

Journal of International Students

Volume 13, Issue 3 (2023), pp. 495-502

ISSN: 2162-3104 (Print), 2166-3750 (Online)

jistudents.org

The Case of African International Students in China at the Height of COVID-19: International Higher Education's Institutional Silence on Anti-Blackness

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ABSTRACT

Anti-Blackness is a global issue that manifests in many forms, including the double standard of condemning violence against some lives while remaining silent about cruelty towards Black lives. Amid soaring anti-Asian hatred around the world, Black African international students (BAIS) were discriminated against and subject to inhumane treatment across China. Despite documentation in mainstream media of the abuses BAIS suffered in China at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, these issues were not taken up in comparative and international higher education (CIHE) literature. We acknowledge both of these violences coexist and call on critical interculturalist and agents of internationalization to consider issues of global anti-Blackness and adopt an intersectional lens in studying international students' experiences.

Keywords: African international students, anti-Blackness, China, COVID-19

African college students are among the most mobile around the world (ICEF, 2023). According to Campus France (2022), nearly 5% of African students study internationally compared to the global average of 2.4%, making Africans about 10% of the international student body worldwide (T.I.M.E. Association, 2021). Nevertheless, the literature on Black African international students (BAIS) on par

with other international students has received relatively less attention. In this commentary, we highlight apathy towards the plight of BAIS in China at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and call for more work in this area from diverse settings to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the African international student population.

This commentary focuses on BAIS, however different phrases are used to refer to the student population from the continent of Africa due to the complexity of racial constructs and identities constituting the African international student population. Black African international students specifically refer to international students from sub-Saharan Africa who are raced as Black. We define international students as transnational persons whose presence in a country is tied to an education-based visa. The scholarly focus within the subfield has not paid much attention to the intersecting identities that make up the African international student experiences. For example, Black students from sub-Saharan Africa must navigate multiple identities, such as “being Black, being from Africa, and being international” (Zewolde, 2021). As a result, the narrative and discourses of BAIS have followed the general conventions of studying international students without considering how African international students’ ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds show up in a given learning context and environment.

Increasingly, higher education literature features Black American, Black Canadian, and to some extent, Black UK student experience; yet none of these reflects the unique experiences of BAIS. We maintain that BAIS may have a different experience than Black nationals of these countries. A few exceptions are the works of Boafo-Arthur (2014), Mwangi et al. (2018, 2019), Onyenekwu (2017) and Zewolde (2022). However, these works are based in the U.S. and U.K. higher education context. Studies from other contexts are worth exploring. The continued lack of attention to BAIS’ experiences in international education has resulted in the perpetuation of practices long ago identified as contributing to current established practices of anti-Blackness, namely the erasure of Black narratives and perspectives. Anti-Blackness refers to a form of racism that attempts to deny the humanity and dignity of Black people and shows indifference or hostility to their struggles and achievements (University of California Irvine, 2023). In this commentary, we call attention to and urge internationalisation agents to contend with global anti-Blackness issues and adopt an intersectional lens in studying BAIS experiences. Anti-Blackness is not new; however, we highlight anti-Blackness in China during COVID-19, accented by BAIS experiences as case examples to advance our arguments.

Positionality Statement

We raise this topic as two Black emerging scholars with significant personal, professional, and educational international ties. Our intersecting identities (i.e., African and male, US American and female) provide us with both advantages and constraints and attest to the complexity and diversity of Black experiences across

geopolitical contexts. We have chosen China as a site of study by virtue of that shared connection. One of the authors studied in China and has experience in business-to-business transactions across Asian contexts. The other author was living in Hong Kong, a special administrative region of China, during the height of the pandemic.

COVID-19 AS A CASE STUDY

We refer to COVID-19 as a case example to bring to the fore and highlight a larger problem within the current scholarship. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic that ravaged human endeavours, international students were disproportionately impacted by the unprecedented global health crisis. A quick scan through the literature on international students' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic clearly shows that BAIS experiences did not receive much-warranted attention relative to other international students and international destinations. One of the prominent trends was the increase in xenophobia and discrimination targeted against East Asians, including Asian international students in Western study destinations (Ng, 2020). At the same time, Black Africans and people of African descent in China became the target of discrimination (Xu et al., 2021). Black African international students faced double discrimination in China. Here, double discrimination refers to racial and ethnic discrimination Africans face because of skin colour (race) and geopolitical positioning (ethnicity). Black African international students withstood systemic racism and discrimination fuelled by the Chinese government's strict pandemic measures. Despite reports of hardship and issues of blatant racism and discrimination meted out against Black Africans in China during the pandemic, discourses surrounding BAIS caught up in the middle of these racial struggles were ignored in China and made invisible around the world. Internet abuse and racist slurs directed at Black Africans increased, exacerbated by the pandemic in 2020 (France 24, 2020). When universities closed due to COVID-19, BAIS were left in precarious situations. Multiple articles reported different universities across China enforced an extended quarantine for Black African students even when official lockdowns ended (Vincent, 2020). Other sources cite Black African students were singled out and subjected to routine PCR tests despite the fact 90% of China's imported cases came from Chinese nationals returning from travel (Human Rights Watch, 2020; Marsh et al., 2020). In a news article, Mohammed, a Guinean student in Guangzhou testified that landlords would call Black students and say that they received pressure from the local government not to extend housing contracts to Black Africans which resulted in students living on the streets and being denied basic necessities such as food and clean water (Al Jazeera, 2020; Nsono, 2020). Mohammed went on to say,

But the problem is not the paper (document from local authorities stating that the bearer is not infected with coronavirus), it's people's minds. Because when you go out, before seeing the paper when someone sees you, they will run away from you" (Nsono, 2020).

While the context of a global pandemic is novel, anti-Black racism in China has been noted and studied in recent history (Castilo, 2020). Yet, these issues are not taken up in the subfield of comparative and international higher education. Instead, the focus remained on mobility, markets, and recruitment (Mulvey, 2021), furthering the capitalistic treatment of international students as “cash cows” (Stein & De Andreotti, 2016) and geopolitical pawns while ignoring the lived experiences of transnational human beings.

A CURSORY GLANCE AT AFRICANS IN CHINA

These problems existed long before COVID-19 (Sautman, 2009); however, racism targeted towards Black Africans in China adapted to new circumstances during the outbreak of COVID-19. Since the late 1990s, China has become a significant recipient of African international students due to its economic and diplomatic engagements with African countries which has resulted in transnational education exchanges and cooperation. Some authors (Breeze & Moore, 2017; Ho, 2017; Mulvey, 2021) have argued that African students increasingly choose China for their higher education due to China’s geostrategy influence (e.g., Sino-African relations) and available scholarship packages. Empirical advances have documented the reception and experiences of African students in Chinese higher education (Agyenim-Boateng, 2022; Mulvey, 2021). Recent evidence suggests that the experiences of BAIS in China are a mixed bag, running the gambit from extremely positive to extremely alarming (for review, see Mulvey, 2020). Ho (2017) argued that BAIS’ daily social interaction in key destination cities such as Beijing, Guangzhou, Nanjing, Shanghai and Wuhan reeks of social hierarchies that impact African students’ impression of China and perception of Sino-African relations. Although these topics are of great relevance to CIHE, the lion’s share of available literature exists outside the subfield but are found in other areas such as mental health, migration studies, and economics as evidenced by our reference list.

DISCUSSION

A focus on the COVID-19 pandemic brazenly exposes the bias in the internationalisation of higher education literature concerning Black African lives. While there is a recent proliferation of BAIS research, BAIS aspirations, experiences, narratives, and perspectives are still scantily available in CIHE research. Historic instances where BAIS are studied, topics are often limited to cultural shock, acculturation-related challenges, college choice, and academic struggles (e.g., Bofo-Arthur, 2014; Hyams-Ssekasi et al., 2014). These issues are common and part of the stressors and challenges all international students face on a regular basis, regardless of background. Solely studying BAIS through such limited and generic perspectives prevents us from fully capturing the complexities of BAIS experience and adequately addressing the dynamic of racial and ethnic differences. Some authors have taken an intersectional approach in examining the Black experience within this student population; however, these works were limited to the U.S and U.K. contexts and were conducted prior to COVID-19.

COVID-19 changed the dynamics of CIHE and affected international students gravely, albeit in different ways. The dearth of empirical research exploring the effects of COVID-19 on BAIS reifies the erasure of Black African experiences from research within the CIHE.

We recognise that anti-Blackness is not relegated to CIHE nor is it only pervasive in Europe, the United States, and Canada. Anti-Blackness is an issue that needs to be addressed in non-Western contexts such as Asia. Much of the focus in the US and Canada is sensitising domestic students to international students whilst ignoring the geopolitical leanings and biases international students bring with them. It is possible to study international student experiences while adopting intersectional analytical frameworks which address the complexities of international student identities and realities. Thus, we call on CIHE researchers to rethink their approach and contend with global anti-Blackness in higher education internationalisation literature.

Anti-Blackness is profoundly global and shows up in diverse forms. One such manifestation was the double standard of decrying the rise in anti-Asian hate while remaining silent about the maltreatment of Black African students in China. Equally remarkable was the outpouring of institutional support for displaced Ukrainian students, at the same time, institutions were resoundingly silent regarding the ongoing genocide in Ethiopia. The disregard for Black African and Indian students stranded in Ukraine at the onset of Russia's invasion was appalling.

Implications

We recognise that duality exists; in the case of this paper, it is possible to denounce the rise in Asian hate crimes while also demanding that Africans in Asia be treated humanely. Racism everywhere against all people is wrong. To be clear, we are not criticising interventions or discourses that condemn violence. We are, however, calling out the selective, asymmetrical outrage within CIHE, especially in the age of a supposed “racial reckoning” (Coloma et al., 2021; Goh, 2022; Strong et al., 2023). We maintain that higher education—and by extension, comparative and international education—researchers are not neutral and should not remain passive in the face of crimes against humanity and anti-Blackness.

It is the hope that the points raised in this commentary will stimulate discussions which challenge anti-Blackness within the CIHE and will inspire scholars and practitioners to take the opportunity to foster antiracist education and practices in international students. Black lives matter, even in comparative and international higher education.

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