

Adverse articulation: Third countries in China–Australia student migration during COVID-19

Dialogues in Human Geography
1–5

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DOI: 10.1177/2043820620934939

journals.sagepub.com/home/dhg**Heidi Østbø Haugen**

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Abstract

Southeast Asian countries were articulated with the Australia–China value chain for educational services early in the COVID-19 outbreak, when travelers from China could enter Australia only via stopovers in third countries. The routes, advertised by migration brokers, allowed Australia to externalize risk of infection while profiting from international student mobility.

Keywords

Australia, brokerage, COVID-19, international students, migration

Introduction

Australia's massive education economy is predicated upon mobility. The education sector, therefore, closely monitored the spread of a novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in China in January 2020, fearing that it would occasion an abrupt halt to the inflow of Chinese students. Direct entry from China was indeed banned on 1 February 2020. Yet, as many as 47,000 Chinese citizens entered Australia during the following 7 weeks (Department of Education, 2020). This was made possible by incorporating Southeast Asian third countries into the Australian–Chinese value chain for educational services. Chinese students made 14-day stopovers on their way to Australia in order to be permitted to enter. Geographical and social stratification mediated the

routes available to students and potential exposure to the virus.

This commentary discusses the infrastructure mobilized to establish new pathways into Australia in ways that ultimately reinforced existing spatial inequalities. It is based on data collected on Chinese social media platforms between 1 February and 1 April 2020 as well as documents and statements by Australian educational institutions and policy makers.

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Desirable and undesirable mobilities

The mobilities paradigm in the social sciences highlights how places are tied into networks of connections with other sites (Urry, 2007). Human geographers have been particularly concerned with how various mobilities interconnect. For example, studies of just-in-time production analyze the logistics of assembling parts sourced from hundreds of places (Sadler, 1994), and trade research documents the interdependencies between migration and commercial flows (Haugen, 2019). In these cases, different mobilities mutually reinforce each other. However, interconnections between mobilities may also cause disruption, such as when unauthorized persons enter aircraft or container ships, posing security threats that can disconnect logistics hubs (Stenmanns, 2019), or when undesirable organisms arrive alongside agricultural crops traded across borders (Berndt and Boeckler, 2011). The global higher education economy creates, and is supported by, the international mobility of students, and it has come under threat by the possibility that students may circulate contagion.

Cresswell (2006: 21) argues that mobility is ‘the lifeblood of modernity and the virus that threatens to hasten its downfall’. ‘Virus’ is a metaphor for any disruption that impedes the taken-for-granted mobilities of everyday life, but it is currently a literal threat. Australia’s education industry faced the challenge of preventing the import of the novel coronavirus while safeguarding the annual AUS \$12 billion income made from Chinese students (Department of Education, 2019). This revenue partly comes from student spending while in Australia, and largely depends on their physical presence in the country. Institutions feared that pivoting to digital education for students in China would decrease retention rates and willingness to pay full fees. The education industry thus preferred to bring students onshore and lobbied for exemptions from the entry restrictions (Bagshaw, 2020). The efforts to lift travel restrictions succeeded only for the relatively small groups of Chinese advanced high school students (Department of Health, 2020).

Third countries as clearing houses

Most of the Chinese students who arrived in Australia after 1 February 2020 traveled via Southeast Asia. To bypass the entry ban from China, third countries were articulated with the production of educational services: actors and activities were reorganized across space in ways that allowed Australian institutions to continue selling educational services to Chinese students (see Bair and Werner, 2011 on articulation and the production of uneven geographies). By allowing students from China to enter only after a transit stay, Australia externalized the risks associated with exporting educational services while retaining the revenues.

The transit countries responded in different ways, depending both on developments on the ground and strategic interests vis-à-vis the more powerful regional counterparts, China and Australia. Indonesia stopped admitting Chinese tourists and suspended flights from China on 5 February, Malaysia imposed an entry ban on travelers from three Chinese provinces on 9 February, and Thailand stopped issuing visas upon arrival to Chinese citizens on 11 March. Cambodia did not impose restrictions, and Prime Minister Hun Sen condemned entry restrictions based on nationality as discriminatory (Savi, 2020). The articulation of third countries with value chains for educational services can be characterized as adverse (cf. Phillips, 2011): the countries experienced negative net outcomes and were in a relatively weak position to control how developments unfolded.

Institutional facilitation

The rerouting of Chinese students was made possible by a comprehensive set of institutions and actors. In particular, existing infrastructure for student migration to Australia was mobilized quickly and effectively, and new infrastructures emerged in response to the situation.

The Australian Department of Education, Skills, and Employment (DESE) published information about the possibility of arriving via a third country as soon as the entry restrictions were announced, including examples of arrival routes: ‘A student leaves mainland China on 3 Feb 2020 and goes to

Malaysia. Provided the student does not return to mainland China, they could enter Australia on 17 Feb 2020' (reprinted by Zhihu, 2020). Prime Minister Scott Morrison used the Chinese social media platform WeChat to tell students that they could enter Australia by way of a stopover (Morrison, 2020). On Australian-facing platforms, by contrast, government messages de-emphasized this potential avenue of entry. The Department of Home Affairs and DESE quickly reverted to a position of policy ambivalence: traveling to Australia via a stay in a third country remained legal, but was not widely touted. The suggested travel routes were removed from the DESE website, but with limited practical consequences since, by then, they were widely reposted on Chinese and English sites. The Minister of Education stated that the government 'has never encouraged students from mainland China to seek out a 14-day period in a third country' but that 'there is nothing within Australia's current travel restrictions to stop them from doing so' (Choudhury, 2020). While Australia outsourced risk to Southeast Asian countries, the government strategically avoided drawing attention to it.

Australian educational institutions responded to the changes in immigration practices by adjusting their semester start dates and facilitating late entries. Some institutions provided financial incentives to encourage students in China to arrive at their campuses. For example, Western Sydney University offered Chinese students who arrived via a third country a one-time AU \$1,500 subsidy payment. The Australian National University invited all affected Chinese students—about 4,000 of them—to apply for up to AU\$5,000 in reimbursement for costs incurred due to the travel ban. Likewise, the University of Melbourne offered support grants of up to AU\$7,500 to help rerouted students with unanticipated expenses.

Chinese consular assistance was extended to Chinese students in third countries. In Thailand, visas on arrival were only valid for 14 days, making it logistically challenging for students from China to stay there long enough to be granted entry to Australia. The Chinese embassy in Bangkok issued documents that students could use when they applied for visa extension in Thailand (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020).

Commercial brokers made information about policies and practices available to Chinese student visa

holders. Brokers forge a range of connections between China and Australia, which includes, but is not limited to, student migration. They market themselves as well-informed problem solvers, and saw an opportunity to prove their aptitude by advising students affected by the entry ban on how to get into Australia. The brokers used closed discussion groups on WeChat to acquire information from students on successful and failed attempts to enter Australia. In this way, they learned not only what official policies were in place, but also how they were practiced. For example, Chinese students who traveled via Thailand posted information about how the Thai customs calculated the visa validity period and how to prove the length of stay in a third country upon arrival in Australia.

The brokers curated and published information they had gathered through open sources and closed discussion groups on their official WeChat accounts. Some posts focused solely on bureaucratic and legal issues, including questions asked by immigration officials, guidance for completing immigration forms, and lists of what the students needed at each stage of their journeys. Other posts combined immigration intelligence and travel writing by interspersing legal information with hotel recommendations, vacation anecdotes, and photos and comments about food and tourist attractions. The previously mentioned official information put out by Australian actors featured frequently as screenshots and in translation on the brokers' WeChat accounts.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 crisis presents places around the world with the same challenge: How to sustain desirable forms of mobility without generating undesirable co-mobility of the virus? We are aware of mobility's Janus-faced nature as we wipe down grocery deliveries, decide whether to visit elderly parents, or engage with customers or patients at work. Responses to the risks presented by mobility vary from prohibitions (e.g. travel ban, quarantine) through substitution (e.g. virtual classes) to filtering (e.g. based on virtual health certificate status or nationality). These measures have varying degree of effectiveness and require different types of

technological, legal, financial, and societal resources. Ideas about how to manage mobility travel as well, and the intercontinental replication of administrative and technological solutions from Asia is particularly manifest during the current crisis.

In the case presented here, the risk of contagion associated with mobility was dealt with by elongating travel routes rather than by inhibiting them. The paths of Chinese students were redirected to shift risk from Australia onto third countries. This was made possible through an alignment of the geopolitical resources possessed by China and Australia with the commercial interests of brokers and educational institutions. To discern the fallout from the novel coronavirus outbreak, a key question to ask is: How are entanglements of desirable and undesirable mobilities dealt with, and to what effect?

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Haugen's research for this commentary has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant agreement No. 802070).

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