

A Kenyan student in Shanghai: '90 percent of me is Chinese'

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Noah Namwamba, a graduate student at Shanghai Jiao Tong University, has immersed himself so deeply in life in China that he sometimes worries family and friends back home in Kenya can't immediately place him when he returns.

He reckons "90 percent of me is Chinese" after spending seven years in Shanghai. He has a coterie of Chinese friends, speaks Mandarin, loves Chinese food, watches Chinese films and has visited most provinces in China.

"Everything is different," he said of his wide-ranging China experience. "You go to Guangdong and people are speaking Cantonese, which is so different from Shanghai dialect. When I went to the Inner Mongolia and saw the local writing, it was something I didn't know existed. Someone told me it was actually used on the Chinese currency renminbi. I thought I understood China, but gradually I began to feel that I didn't know anything."

Namwamba was born and raised in the Kenyan capital Nairobi. He recalls watching kung fu movies as a child, calling Jet Lee an icon among the young in his native country.

"Jumping from a table and doing a Jet Lee kick as a kid was considered something to be proud of," he said. "So, growing up watching Chinese dramas and films was how I learned about China. The image of China painted in our minds was of a country where people were practicing kung fu everywhere. And some people in Kenya still have that perception even to this day."

When he first came to China in 2016, one of his first trips was to the Shaolin Temple in

central China's Henan Province, which was regarded as the birthplace of kung fu.

Namwamba recalls how he was studying at the University of Nairobi in 2013. His department was on the third floor, one floor above the Confucius Institute at the school.

"I used to skip the second floor," he said, with a sheepish grin, "but along the way, I listened to Kenya students there speaking fluent Chinese. It sounded so nice."

The germ of a dream to go to China took root. He began studying Chinese at the Confucius Institute. With his ear for languages, Namwamba easily passed the HSK (Level II) test, which led to his enrollment in a one-semester Chinese language course at Fudan University in Shanghai.

When the plane carrying him landed at Pudong International Airport in September 2016, Namwamba was overcome by amazement.

"Is this real, I kept asking myself," he said. "It was a very strange but joyful sensation. I'm finally here in China!"

He is currently working on a PhD in new media studies at Shanghai Jiao Tong University.

"China has become my home, and I love it," he said.

That endearment is reinforced the more Namwamba's Chinese roots expand.

He said he's made so many Chinese friends over the years that he's lost count of them. "There are maybe more than 2,000 Chinese contacts on my WeChat account," he said.

Food has been part of the delight of living in China. His favorites are Shandong dumplings, Xinjiang barbecue and Xi'an roujiamo, a Chinese-style burger.

"I have learned a lot," he said. "But one thing that is very obvious — China is a nation of



Noah Namwamba poses with Chinese kung fu players at the Shaolin Temple. — Ti Gong

creative, smart people, who are open to new ideas, people and challenges."

Namwamba said he is especially impressed by the nation's embrace of advanced technologies.

"I use WeChat, Eleme, Taobao, Meituan, Dingdong Maicai — all these apps are so ubiquitous," he said, adding that tech giants like Alibaba and Tencent are global game changers.

"Kenyans also use Taobao," he said. "I asked family members back home to use WeChat because that's the best way to contact me easily."

Tecno, according to him, is currently the most popular brand in Kenya, and the whole of Africa as well.

"It's a smartphone brand made by China specifically for Africa," he said. "You can't buy it outside of the continent. Its camera works so well with us because we have darker skin and it can take brighter photos."

In addition, local languages are included on the affordable phone.

"Africans trust no other brand other than Tecno," he said. Besides apps and gadgets, China's construction and infrastructure projects have

also become a common sight in Kenya, he said.

"We now have a lot of highways built by China, and they all have signals in Chinese, like 限速 (*xiansu*, speed limit)," he said. "The toll stations also have Chinese characters, and apartments constructed by Chinese companies have Chinese names in pinyin."

Perhaps the most prominent project of all is the Mombasa-Nairobi Standard Gauge Railway, commonly known as SGR.

Built with Chinese technology and to Chinese standards, the 480-kilometer railway began operating in 2017. It is Kenya's largest infrastructure project, connecting East Africa's largest port city of Mombasa with Nairobi in a trip that takes about four hours.

That compares with a bus trip that takes about 12 hours, he said.

"Cargo trains that connect Mombasa to Nairobi can easily move on to Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi other landlocked African countries," he said. "It's much cheaper to move goods by rail than by air freight."

Namwamba said he has been dazzled by China's focus on innovation and the

array of technologies that has produced.

"China is investing so heavily on technologies," he said. "Just look. After ChatGPT came out, there was a Chinese version of it a few days later. In terms of technology, there's no way that China will be left behind."

Namwamba said he doesn't think any other country can compare China in its efforts to develop new media, in particular, short-form content platforms.

"China has Douyin, Kuaishou, Xiaohongshu," he said. "I can't even name all of them. Each one of them has its own unique characteristics targeting a particular group of users. That level of competitiveness and innovation gives China a leading role in the development of new media formats and applications."

Namwamba said he wants to use new technologies to help Kenyans learn about China and vice versa.

"China and Kenya have a great relationship, but I want to help move that relationship from government and corporate entities to a people-to-people bridge," he said. "That's my goal. That's my dream."

At the 2018 China International Import Expo, he worked with a team of translators assisting a presidential delegation from Kenya. He said he told President Uhuru Kenyatta that the two nations "can be like a family."

In 2022, Namwamba was invited to give a speech at the World Youth Development Forum.

This year marks the 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations between China and Kenya, highlighted by China's "Belt and Road" initiative that is expanding trade and cultural ties to Central Asia, Africa and beyond.

"It's not about connecting China to the world," he said. "It's actually a way of connecting different countries in one loop and enabling cooperation between different people, different cultures and different countries on every level. It's a community of shared values."