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State-mediated Brokerage System in China's Self-funded Study Abroad Market

Shanshan Lan* 

ABSTRACT

The thriving of China's self-funded study abroad market is marked by the tremendous increase of students who use the services of educational intermediaries to facilitate their transnational journeys. This is largely due to the marketization of China's higher educational system and the liberalization of state policy towards commercialized brokerage services. Based on multi-sited fieldwork in China and Italy, this paper examines the intersections between the regulatory, the commercial, and the social dimensions of the educational migration infrastructure in China. It identifies a tension between the neoliberal ideas of individual autonomy and freedom, which are promoted by the state and private intermediaries, and the self-perpetuating nature of the educational migration infrastructure, which facilitates and constrains different groups of parents' and students' desire for international education.

Ping is a middle-aged woman whom I met in summer 2015, when she accompanied her 16-year-old daughter Maggie to attend a mock SAT exam held on a university campus in Jinan.¹ Like the majority of my informants, Ping identifies herself as middle-class, that is the middle stratum of Chinese society. Ping and her husband are both state employees in the railway sector and both have college degrees. Although Maggie is still in her first year of high school, she has already taken the TOFEL exam twice. Ping explained her obsession with Maggie's education: "Since this is our only child, we want to provide her the best education we can afford. Now she is performing OK in school, but we know that she won't be able to attend an elite university in China. In China your exam score determines what major you can choose. We want to send her abroad so that she can attend a better university and choose a major based on her interest." Ping told me that she has been following the advice of a study abroad agent, Esther, to prepare for Maggie's eventual entry to an elite university in the United States. After the mock SAT, Ping would travel with Maggie to Shanghai to attend a six-week intensive English training course hosted by a renowned English language centre. The total cost of the trip, tuition plus food and lodging, would be around 50,000RMB. Meanwhile, since Maggie wants to major in industrial design, Esther suggested she should attend the summer school of the Chicago Art Institute next year. She convinced Ping that this pre-college overseas study trip is an important investment for Maggie's future application for universities in the US, because it will distinguish her from other applicants from China.

Ping is just one among many middle-class Chinese parents who invest extravagantly in their children's dreams to study abroad. According to the Chinese Ministry of Education, about 544,500 students left China in 2016 to study abroad and 91.49 per cent of them were self-funded. In 2014, the estimated value of China's study abroad market already reached 200 billion RMB (Er, 2014). While these statistics reflect the flourishing of the education-migration industry in China, they fail to

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account for the anxieties, hopes, confusions and determinations experienced by Chinese parents and children in their daily life interactions with educational intermediaries from both the state and non-state sectors. With the marketization of China's higher educational system and the commercialization of international student migration, studying abroad is often framed in popular Chinese media as a special type of educational consumption and a matter of personal choice. This article contends that recent transnational student migration from China is in fact largely facilitated and structured by the state. The diversification of brokerage services in China's self-funded study abroad market reflects the state's deliberate efforts to relax its control over transnational student mobility in order to relieve the problem of uneven distribution of educational resources in the country. However, state attempt to liberalize the study abroad market ends up perpetuating social inequalities due to its tacit endorsement of neoliberal ethos such as self-responsibility and self-improvement.

Various scholars have noted that international student mobility is not a matter of personal choice but is structured by multiple social actors. In terms of the supplier side, Findlay et al. (2017) emphasize the financial interests and aggressive recruitment policies of universities in the UK in facilitating international student migration. Moskal (2017) and Robertson and Runganaikalo (2014) note the constraints experienced by international students due to restrictive immigration policies in destination countries such as the UK and Australia. In terms of the demand side, existing literature mainly focuses on the link between transnational student mobility and social reproduction (Waters, 2005; Xiang and Shen, 2009) and Asian students' desire for permanent residency in the developed world (Baas, 2010; Fong, 2011). While there is an increasing literature on the role of the sending state in facilitating and regulating international labour migration (Guevarra, 2010; Rodriguez, 2010; Xiang, 2012), relatively little is known about the sending state's role in mediating transnational student migration (Gribble, 2008). Based on the research on low-skilled labour migration from China and Indonesia, Xiang and Lindquist (2014) define migration infrastructure as "the systematically interlinked technologies, institutions, and actors that facilitate and condition mobility" (122). The two authors argue that "the interplay between different dimensions of migration infrastructure make it self-perpetuating and self-serving, and impedes and rather than enhances people's migratory capability" (122). This article attempts to creatively apply Xiang and Lindquist's theory of migration infrastructure to the field of transnational student migration from China. Echoing the two authors' emphasis on the intersections between the regulatory and commercial dimensions of migration infrastructure, this research critically examines the specific forms of state and private hybrid processes that emerge in China's self-funded study abroad market.

In their study of the articulation between neoliberal logic and socialist sovereignty in China, Ong and Zhang (2008) identify a new mode of post-socialist governance, which grants citizens certain degrees of freedom to pursue self-interests while maintaining state control from a distance. This article examines how the post-socialist technology of ruling from afar is manifested in China's self-funded study abroad market, which is marked by a complex interplay between state nationalist agenda, commercialized brokerage services and individual choices. I am interested in teasing out the unequal power relations embedded in the tensions between the neoliberal ideas of individual autonomy and freedom, promoted by the state and private intermediaries, and the self-perpetuating nature of the educational migration infrastructure, which facilitates and shapes parents' and students' desire for international education. China provides an interesting case study due to the authoritarian nature of its regime and its status as the largest supplier of international students to the rest of the world. By uncovering how state processes produce and become enmeshed with the commercial brokerage of international education in post-socialist China, the article contributes to both the migration studies literature on migration industries/infrastructures and the educational mobilities literature on the complex structures that shape student mobility.

The primary data for this article were gathered in summer 2015 in Guangzhou and Jinan in China. In addition to archival research (official documents, websites, newspaper and media analysis), the author conducted 34 semi-structured interviews with parents, students, educators, state officials and private intermediary agents. The interview questions focus on pre-migration decision-

making, interactions with educational intermediaries and impact of state policy on China's self-funded study abroad market. The recruitment of research subjects was initially based on my personal network; then followed a snowball sampling method. Since one of my close friends has been working as a private educational agent in Jinan, she played a key role in initiating me into the social circles of educational brokers and Chinese parents and students. At times I was able to accompany my friend during her consultation meetings with parents and students. My identity as an overseas Chinese scholar who had studied in the United States and was now teaching in a well-known European university not only enhanced the credibility of my friend's business, but attracted interest from Chinese parents who were eager to learn more about higher educational systems in the United States and Europe. The supplementary data were collected in summer 2017 in Bologna, Florence and Rome in Italy, which include open-ended interviews with Chinese students, teaching and managerial staff in Italian universities, private training centres and non-profit organizations. The focus was on post-migration adjustment experiences and evaluation of the services of study abroad intermediaries. Due to my inability to speak Italian, the perspectives of Italian teaching and administrative staff are relatively less represented in the data.

The article is structured as follows: it first explores the structural reasons for the thriving of China's self-funded study abroad market. Then it identifies different mode of intersections between the state and non-state sectors. Next, it examines parents' and students' dilemmas, struggles and compromised agency in interacting with private intermediaries. Finally, it reflects on the pitfalls of neoliberal migration infrastructure in China's self-funded study abroad market and the policy implications for both the sending and receiving countries in terms of the professionalization of educational brokerage services and the improvement of welfare services for international students.

STATE ENGINEERED TRANSNATIONAL STUDENT MOBILITY

China's study abroad programme started under the state's sponsorship. In 1978, a group of 52 Chinese students and scholars chosen by the Ministry of Education were sent to the United States to pursue academic studies (Li, 2005). In the early 1980s, most overseas Chinese students were sponsored by the Chinese government. They were supposed to learn from the West and return to make contributions to the modernization of China (Xiang and Shen, 2009). In the 1990s, self-financed students started to increase, yet the majority of them depended on scholarships from overseas universities or foundations to support their postgraduate studies (Xiang and Shen, 2009). Since the late 1990s, more and more Chinese students managed to study abroad at their own expense. The last decade witnessed a dramatic increase of young students who go abroad to pursue high school or undergraduate studies, and their educational journeys are usually facilitated by private study abroad agencies (Liu, 2009; Fong, 2011). With the rapid growth of China's economy and the expansion of its middle class (Cheng, 2010), recent student migration has developed new trends in the diversification of student backgrounds, choice of universities, majors and destination countries. Depending on the length of the study abroad period, King and Raghuram (2013) make distinctions between credit mobility, whose goal is to attend short-term exchange programmes and degree mobility, whose goal is to obtain an overseas degree. This research mainly focuses on Chinese students who study abroad for the purpose of obtaining a Bachelor's or Master's degree.

There are multiple reasons for the study abroad fever in China. The first one is the marketization of China's higher educational system and the unequal distribution of educational resources. In 1997, colleges and universities in China started charging tuition fees. The percentage of state funding dropped from 95.9 per cent in 1978 to 47.9 per cent in 2000 (Zhan and Zhong, 2004). Meanwhile, China's higher education enrolment increased by almost 800 per cent from 1990 to 2005 (Lin and Sun, 2010). One consequence of this higher education expansion is the inflation of college degrees

and rising importance of university ranking (Cebolla-Boado et al., 2018). To achieve the goal of building several world-class universities in China, the state has been allocating disproportionately large amounts of funding to a limited number of public universities via Project 211 and Project 985.² Between 1996 and 2008, about US\$ 6.2 billion was distributed to over 100 key universities (Li, 2004; Mohrman, 2013). China's stratified educational system has increased the pressure on students to score higher in the National College Entrance Exam (*gaokao*). Students who fail the exam or who fail to enter a key Chinese university often have to make alternative plans for overseas education. All my informants in Italy reported that studying abroad was their second choice, because their *gaokao* score was not high enough to be admitted by an elite university in China.

The liberalization of state policy constitutes another reason for the growth of transnational student mobility from China. According to Xiang (2003), private educational intermediaries became active in the mid-1990s. In August 1999, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Public Security and the Administration Bureau for Industry and Commerce, promulgated *Provisions on the administration of intermediary services for studying abroad at one's own expense*. This remained a principal guide in state regulation of the self-funded study abroad market until its abolition in 2015. The 1999 law stipulated that all educational intermediaries must be accredited by the Ministry of Education before registering their businesses with the local Public Security Bureau and the Administration Bureau for Industry and Commerce. In order to limit the number of private intermediaries, the law required that a company must hold a reserve fund of at least 500,000 RMB, and must have established steady co-operations and exchanges with overseas educational institutions. Trans-provincial intermediary practices were discouraged and were subjected to additional scrutiny procedures by the state. While the goal of the 1999 law was to prevent unethical intermediary practices, it ended up favouring brokerage institutions which were either previously affiliated to the state or had close connections with state officials. With endorsement from the state, these brokers generally had more opportunities to establish international collaborations and exchanges with overseas educational institutions and therefore faced little obstacle in obtaining accreditation.

In the 2000s, China's self-funded study abroad market kept growing, due to the state's liberalization of emigration policies and internationalization in China's higher education system. According to Mr. Li, a private agent in Guangzhou, the relaxation of visa policies in major study-abroad destinations, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia, in the late 2000s, facilitated the rapid increase of private intermediary services. One unintended consequence of the 1999 law was to encourage illicit intermediary practices. Smaller agents who did not have the capacity to obtain accreditation from the state simply registered their businesses with the local Administration Bureau for Industry and Commerce. They usually labelled themselves as consulting companies rather than educational intermediaries. Trans-regional practices also became possible because some state-accredited intermediaries made profits by functioning as patrons for smaller agents in other provinces. An informal estimate in 2014 revealed that among over 10,000 intermediary agencies in the country, only just over 400 were accredited by the Ministry of Education (Cha, 2014).

Since 2013, the state has been relaxing its control of the self-funded study abroad market. The first move was to delegate the authority to accredit private educational intermediaries to the provincial government and to simplify the application procedure for trans-regional intermediary services. The goal was to acknowledge "the decisive role of the market in the allocation of resources."³ Instead of emphasizing the qualification of private intermediary agencies, the focus has shifted to "optimize public services, protect fair competition, strengthen market regulation, maintain market order, supplement market deficiency, and promote sustainable development in private study abroad intermediary services" (Ibid). In June 2014, a new state policy granted private intermediary agencies the right to establish business practices first and obtain accreditation later. This postponing of the accreditation procedure has significantly lowered the entry requirement for overseas educational services. It also provided a shortcut for the legalization of many consulting companies who had long been engaged in illicit intermediary practices. The year of 2015 witnessed further liberalization

of the study abroad market due to the official abolition of the 1999 provisions, which allowed smaller agents with less financial capital to enter the field. State deregulation culminated in January 2017, when the accreditation requirement was officially revoked. In place of state intervention, market competition and quality service became the two keywords in official discussions of China's self-funded study abroad industry (c.f. Xiang, 2012).

State abolition of the accreditation system has facilitated the spread of study-abroad services to second- and third-tier cities, from coastal areas to interior China. By transforming educational intermediaries into commercialized service providers, the state rendered brokerage services more accessible to ordinary Chinese citizens. It also transferred the risks of studying abroad to private educational intermediaries and individual Chinese families. Instead of totally withdrawing from the self-funded study-abroad market, the state has been influencing and monitoring the market through sophisticated strategies of public-private collaborations. Meanwhile, in an effort to reverse the brain drain from China, the state has been actively promoting the return of Chinese professionals with overseas learning and working experiences (Zweig, 2006; Xiang, 2011). In 2014, China's President Xi made an important connection between studying abroad and the national project of the Chinese Dream. He emphasized that overseas students are important components of China's talent pool and that China's policy towards studying abroad should serve the larger goal of strategic national development (Hao, 2015). The incorporation of study abroad students into grand state narratives such as the Chinese Dream highlights the connections between state-engineered transnational mobility projects and individual choices for overseas education.

INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN THE STATE AND NON-STATE SECTORS

Between 1990s and 2000s, China's self-funded study abroad market was dominated by intermediary agencies that were formally or informally affiliated with the state. They gained credibility by state endorsement and by their privileged access to special sources of knowledge and channels of communication with overseas universities and educational agents. The rise of commercialized educational brokers between 2000s and 2010s corresponded with the relaxation of state control of intermediary agencies and the transition of self-funded study abroad from an elite privilege to mass consumption. These commercialized brokers cultivate their credibility by emphasizing quality service, consumer rights protection and nationwide service networks. However, a clear division between the state and non-state sectors remains disputable due to the existence of various types of hybrid practices which involve the intersections of the regulatory and the commercial dimensions of migration infrastructure (Xiang and Lindquist, 2014).

This section identifies four modes of state-private interactions: the privatization of state-affiliated educational agencies and institutions; private marketing and brand-building activities endorsed by state officials; the state as a business provider for private intermediaries; and surveillance of the private sector through government organized NGOs. The distinctions between these four types are analytical by nature. In practice they are often entangled with each other due to the prevalence of personal networks (*guanxi*) and the expansion of agent chains.

With the deregulation of China's self-funded study abroad market, intermediaries which used to be affiliated with the state often had to go through a process of privatization in order to survive in the market economy. S Company was a private educational intermediary founded in 2000. It evolved from the International Education Exchange Department of Shandong Science and Technological Training Centre, which was established in 1990 and was formally affiliated with the Association of Science and Technology of Shandong Province. Before the rise of commercialized brokers in late 2000s, S Company monopolized the channel for international exchanges in science, technology and education in Shandong Province and was among the first group of educational

intermediaries accredited by the Ministry of Education. While the legal representative of S company is a staff affiliated with the Association of Science and Technology of Shandong Province, the rest of the employees are hired on short-term or contract basis. Ms. Wang, who worked for 10 years in S Company, told me, “Our golden time was prior to 2009, when we depended on the state and faced little competition from other agents. Now we have to depend on ourselves and work really hard due to market pressure.” Although S company has lost some of its comparative advantage due to the aggressive marketing strategies of commercialized brokers with nationwide service networks, it still maintains a relatively stable student recruiting network through nine branch offices in multiple cities in Shandong Province, thanks to its previous affiliation with the local state.

Due to the marketization of China’s higher educational system, public universities are granted the liberty to use state-funded educational resources to generate extra revenues for sustainable development. This has led to hybrid forms of practices, with elite public universities functioning as de facto brokers by running various kinds of study abroad programs for the purpose of generating extra revenues. The International College of Y, a reputable public university in Guangzhou, was founded in 2004. It targets students who wish to study abroad on their own expenses, mainly high school graduates who either failed the *Gaokao* or are not eligible to enrol in its regular programmes. Mr. Wu, the Vice Dean of the International College, explained to me, “Our format is higher education, but our content is pre-college training. We function more like a combination of a training centre and a study abroad agent, but we are very different from those private intermediaries because we provide free advice for university choices and visa applications.” While Y University takes care to distance itself from private intermediaries, there are plenty of key universities at the regional and provincial level that collaborate with commercialized intermediaries to increase student enrolment. Some chose to subcontract their study abroad programs to private intermediaries, which are granted the liberty to recruit students on behalf of elite universities and to set up training centres on university campuses. Collaboration between elite universities and private intermediaries can be highly problematic if private agents fail to deliver services that match the reputation of elite universities. However, there are no clear state laws to regulate such partnership.

While smaller brokers try to initiate collaborations with state-funded universities in order to increase their credibility, commercialized intermediaries with nationwide service networks also realize the importance of seeking endorsement from the state. Founded in 1999 in Beijing by a private entrepreneur who made his name in the clothing industry, G Company gained national prominence by actively cultivating relations with various levels of state officials. In 2001, G Company established the first Study Abroad Consumer Education School under the authorization of the Consumer Association in Beijing. The goals of the consumer school are: to offer free lectures on information concerning study abroad; to promote state rules and regulations; and to protect the legal interests of consumers. Guest speakers include former state officials, former Counsel for education in overseas Chinese embassies, representatives from overseas embassies and educational institutions and other expert consultants. Although couched in terms of consumer rights protection and public service, these events functioned as promotional campaigns for G to build its brand and client bases. Currently G has a nationwide network of 47 consumer schools covering various Chinese cities and even minority areas. G also participated in the drafting of two booklets: *Terminologies for Study Abroad Services* and *Service Specification for Study Abroad Intermediaries*. These booklets were formally released in 2016 by two state organs: General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine and National Administration of Standardization.

The state not only endorses commercialized brokerage services, but functions as a broker itself by signing bilateral agreements with different overseas governments and educational institutions in an effort to promote trade relations and cultural exchange. However, it often depends on private educational agents to advertise these programs in different Chinese cities and universities. For example, while most of the Chinese students I met in Italy studied abroad via the state-initiated

Marco Polo Project (launched in 2004) and the Turandot Project (launched in 2009), their applications were all facilitated by private agents.⁴

Ms. Gu's company was founded in 2009 in Jinan, Shandong province. In addition to serving individual clients, Ms. Gu works as a subcontractor for state-initiated transnational education projects. Since this subcontracting system is not based on open competitions, only agents who have good relations with key project personnel can secure a contract. Because Ms. Gu has cultivated strong personal ties with staff in two non-profit organizations affiliated with the Ministry of Education, she managed to contract several state-initiated pilot projects in the past few years. She explained to me, "My job is to serve as a communication channel between the state and second and third-tier universities which do not have the capacity to establish collaborative relations with overseas educational institutions. Since it is a pilot project, the information will not be publicized on official websites. The state needs an agent to operationalize the project at the ground level and to mediate its bargaining process with local universities." Such transnational programmes usually make profits out of student tuition, which cost much more than regular college programmes in China. The profits are usually divided between state-affiliated non-profit organizations, the agents and local universities.

Collaborations between the state and non-state sectors reflect the intensification of migration infrastructure in China's self-funded study abroad market. While promoting the commercialization of overseas education and the diversification of study abroad destinations, such hybrid practices also create new hierarchies among different types of educational intermediaries. Take a government-organized NGO, the China Education Association for International Exchange (CEAIE), for example. Although formally registered as a non-profit organization with the Ministry of Civil Affairs, CEAIE is in reality operated by the Ministry of Education and has a nationwide network in different cities and provinces. In 2013, CEAIE established a branch organization named the Committee on Self-Funded Study Abroad Service (COSA). While the goal of COSA is to promote self-discipline and standardization among private educational intermediaries, its current membership is limited to agencies that have been accredited by the Ministry of Education. This arrangement not only establishes the privileged status of COSA members in the self-funded study abroad market, but betrays the limitation of COSA in regulating educational agents not registered in its system. By outsourcing its regulation of the self-funded study abroad market to COSA, the state actually contributes to the perpetuation of hierarchies and inequalities in educational brokerage services.

INTERACTIONS BETWEEN PARENTS, STUDENTS AND PRIVATE AGENTS

State endorsed consumerism in the self-funded study abroad market sometimes gives false hope to Chinese parents and students that they can freely choose quality overseas education. However, the proliferation of information concerning study abroad and the diversification of brokerage services often end up confusing them. This section identifies a dilemma in many parents' and students' interactions with private agents: on the one hand, they are sceptical about the brokerage service due to its profit-driven nature; on the other hand, they consider brokerage as an indispensable part of the study abroad process. I argue that parents' and students' anxieties, hopes and struggles in dealing with educational intermediaries are symptomatic of the tensions between neoliberal ideas of individual autonomy and freedom and the self-perpetuating nature of the educational migration infrastructure in China. Although parents and students are not passive consumers of the neoliberal commodity of international education, their bargaining power with private agents is largely determined or constrained by the financial, educational and social resources they possess.

Compared with the low-skilled labour migrants studied by Xiang and Lindquist (2014), student migrants in China are not simply moved from one place to another by educational brokers. However, their choices of destination countries, host universities and study majors are heavily mediated, intervened and constrained by China's educational migration infrastructure. Due to fierce competition,

private intermediaries have adopted various strategies in order to target different groups of consumers. Some promise to help their clients enter elite overseas universities; others promote the concept of travel and study by emphasizing the accumulation of foreign language skills, cross-cultural knowledge and overseas experiences. Echoing the neoliberal rhetoric of self-responsibility, more and more intermediaries are offering one-stop services which include pre-study abroad consultation, assistance with language training and university application, support for visa interviews, airport pickup, accommodations and host families, help with registration in the host university, application for identification card and other logistics and career planning after graduation. Such commercialized practices have effectively kindled parents and students' desire for international education. However, growing consumerism in the self-funded study abroad market also facilitated hasty and casual decisions.

For many of the Chinese students in this research, the role of study abroad agents remains highly controversial. When asked why they prefer the service of an agent, most students I interviewed in Italy replied that it was convenient and time-saving. However, quite a number of students also reported feelings of uncertainty and doubts about the professional qualifications of their agents. Julian, a 23-year-old minority Chinese student from Guiyang, who attended a second-tier university in Nanjing, told me, "I paid an intermediary in Nanjing to help me, but I did not totally trust them. I still have the recordings of all my conversations with the agent. In case something went wrong, the recordings could serve as proof. I was concerned that what they promised might be different from what they could deliver." Fortunately, Julian's application went well. When I met him in Italy, he was about to finish his Italian language course and start his Master's in Cultural Heritage. Aron, a 27-year-old student from a small city in Heilongjiang, had less fortunate experiences. Since Aron attended a second-tier university in Nanchang, Jiangxi province, he found an agent in Nanchang, based on the recommendations of his mom's friend. Aron explained to me:

"We did not know how to distinguish between different agents. The information on the internet was not reliable. Preparing for studying abroad was a long process. You had to learn one year's language. Since I did not want to waste more time, I simply settled on this agent."

Aron's agent turned out to have little experience sending students to Italy. Aron told me that he managed to submit the application based on the advice of a classmate in an Italian language school, whose agent was very professional and helpful. When I met him in Italy, Aron was about to finish his second bachelor's degree in Wine Brewing.

Unlike Julian and Aron, about half of the students in this research depended on their parents to communicate with an agent. Esther, who has a reputation of successfully sending many students in Jinan to elite universities in the United States, develops her client base mainly by word of mouth. I once attended a consultation session between Esther and a Chinese couple. Mr. Liang, the husband, is a private entrepreneur with his own accounting company. Since his son Robin wanted to study aviation in the US, Mr. Liang found an agent in Beijing who recommended an aviation school in San Jose. Robin could learn aviation in the school for one year, then attend San Jose state University to pursue a bachelor of science in Aviation. After calculating the costs and benefits, Mr. Liang paid the agent 680,000 RMB for the tuition and lodging in the aviation school, and the fee to change a US pilot licence to a Chinese one. After learning from a friend about Esther's expertise, the couple decided to ask Esther for a second opinion. Basically, they wanted to verify that the collaboration between the aviation school and San Jose University is a valid one, and the licence received from the US aviation school can be exchanged for a Chinese one. Mr. and Mrs. Liang's anxiety about the credibility of their agent reflects some Chinese parents' worries about the risks of managing their child's study-abroad project. However, their strategy of consulting multiple agents also attests to the normalization of brokerage service in China's self-funded study abroad market. Despite their uncertainty and doubts, parents (and students) are also motivated to believe that agents are more professional and experienced in bridging knowledge gaps and in helping them to navigate international mobility regimes.

In her study of private home ownership in Kunming city, Li Zhang (2008) notes that everyday consumption practices have played a key role in the formation of a new middle-class subjectivity in urban China. This research interprets middle class Chinese families' investment in their child's study abroad project as a special type of educational consumption that is marked by class distinctions. In her study of popular conceptions of social injustice in Beijing, Ching Kwan Lee (2009) finds "a deep ambivalence" among her respondents, who criticize rampant corruption among state officials yet still trust the state to solve the problem. This research finds a similar ambivalence in middle class Chinese parents' attitude towards the state's role in the self-funded study abroad market. Like Ping, the student mom who appeared at the beginning of this article, most parents I met were very critical of China's higher educational system. However, the same group of parents also seems to internalize, to a certain extent, the neoliberal idea of self-responsibility and self-development, which has been propagated by state policy concerning self-funded study abroad. Scholars have noted that China's new middle class is politically conservative, since many of them have benefited significantly from the post-socialist redistribution system and the market economy (Tang and Unger, 2013). The same conservatism can be found in some Chinese parents' choice of intermediary agents. Several Chinese students from Shandong told me that their parents chose S Company because it was previously affiliated with the local government and therefore is more trustworthy.

Despite the profit-driven nature of their business, private agents are keenly aware that they are doing a service for the state. Mr. Li, a private agent in Guangzhou, told me, "The government is happy because the mass has solved the problem of higher education themselves. It's like outsourcing in education. Chinese students are being educated overseas and they will eventually return to China to find jobs. So it is the Chinese government who benefits from this outsourcing." Meanwhile, smaller agents are also quite critical of social stratifications in the self-funded study abroad market. Mr. Li opined, "Nowadays if you are from the lower strata of Chinese society, it is a very painful struggle to get quality education for your child. Today all the social resources are evaluated by money and only the wealthy ones can have access to them." Mr. Qian, General Manager of the Overseas Financial Service Centre of a bank in Jinan, explained to me the correlation between students' family backgrounds and their study abroad destinations. Elite and upper-middle class families (with assets of about 30-50 million RMB) usually send their children to the United States, Canada and Australia, since tuition in these countries is the most expensive. Middle-class families (with an annual income above 300,000RMB) usually send their children to Germany, Italy and other small European countries because tuition in these countries is free and they only need to cover living expenses. Ordinary or low income families (with an annual income between 50,000 to 60,000 RMB) can only afford to send their children to South Korea, Japan and Thailand, where students can support their own studies by taking various part-time jobs. Although Mr. Qian's division of social classes is based on his personal evaluation of the situation in Jinan, it confirms the correlation between social stratification in China and the hierarchical ranking of destination countries in the global higher education market (Hansen and Thøgersen, 2015).

THE NEOLIBERAL MIGRATION INFRASTRUCTURE AND ITS PITFALLS

Deregulation in China's educational brokerage system is marked by the state's tacit endorsement of neoliberal ideologies such as educational consumption and self-development, which has been aggressively promoted through the marketing strategies of various levels of educational intermediaries. According to the Chinese Ministry of Education, in 2017 the general trend in China's study abroad market was marked by state-sponsored study abroad, setting the direction, with self-funded study abroad constituting the majority. The commodification of overseas education ends up perpetuating social stratification in Chinese society, since families from less advantaged backgrounds cannot

benefit from liberal state policies. Meanwhile, by transferring the risks of studying abroad to individual Chinese civilians, the state is using private intermediaries as scapegoats when things go wrong. Martina, a staff from a non-profit educational agency in Italy, told me, “We generally work with agencies related to the Chinese government. They are more experienced and can help us recruit students in an efficient way. There seems to be an uncontrolled number of small private agents in China and some are involved in unethical practices.” Instead of criticizing the Chinese state’s lack of discipline of unethical intermediary practices, Martina resorted to the neoliberal discourse of self-responsibility as a solution to the problem. She said, “It is the students’ own responsibility to find a trustworthy agent. We provide assistance in the university application process, but we cannot help them make personal decisions.” The relegation of the study abroad project to the personal domain in both the sending and receiving countries has significantly obscured structural inequalities embedded in China’s education-migration industry (c.f. Marginson, 2016).

In their study of labour migration in China and Indonesia, Xiang and Lindquist (2014) argue that the intensification of migration infrastructure, in the form of infrastructure involution, functions to impede rather than expand people’s migratory capacities. This research finds that intersections between the regulatory, the commercial and the social dimensions of the educational migration infrastructure in China may foster overdependence on brokerage services and thus compromise parents’ and students’ agency in making decisions about studying abroad. The social network of parents and students may function as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it provides an important channel for gathering and exchanging information about study abroad services and personal experiences; on the other hand, it pushes some parents and students who originally had no plans for overseas education into the self-funded study abroad market. The idea of keeping up with the Joneses (among parents) and studying abroad with one’s cousins or friends (among students) are actually quite popular among my informants. Due to their easy access to commercialized brokerage services, students are less motivated to prepare for the application materials themselves. Some cited the expertise of the agents as a reason for not filing the application themselves; others worried that documents prepared by themselves might not be good enough to guarantee admission; while others listed time-constraints as a major reason for their dependence on commercialized agents. Lily, a 22-year-old student from Wuhan, confided in me:

“The reason I did not choose DIY was because the idea of studying abroad came suddenly and it was not in my original plan. I had very little time to prepare the application materials and I was not sure whether I could make it or not.”

Lily’s response was echoed by several other students, who made hasty decisions about studying in Italy simply because the procedures could be handled quickly and efficiently by their agents.

In addition, middle-class Chinese parents’ overenthusiastic involvement in their child’s study abroad project may also contribute to the lack of agency on the part of students. In the middle of his meeting with Esther and me, Mr. Liang, the Chinese parent who wished to send his son Robin to an aviation school in the United States, called Robin on the phone and urged him to come and meet us to receive some advice on how to improve his English. To Mr. Liang’s disappointment, Robin was not interested in the idea at all and preferred to stay at home and play video games.

Robin’s indifference towards his own overseas education is not an exception. While more and more parents are turning to overseas education as a remedy for their child’s lack of chance to enter an elite university in China, students like Robin are often caught in a very stressful situation where they have to struggle with their sense of failure in the *Gaokao* system and strive to improve their foreign language proficiency in preparation for studying abroad. Some students were so overwhelmed by the whole process that they simply designated most of the work to their parents and concentrated solely on language learning. Xiu, a 23-year-old student from Shandong told me:

"I am sure my mom did a lot for me by gathering all kinds of information and finding the right agent for me. She did not talk about it, but I assume she put a lot of efforts into it. All I did was to take a 2 month intensive Italian course."

Several students in Italy reported that their parents insisted purchasing overseas services from private agents in order to ease their transition into campus life. However, overdependence on agent services may hinder young students' integration into campus life since it undermines their chances of developing self-reliance.

Due to its highly commercialized nature, educational brokerage in China starts to bear some features of international labour brokerage in regard to transnational collaborations between multiple agents and the development of complicated agent chains (Xiang, 2012). The existence of agent-chains functions to maximize profits because it broadens the scope of student recruitment for all agents, since they can always channel students who fall outside their service range to other agents. As collaborations between agents in China intensified, some intermediaries often group the application files of all students who apply for the same university together and send them to the Italian embassy in one package. The downside of this practice is that it may significantly increase the waiting time for students whose application materials have to go through multiple agents. The profit-driven nature of commercialized intermediary practices also prompted some agents to make presumptuous promises to parents such as guaranteed admission to an overseas university and full refund in case of failed applications. In order to fulfil these promises, some agents had to resort to unethical practices such as providing falsified information concerning the student's language skills, social activities and personal talents. One of the negative consequences is that some students who got admitted by overseas universities had to drop due to their inability to follow the curriculum. In Jinan, I encountered several Chinese students attending universities in the United States, who had to switch majors or change universities after realizing that agents' advice did not serve their best interests.

The Chinese case study has important policy implications since much of the social inequalities in China's higher educational system can be attributed to the uneven distribution of educational resources by the state. Reforms in China's educational system should focus on democratic sharing of educational resources, and the cultivation of independent thinking and problem-solving capacities among Chinese students. This will prepare them to handle the many challenges of studying abroad and also decrease their dependence on commercialized agents. To protect the interests of student migrants, the state needs to play a more active role in the professionalization of educational brokerage services. To the extent that agents can persuade parents to buy expensive training courses in preparation for elite university application, and to influence student's choice of study majors and universities, unethical intermediary practices can be detrimental to the future development of student migrants. This problem has already been manifested by recent examples of Chinese students being expelled from US schools due to low grades, academic dishonesty and breaking rules (Zuo, 2015). From the receiving country's perspective, host universities should advertise their services for international students more aggressively in China, instead of depending on recruitment agents. Once students learn that many of the overseas services provided by intermediaries in China can be freely obtained from the host universities' international office, they are less likely to purchase expensive service packages from study abroad agents. This may help them to avoid some of the pitfalls in educational consumption covered in this article.

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NOTES

1. All personal names in this article are fictional; all interview excerpts with Chinese informants were translated into English by the author.
2. Project 211 was initiated in 1995 by the Ministry of Education. Its goal was to build 100 world-class universities in the 21st century. Project 985 was initiated by former Chinese president, Jiang Zemin, during a speech at Peking University on May 4, 1998. The project involves both national and local governments allocating large amounts of funding to a limited number of key universities in order to build world-class teaching and research institutions in China.
3. http://www.moe.edu.cn/srcsite/A20/moe_862/201504/t20150403_189392.html
4. The Marco Polo and Turandot Projects were established by the Chinese and Italian governments to provide an educational pathway for Chinese students who wish to enrol in the Arts and Humanities programs in Italian universities.

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