

“A Fast Track to the Middle Class”: A Digital Ethnography of China’s Doctoral Degree Mobility Industry

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

This paper presents preliminary findings from an ongoing study of China’s doctoral degree mobility services market, through a nine-month multi-sited digital ethnography. While existing literature acknowledges a for-profit industry serving international students (e.g., Posselt, 2016), the scope, impact, and definition of this market remain underexplored. Drawing on two months of observation across Chinese social media platforms—including WeChat and Rednote—the study explores how education agents represent and market doctoral application services online. Thematic analysis reveals three core service areas: approaching potential supervisors, developing research proposal, and enhancing applicants’ academic profiles, often through publication-focused “boot camps.” These agents not only promote comprehensive and tailored services but also construct the doctoral pathway as a means of upward social mobility. The findings provide an initial understanding of doctoral education agents in China and lay the groundwork for future research into this influential market.

Full paper

This paper explores a frequently-overlooked aspect of International Student Mobility (ISM): the “degree mobility industry”. However, in Higher Education (HE) admission literature, scholars have indicated the awareness of the existence of a degree mobility-related market or certain paid services among admission decision makers (Posselt, 2016). From the available literature which has noted traces of this industry (e.g., Kim, 2023), which studies are conducted in different geographic regions and utilise different terminologies for the industry, scholars recognize the existence of a for-profit market and more importantly, its contribution to ISM as bridging international students and their host institutions. In the Chinese context, this industry has supported students pursuing education abroad since the 1980s (Xiang and Shen, 2009), yet its role in facilitating international doctoral admissions remains under-researched. In this paper, I introduce the most commonly recognised stakeholder—education agents.

The term education agents refers to “an individual or organisation that helps a prospective student enrol in an education institution or helps an education institution recruit students” (OBHE, 2014, p. 3). In the local industry report, 74% of the Chinese students claim engaging with agents’ support (New Oriental, 2020). Education agents provide comprehensive services that are recognized by students as enhancing their admission opportunities (Hagedorn and Zhang, 2010), including recommendations for institutions (Ying et al., 2023) and direct assistance with application materials (Feng and Horta, 2021). Notably, the aforementioned studies are all based on undergraduate or master’s (PGT) level. The role of doctoral education agents remains significantly under-explored across the HE scholarship.

This paper is part of an ongoing doctoral study, which employs a multi-sited digital ethnography (Murthy, 2008) on Chinese social media, incorporating two stages: participant observation and interviews. The data presented in this paper comes from two months of unobtrusive observation (ibid.) on WeChat and Rednote, aimed at gaining a general understanding of doctoral application services. 122 social media posts were collected from WeChat public accounts across three education agents, and Rednote posts of different education agents. The paper discusses preliminary findings based on the thematic analysis of education agents’ social media activity during this phase.

The doctoral agents’ online activity revealed highly consistent themes: promotion of fully-funded doctoral programmes and scholarships; exclusive career opportunities for PhD holders; application guidance; student testimonials; and introductions to their services. These agents typically target multiple regions—including Hong Kong, the U.S., the U.K., and Europe—and focus on three key components of doctoral applications: (i) contacting potential supervisors, (ii) developing research proposals, and (iii) building an applicant’s research background.

(i) “Approaching a supervisor” posts often involve the agent providing a curated list of 20–80 potential advisors and drafting contact emails. Research proposal development is usually structured as a lesson, including topic brainstorming based on supervisor interests, proposal outlining, and iterative editing in the posts. The idea of “enhancing research background” is often vague in marketing materials, but student testimonials reveal it typically refers to publication records and research experience. Some agents display posts offering “academic boot camps” with professors from prestigious institutions, promising publication opportunities in journals or conferences. These services are packaged flexibly to address students’ varying needs and align with key admission criteria.

Beyond practical support, these agents also construct an aspirational narrative around doctoral study as a pathway to upward mobility. In one post, a doctoral degree is described as “a fast track for small-town swot to join the urban middle class”. By consistently highlighting high-paying career prospects, showcasing daily updates of funded programs, and advertising “nanny-style” support throughout the application process, agents frame doctoral degree not just as an academic goal but as a transformative life opportunity.

This paper presents preliminary insights from a two-month digital ethnographic observation exploring online representations of China's doctoral mobility market. Analysis of education agents' posts reveals consistent themes and comprehensive services, and narratives that frame the PhD as a pathway to upward social mobility. Unlike undergraduate or postgraduate agents, who typically focus on essay editing or recruitment within a single country (Raimo, Humfrey, & Huang, 2016; Feng & Horta, 2021), doctoral agents specialize in supervisor outreach, research proposal development, and multi-country mobility. Yet, similar to other actors in the degree mobility industry (Cheng, Lin & Fan, 2020), they also shape discourses that make international study appear desirable. These findings outline the unique role of doctoral agents, addressing a key gap in the literature. They also lay the foundation for the next phase of this project: engaging directly with applicants and practitioners to examine how the market constructs doctoral "admissibility," informing policies on equity in international admissions.