produce a journal article often distinguishes visiting scholars from other researchers or scholars at their home institutions who may not have the English language capacity or research skills to submit articles in top-tiered journals in their academic field of study. Also, access to research facilities and faculty teaching cutting-edge research methods and theories gave the visiting scholars a professional advantage, compared to their colleagues back in their home country.

### ***Teaching Skills***

Lucy, a mid-career faculty member from China, was well aware of the impacts of globalization on her career trajectory and discussed in detail the importance of learning about the system of education in the U.S. and enhancing her English language skills while at Midwestern University. Lucy noted her priorities for her time in the U.S. were to learn about, “American education, American teaching methods, and English...My major and my work is focused on teacher education, so I want to learn how American teachers teach.” When returning to China, Lucy planned to work with international students and secure a position in an office supporting international students at her home university. Lucy believed her exposure to different ways of knowing and learning at Midwestern University would help advance her career and prepare her to successfully interact with international students at her university in China.

As a faculty member at a university in Sub-Saharan Africa, Lilah discussed how her interactive classrooms at Midwestern University were challenging her to think about her own teaching styles and how different methodologies could be adapted in her low-resource classroom. Lilah stated, “The way these professors are approaching the classes, it’s different than the way we do it back home. Here, it’s more interactive, we interact a lot. While back home, it is top-down.” Exposure to the U.S. classroom helped the visiting scholars gain a better understanding of learner-centered pedagogies used frequently at U.S. universities. Learner-centered pedagogies are viewed as a pedagogical “best practice” from the U.S. education system with governments and donors seeking to replicate these practices in K-12 and higher education classrooms in Africa (Vavrus et al., [2011](#)). In China, the government is also seeking to adopt learner-centered pedagogies with the hope to improve the K-12 education system throughout the country. So, exposure to the U.S. academic system and learning new teaching skills promoted in the U.S. were important for both Sub-Saharan African and Chinese visiting scholars, as policies supporting pedagogical change were influencing governments in their home countries.

### ***English Language***

Learning English was an important goal for Chinese visiting scholars because they all considered English language competency an extremely important skill for their career advancement in China. Emily discussed, “English is very important in China [for] work.” The significance of English was also evident in stories about the visiting scholars’ life in China where, due to lack of English skills, they were unable to pursue careers they really wanted to explore in higher education. English had not only played an important role in their past lives, but the Chinese visiting scholars also believed their English proficiency level would determine their future career success, because the opportunities to advance professionally depended on their language skills. All the Chinese visiting scholars expressed strong desire to improve their English skills and they spent time learning and practicing English at Midwestern University. Wei Fei wanted to focus on academic English so he could “publish in English,” however, other scholars wanted to improve both written and oral language skills, so they could communicate with their U.S. colleagues and the growing body of

international students and scholars at Chinese universities. The Chinese visiting scholars struggled with learning English during their time at Midwestern University, but by the end of the program, they reported improvement in their English skills. Emma stated, “English not only benefits me academically, but also in travelling.” The pressure to learn English was also associated with globalization as Lucy mentioned, “Our government thinks because of globalization [our] border is very small, so different countries need to talk to each other.” Furthermore, becoming informed global citizens, the visiting scholars were able to support the Chinese government’s economic reform platform by actively participating in the global economy. Lucy described this further, “Globalization is a trend in China, education reform is focused on how to face the challenge of globalization and here [at Midwestern University] we can make contact with many people from different countries. So, we have a chance to know other cultures by experience, not by books. Now [in China] many graduates or PhD students come from other countries, so our departments need faculty to improve their English language skills and learn how to teach foreign students.”

All the Chinese visiting scholars wanted to learn English to communicate with their international colleagues, and to be able to read, write, and publish in English research journals. However, many of the Sub-Saharan African visiting scholars had strong English language skills and did not report significant issues related to their English language ability, either in the classroom or outside the classroom.

### **Relationship Building and Network Development**

The visiting scholars came to Midwestern University seeking to develop sustainable networks and create strong relationships that could be fostered and utilized when they returned home. Visiting scholars from Sub-Saharan Africa described how attending conferences in their fields of study provided an opportunity to build critical networks with scientists not only in their specific discipline, but with other experts with whom they could collaborate in the future. Exposure to the U.S. academic system throughout their time at Midwestern University gave the Sub-Saharan African scholars the opportunity to see how building multidisciplinary networks would be beneficial for their future research endeavors. Similarly, relationship



building was an important way for the Chinese visiting scholars to make sense of their experiences and to achieve their goals. The visiting scholars from China were also quite intentional in their relationship building process because of the limited time they had in the U.S. They engaged with people and in activities based on their personal and professional goals. All the Chinese visiting scholars considered spending time with their faculty mentor as the most valuable activity during their stay at Midwestern University because the faculty mentors helped them gain the research skills they desired. The Chinese visiting scholars also considered their relationships with student mentors important because their student mentors helped them to learn about American culture, practice English, and manage day-to-day life in the U.S.

Although the Chinese visiting scholars' program had built-in socialization activities with students from the university that they were required to attend, most of the visiting scholars considered those interactions superficial and frustrating. The Chinese visiting scholars' expectations about social relationships were shaped by their culture and they found connecting with American peers difficult, regardless of their efforts and strong desire to build social relationships with American students. Emily said, "I think Chinese people take relationships between people in a really serious way." Wei Fei echoed the same sentiment, "I am a traditional Chinese man. So, I think the serious way is not bad." All the Chinese visiting scholars often compared American and Chinese values for social relationships and believed that due to different values, connecting deeply and creating lasting relationships with Americans was difficult for them. Several of the Chinese scholars decided to join a church to engage with American peers and actively participated in American holiday events, but they were still unable to make meaningful friendships with Americans.

### **Expanding Worldview and Self-Development**

The participants of this study considered their engagement in the international visiting scholars' program critical for their professional development. However, professional development was deeply intertwined with personal growth for the Chinese visiting scholars. Participating in the international visiting scholars program facilitated self-development, which, for the Chinese scholars, meant economic investment in the self as human

capital or advancing one's social position through education (Bourdieu, 1986). Furthermore, the students desired to acquire social capital, in addition to intellectual self-development through immersion in learned knowledge and becoming a global citizen. The issue of "broadening their horizons" was an important goal for many Chinese visiting scholars. The term encompassed gaining knowledge about the larger world around them. The reason Emily decided to participate in the international visiting scholars' program at Midwestern University was rooted in her desire "to broaden her horizons" and "enlarge her experience" by gaining a global perspective and accessing resources she did not have in China. Emily stressed, "The most important goal for me is to open the eyesight." The desire to gain knowledge about the world around them was important for all the visiting scholars, but exploring other worldviews was especially important for the Chinese scholars. The opportunities offered at Midwestern University went beyond attending classes, learning English, and gaining exposure to new ideas in the U.S. classroom. The Chinese visiting scholars described their time in the U.S. as a mechanism for personal enrichment, self-awareness, and changing worldviews. They used phrases such as "to know about myself," "be a better person," and "understand myself more deeply."

Personal growth, enrichment, and exposure to new cultural ideas was a critical component of the Chinese scholars' time in the U.S. To some extent, the Sub-Saharan African visiting scholars shared the same desire for personal development, as Ariel shared, "I have been attending the women's networking meetings [at Midwestern University] because when I came here, I had the goal of developing myself personally." However, most of the Sub-Saharan African visiting scholars expressed a desire for academic and research development over more personal growth while in the U.S. Lilah explored this further by stating, "As a faculty member, I need to grow academically, and I need to grow in research and even the outreach activities. But for me to grow well, I need good qualifications, and I need to have international experience." The Sub-Saharan African scholars did not express a need to expand their worldview, as many of them had traveled outside of their country and had worked with international colleagues before departing to the U.S. The Sub-Saharan African scholars focused on gaining exposure to new developments, trends, and theories in their field and

learning research skills, which would help advance their academic endeavors.

### Discussion

This paper has analyzed goals and motivations of international visiting scholars from China and Sub-Saharan Africa at a research university. This research contributes to the growing body of literature on international visiting scholars in the U.S. (Howe, [2008](#); Shimmi, [2014](#); Xue et al., [2015](#); Zhao, [2008](#)) and confirms findings and claims from studies about global higher education partnership studies (DeLong et al., [2011](#); Kim & Celis, [2016](#)). This study is unique because it provides perspectives of visiting scholars from two different regions of the world and describes how they perceived their experiences, which is an addition to existing literature. It also presents perspectives on how funding, structure, and length of program can impact students' experiences.

The findings of this study suggest the visiting scholars had multifaceted expectations about their time at Midwestern University, and their goals and motivations focused on both professional career development and personal self-cultivation, taking the form of engaging with networks and exposing themselves to new belief systems and ways of thinking (Marginson, [2014](#)). These global higher education partnership programs provided them with the opportunities to integrate into a new “space of possible” for visiting scholars which allowed them to use their U.S. environment to access various resources, promoting professional and personal development (Marginson, [2014](#)). Marginson ([2014](#)) described how international students develop an identity based upon how they are situated within their society at large, such as their national identity, religion, or professional identity. While this identity may be static in their home country, based upon societal norms, Marginson asserts students have the potential to blend different identities and use education as a tool of “mobility to alter their space of possibility to move across political and cultural systems and geographical borders when entering a new country (Marginson, [2014](#)). However, Marginson ([2014](#)) postulates identity alone does not completely explain the self-forming person. In this study, we found that the new space provided new opportunities of growth and personal-professional development for visiting scholars from both the groups.

The goals and motivations driving international visiting scholars to study in the U.S. were often defined by what the scholars felt they lacked in their home-country, including access to resources and knowledge of current theories, trends, and new research in their fields of study. Their motivation to engage and participate in these programs regardless of strict structures and rules for the Sub-Saharan African students and self-funded models for Chinese students were similar and stemmed from their perceptions of “lack” or “personal limitations” which they experienced in their own countries. This inherent thought “we are not good enough and we need to learn from the U.S. to be successful” prevailed in both groups.

Success was oftentimes defined and understood from an economic development perspective for both groups. However, this study found some differences between the Chinese and Sub-Saharan African visiting scholars, which has implications for international student affairs offices supporting these populations on U.S. campuses. For the Chinese visiting scholars, their professional and personal development were deeply intertwined, with the scholars expressing a desire to become better people and gain deeper personal awareness. The Sub-Saharan African visiting scholars focused more on their professional growth, gaining skill sets and research techniques, and advancing their career opportunities when they returned home. Very few Sub-Saharan African scholars expressed a need for self-improvement while in the U.S., as they saw their professional growth as the primary purpose for their time at Midwestern University.

In contrast, the Chinese scholars frequently discussed broadening their horizons and desired to connect with a wide range of people and networks. The Chinese scholars sought to gain global citizenship, which would expand their cultural and social worldviews. The Sub-Saharan African scholars also strongly desired to engage in international networks that would foster collaboration and lead to potential partnerships on grant funding and research opportunities. However, the Sub-Saharan African scholars’ identity was firmly rooted in their home-country nationality and the scholars did not express a desire to become global citizens. This finding could be attributed to the structure and goals of the scholarship program funding their doctoral programs. The goals of the scholarship program, combined with the rules and regulations enforced by the donor agency,

could have influenced the Sub-Saharan African scholars' agency of freedom to envision themselves as global citizens, while participating in the specific scholarship program.

This study has found the visiting scholars were guided by freedom and agency, which describes an individual's ability to act based upon their own desires, goals, and motivations (Sen, [2001](#)). They used their agency to make meaning of their engagement in these education abroad programs. They were constantly working and aspiring to gain more control of their lives by defining their own goals and focusing on learning certain skills. As Bano ([2020](#)) argued, often literature presents international students and scholars as empty vessels completely devoid of agency, which is not a true representation. In this study, we also found that these scholars directed their engagement depth and breadth in these programs. Similar to Bano's ([2020](#)) study of Chinese visiting scholars, in this study, we found that these scholars "were constantly picking and choosing what to incorporate in their lives and what to ignore from this new experience" (p.186).

Another key difference between the Chinese and Sub-Saharan African visiting scholars was their knowledge about Western culture and U.S. society in general. The Chinese female scholars expressed a particular fascination with U.S. culture on their arrival and considered the U.S. education system and society better than Chinese education system and society. The Chinese female visiting scholars expressed a desire to learn more about American society and make deep connections with American students and colleagues, which did not actually occur at Midwestern University. In contrast, the Sub-Saharan African scholars did not seek to assimilate into their communities and did not express a strong desire to specifically meet and connect with American peers. Many Sub-Saharan African scholars did connect with Americans studying in their departments and working in the same laboratories, however, most of the Sub-Saharan Africans developed a robust peer group of other international students, Sub-Saharan Africans, and co-nationals. The Sub-Saharan African scholars also wanted to learn from the best and brightest scholars in their field, regardless of their nationality or ethnic identity, and by studying in the U.S., they gained access to top-level academics and researchers who could help them advance their careers and academic pursuits. More than the Chinese

scholars, many of the Sub-Saharan African scholars had previous exposure to U.S. society through prior travel to the U.S., engaging with U.S. citizens in their home country, or by learning about U.S. culture in their primary and secondary schools.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, this study explains the perceptions of engagement of two groups of international visiting scholars who participated in two different types of international education programs at a major research university in the U.S. This study further highlights the differences and similarities between the perceptions of engagement of both groups of scholars using meaning making frameworks. The study found several similarities between the two groups of visiting scholars. First, the scholars had a strong sense of obligation to their families and their home countries in both groups. The participants discussed how they would be able to contribute towards improving their mother institutions when they returned home based on the training they received at the Midwestern University. Second, their goals and motivations also focused around building their professional careers, which would positively impact the livelihoods of their families. Third, the scholars constantly engaged in activities which could advance their careers, such as learning new research methods, observing teaching methodologies in the U.S. classrooms, and building networks.

## **Implications**

This study can help faculty, administrators, and policy makers to design and create more meaningful educational experiences for international visiting scholars coming from diverse backgrounds. Lessons learned from this study call for the administrators and stakeholders to seek an understanding of the goals and motivations of the participants and consider them as active agents in these partnerships. They need to involve participants in decision making processes while creating these programs or at the very least, create more engagement opportunities for the participants based on their needs and goals, especially keeping their home context in mind. There is a need to build relationships of trust and respect, cultivate cultural competency not only for the incoming scholars but also to train local partners, improve the opportunities for better and more intentional communication among different stakeholders, and the chance to sustain

these partnerships after the program comes to an end. This study also provides the groundwork for future studies to explore the concepts of freedom and agency and their relationship with professional development.

### **Limitations**

This study has certain limitations. First, the sample size of the study was small and the study focused on only one university in the U.S. Future research on this population could include the perspectives of international visiting scholars participating in various programs at other universities in the U.S. Second, the interviews were conducted in English, which was not the primary language for many of the participants. The findings might be more revealing if the participants were able to use their native languages. Additionally, all the participants received some type of financial support from a government funding agency and the experiences of this particular group were inherently different from scholars who were self-funded because of the restrictions imposed upon them from their funding agency. Finally, this study only examined the international visiting scholars during the timeframe when they were living and learning in the U.S.; however, additional research could investigate the impact of their studies abroad on their professional and personal lives when the scholars returned to their home institution.

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