
Angel or Demon, the Image of Education Agents in Chinese International Students' Eyes

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Abstract – With the rapid economic growth in China for the past two decades, Chinese education agents have gradually played a more important role in the stage of international student enrollment, while only a few research studies have explored the functions and characteristics of Chinese education agents. To build a deep understanding of the business behaviors of Chinese education agents, this research study applied a qualitative thematic analysis and invited 12 Chinese participants to share their knowledge and experiences. According to the lived experiences of the research participants helped by Chinese agents, five themes have been created. The findings of this study present the image of Chinese education agents in Chinese students' eyes. This study is highly valuable in studying the behaviors of Chinese education agents, laying a solid foundation for future studies focusing on international student management and enrollment.

Keywords – Chinese Students, Qualitative Study, Education Agents, International Student Management.

I. INTRODUCTION

The number of international students studying in the U.S. has been quickly increasing for the past several decades. According to data released by Open door [1], the total number of international students in the U.S. in the academic year 2016 to 2017 was 1,078,822, which was almost two times larger than the number one decade ago and triple larger than the number two decades ago. Among different international student groups, the Chinese student population has taken the largest part of the total number of international students studying in the U.S., representing 33 percent of the total in the academic year 2016 to 2017 [1]. Indeed, the number of Chinese students in the U.S. has been increasing at a fast rate for the past decade, greatly and consistently contributing to the diversity of American colleges and American economic development [2]. For example, the U.S. made \$ 30.8 billion through exports of higher education to international students in 2015 [3].

Without a doubt, Chinese students have many good reasons in pursuit of their education in the U.S. The increasing intention of Chinese domestic competition over educational resources is a significant factor in causing Chinese students to look for overseas educational opportunities. In China, only half the number of total Chinese high school students who are able to earn high scores from the Chinese college annual entrance exam can be picked by Chinese 4-years-colleges [4]. The competitive enrollment rate of Chinese colleges makes many Chinese students left behind every year and have to seek their education opportunities overseas. Most importantly, many Chinese students are attracted by American culture and the wider range of academic degree programs offered by different American universities [5]. However, matching an ideal university out of several thousands of American universities is not an easy task for both Chinese students and their parents who are short of enough understandings of the American university admission system, let English language barriers alone. Thus, using an education agent, who can be a person or a company providing services to Chinese students planning to pursue a degree in the U.S., can be a helpful way for many Chinese students interested in studying in

the U.S.

The number of Chinese education agents has been growing exponentially for the past two decades, with the increasing presence of Chinese overseas students around the world. As of 2016, there were about 500 registered educational agencies in mainland China [6]. A large number of unregistered education agents also widely exist in China because of loosely regulatory policies and profitable service fees produced from consulting with Chinese students. The service fees can be expensive, depending on the services that students need and the rankings of the university that they choose. For example, ZMN education, a Chinese education company, normally charges per student \$ 15000 to 20, 000, if they help their clients get admission offers from the top-ranked American universities.

While Chinese education agents are playing a key role in influencing the quality and number of Chinese students in the U.S., there are only a handful of studies discussing the functions and influences of Chinese agents in the admission process of American universities. This research study aims at filling this academic gap by applying a qualitative research approach based on real lived experiences of Chinese students in the U.S. The goal of this research study is to build a comprehensive understanding of the image of Chinese education agents in Chinese students' eyes. This research study is meaningful and valuable in twofold. On one hand, a deep understanding of both advantages and disadvantages of working with overseas educational agents in choosing an American university can be learned through the real experiences of Chinese students, so the educators and stakeholders can know better the needs of Chinese international students. On the other hand, according to the findings of this study, educators, policymakers, and American admission officers can better learn the behaviors of Chinese agencies and evaluate how to better cooperate with Chinese overseas educational agencies.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Although the U.S. has been a predominant position in attracting international students, now the competition among the U.S. and other English speaking countries such as the U.K. and Australia has been getting intensified [7]. One powerful weapon that universities in the U.K and Australia often use in the battlefield of enrollment is the education agents [8-9]. It has been reported that more than 100 UK higher education institutions (HEIs) used recruitment agents in 2012, with total commission payments of £57.8 million [10]. Many agents employed by HEIs are located in many major cities of China, such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen, closely working with Chinese students and their parents interested in studying in overseas education institutions, persuading parents and students to consider Australian institutions or British colleges with which they partner.

In contrast with their counterparts, educational leaders of American higher education used to have a more cautious attitude towards the use of third-party agents [11]. Mckown (2009) explains that the use of third-party agents to American universities was generally regarded as a signal of weak recruiting practice in the historical development of American international recruitment, so many American universities preferred to advertise themselves to international students through cooperating with Education USA information centers supported by the Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs (ECA) [12]. Besides, another big concern that many American educators and university leaders held was that the misuse of international recruitment agents may impair the university's reputation [13]. Education agents sometimes recommend international students with low academic performance for the money. However, it may be too late to discuss whether the use of agents for HE is good or bad, as agents have already become a major player in the global HE landscape [14].

Facing the acute competition of enrolling international students, nowadays, a growing number of American universities has changed their strategies of student enrollment. They adopted a more friendly and welcoming attitude towards Chinese education agents, as professional agents can effectively provide American institutions with fast and direct access to international students, helping American admission teams research their enrollment goals [15]. For example, in 2015, the American International Recruitment Council signed 20 large education agencies in China [16]. These 20 education agencies are responsible for helping recommend American universities to Chinese students. Although evidence indicates that Chinese agencies have been popular with Chinese students, it does not mean that American universities fully embrace Chinese agents like Australian universities and British institutions. American universities have some concerns in building close partnerships with Chinese agents. For example, the ethical problem is still a big issue to many Chinese education agencies, disgracing their fame and trustworthy, as many, too many, irresponsible Chinese agents help Chinese students cheat in their college application materials at all levels, from undergraduate application essays to letters of recommendation for doctoral programs [17-19].

How to properly manage recruitment agents and reduce unethical practices of education agents have been discussed by a limited number of studies [20]. Researchers and practitioners have also explained the causing factors for triggering the unethical behaviors of agents in the field of marketing and business [21-22]. Sharma (1997) argued that there are common characteristics that are shared by all types of agents such as self-interest and bounded rationality, but the huge power asymmetry may favor certain types of agents to develop different relationships with their clients [23]. Thus, the disproportionate power balance between clients and agents can trigger the unethical behaviors of agents. When it comes to Chinese education agents, the disproportionate power balance strongly favors agents but against Chinese students who have little information about American universities.

Although many Chinese students may have a disadvantaged position when working with education agents due to the imbalanced power, some still have to choose to work with education agents for the following reasons. First of all, education agents can help facilitate the applying process and deal with many documents, helping them save time [24]. Secondly, professional and experienced education agents are resourceful and have people connections with some universities, so Chinese students believe if they choose to work with education agents, their chances to get in good universities can be secured [25]. Many education agents sign contracts with their Chinese clients, stressing if their clients do not get accepted by their targeted universities, their cost will be fully refunded. Thus, hiring education agents to secure their admission outcomes becomes attractive to many Chinese students and their parents. Thirdly, many education agents also have to help their clients prepare documents for getting a visa [26]. For many Chinese students, applying for a visa sometimes is even harder than having an admission offer from a top university, so education agents familiar with the visa application process may make it easier.

III. METHOD

A. Research Questions

Although few above-mentioned studies did examine the behaviors of agents and discussed the Chinese agents' role in international student enrollment of American institutions, it was clear that there was a blank space of understanding what kind of experiences Chinese students working with Chinese agents had in

academia. This study, however, intended to have an in-depth understanding of both positive and negative thoughts of Chinese students who have been helped by Chinese agents. Hence, research questions were designed as follow.

RQ1: What Kind of experiences do Chinese students in the U.S. who have been helped by Chinese education agents have?

RQ2: How do Chinese students think about the ethics of their education agents?

As the goal of this study was to produce a deeper understanding of Chinese students' experiences in co-working with their education agents for applying for American universities and portray the image of education agents based on their lived experiences, a thematic analysis research approach was chosen and used in this study. The thematic analysis is a commonly used qualitative data analysis approach in psychology [27]. The nature of the research questions required the use of a qualitative approach that can ensure the richness of the data. Not only can the qualitative approach collect the in-depth data, but it can also allow the underlying meanings of research participants to be surfaced [28]. Besides, TA, as a research approach, has its strength in providing sensitive and rich descriptions of a social and educational phenomenon. The co-working process between Chinese students and education agents in applying for American universities is a social phenomenon. Thus, it is appropriate to apply the qualitative thematic analysis to study the case.

B. Participants

Twelve Chinese students from three universities in South Florida, two American private universities and one public university, voluntarily participated in this study. The researchers also invited a Chinese consultant working at an agent company in Shenzhen, China, to contribute her knowledge and experiences. The sampling strategy was purposeful, which means all participants were contacted through the researchers' social network. All Chinese students in this study had been helped by Chinese education agents before. Four participants were from the graduate programs, four participants were from undergraduate programs, and four participants were in an English language program affiliated to a private university in South Florida. There were five female participants and seven male students. All student participants are from economically developed cities in China, such as Shanghai or Beijing, where many Chinese agent companies are located. All real names of participants were removed for confidentiality in this study. The detailed information about Chinese students lists as follow:

Table. 1. Demographic Information of Chinese Students.

Name	Gender	Age	Years in the US	Program Levels
Participant A	Female	26	4 Years	Graduate
Participant B	Male	21	2 Years	Undergraduate
Participant C	Female	20	2 Years	Undergraduate
Participant D	Male	19	6 to 9 months	Language Program
Participant E	Male	19	6 to 9 months	Language Program
Participant F	Male	20	2 Years	Language Program
Participant G	Male	22	9 to 12 months	Language Program

Name	Gender	Age	Years in the US	Program Levels
Participant H	Female	24	3 Years	Graduate
Participant I	Female	25	4 Years	Graduate
Participant J	Female	23	2 Years	Graduate
Participant K	Male	21	2 Years	Undergraduate
Participant L	Male	22	4 Years	Undergraduate

The Chinese education consultant was also involved in this study by participating in a Wechat video interview with the researchers for helping contribute additional insight on Chinese students' experiences. The consultant working for a Chinese education agent company had extensive experiences in guiding Chinese students interested in studying in the U.S.

C. Procedure

Creswell (2000) suggests that the qualitative methodology calls for a tight relationship between researchers and participants for collaborating in the research process. The closer relationship that researchers and research participants have, the more productive data that they mutually produce [29]. By following the suggestions of Creswell (2000), a two-stage data collection approach has been employed in this study. At the first stage, the researcher spent lots of time with participants to build rapport and explained the purpose and the meaning of this study in detail. The length of the ice-breaking stage with research participants was about three months, taking place from January 2019 to March 2019. Meeting spots were all decided by participants, mostly at a cafe or a restaurant near participants' colleges. At this stage, the researchers also introduced the ethics, confidentiality, study purposes, and latent risks of this study and handed out the informed consent forms to all participants. This preliminarily ice-breaking stage proved to be successful as trust between the researchers and the research participants have been built, which led to the smooth collection of the rich data at the following stage.

71 minutes to 113 minutes, face to face, and semi-structured interviews with Chinese student participants were conducted at the second stage. Although the longest interview lasted for 113 minutes, the average time of the 12 interviews is about 82 minutes. All interviews were conducted mainly in Chinese, but English was used from time to time for some situations where English could help better deliver the meanings. All conversations were later all translated into English verbatim. With the consent of all the participants, conversations produced in interviews were taped by a recording pen. Seven research interviews took place in a meeting room at a clubhouse of the X community, which was purposefully chosen for avoiding interruption. The other five interviews were done at the participants' apartment at their request. The interview with the Chinese education agent was through video calls of Wechat, a Skype-like communication APP popular in China.

D. Analysis

Braun and Clarke (2006) create a straightforward and step-by-step guideline for conducting TA in qualitative research studies. Their guidelines were followed closely in this research study [27]. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), there are six steps in applying TA. 1) Researchers should familiarize themselves with data, 2) generate initial codes, 3) search for themes, 4) review them, 5) define and name different themes, and 6) produce the final report [27]. In this study, the researchers interviewed 12 student participants and 1 education

agent for investigating both the positive and negative experiences of Chinese students who hired Chinese agents. After familiarizing with the data collected from research participants, the researchers identified broader patterns of shared meaning across the data set. Some codes and themes that could not form a coherent analytic story were discarded. All themes were carefully checked by all researchers to see if they captured the essence of the coded data addressing the research questions. Finally, five super ordinate research themes have been created based on the experiences of the research participants.

IV. RESULTS

In this section, five identified themes in this study are presented: 1) Heavily money-driven; 2) Informative and resourceful; 3) responsive; 4) unethical to American universities; 5) Develop long-term relationships to Chinese clients.

A. Heavily Money-Driven

It was found that all Chinese participants believed that money is the only purpose that Chinese education agents work for, as in their stories, money, as a theme, was mentioned repeatedly from the beginning to the end. Chinese students knew that they were doing business with education agents, so money was a big concern of Chinese students and their parents. Although different Chinese participants hired Chinese agents at different prices, ranging from \$ 3500 thousand to \$ 25, 000 thousand, they all viewed behaviors and images of education agents as highly money-driven. Participant B even called his Chinese agent as a money-sucker company. Below is an example of a participant's report.

“You know what? They overcharged everything and sometimes lied to you. Let me tell you. When I took the TOEFL exam, my advisor working at the agent company said she could help me register for the test. You know, in China, the website sometimes was so slow that made online test registration annoying, so I thought that was good. Then, she charged me \$ 210 for that, but I knew it only cost \$ 170. Besides, they introduced a language training center for me and told me that I could have a discount fee. However, the language training center was super expensive and the price for one month English writing course was as high as \$ 10, 000. They thought I must be from a rich family and we do not care about money, as my family can afford my expensive tuition at an American private university, so they wanted to make money from me as much as they can. They grasped every possible chance.” (Interview with participant B, 2019)

Although other participants did not show the strong emotion as Participant B showed in his story regarding the money-driven character of Chinese agents, an avaricious image of Chinese education agents was clearly shown in their stories too. Participant A, C, and F adapted a more understanding and tolerant attitude towards the business behaviors of their agents, as they thought the most important thing to them, back to that time, was to be accepted by a top-ranked American university. They cared how much they paid, but they cared much more about the results of their application for university admission. Below is an example from the interview with participant C.

“They (education agents) helped me applied for 10 universities and charged me \$ 1,000 for application fees. However, I knew some American universities only charged \$ 50. Some American state universities charged \$ 35 for the application fees. I was a little bit angry at the beginning, but my mom told me no need. They were a commercial firm and we just worked together for one time. It was not a big deal. At that time, I still needed their

help and suggestions, so it would not be wise to chew them out and break our relationship.” (Interview with participant C, 2019).

B. Informative and Resourceful

Of all 12 Chinese student participants discussed the informative feature of Chinese education agents in their stories. In their eyes, education agents have a lot of key information that Chinese students need. Knowledge and information reservoir of education agents does not only include the world and national rankings of universities listed by different institutions, but they are also supposed to conclude the preference of some programs at top universities in reviewing materials of applicants. In working with Chinese students, education agents have to provide a lot of detailed, specific information to Chinese clients to help them make decisions. Below are two examples from the interviews.

“I asked them for very detailed information about the tuition and fees of targeted universities, the acceptance rate of the programs, and the surrounding areas of those universities. They explained it clearly.” (Interview with participant I, 2019).

“My education agent company has a big data bank, which is somewhat like a library. The library has almost the information of almost all American universities, from admission requirements to the geographical description of universities. When I mentioned a certain university that I was interested in, the education agent just directly showed me the information and we discussed it from there.” (Interview with participant L, 2019).

C. Responsive

According to their experiences of working with Chinese education agents, 10 out of 12 Chinese students evaluated that the education agents were responsive and answered their questions promptly. These participants believed that being responsive is a merit of education agents, as responsible education agents should work closely with their clients. About the high responsiveness character of Chinese education agents, experiences of participants C, D, E, and F are highly similar, as they all hired the same agent company. According to their reports and discussions, the agent company has a series of the standard process that ensures Chinese clients and their agents to keep close contacts. Below is an excerpt from the interview with participant E.

“My parents and I were put into a Wechat group, which also included four other education agents. Normally, they updated their progress weekly in the group, but sometimes they reported more frequently depending on the importance of the issue.” (Interview with participant E, 2019).

Along with the above-discussed four participants who have worked with the same education company, the other six Chinese participants also gave similar discussions that explained the being responsiveness was an impressive feature of the education agents with whom they worked. The whole admission process, from the very beginning of the university choosing to the last step of helping Chinese clients book flight tickets, is relatively long and could usually be over six to seven months and sometimes even longer. Every step to Chinese students and their parents could be challenging as they have little knowledge and thus have many questions for their agents, so answering various questions posted by their clients in time has become one of the important tasks of education agents. Below is an excerpt from the interview with participant K.

“My agents answered my questions in time and explained it clearly to me. If she did not reply to me immedia-

-tely, she may text me back or call me on the next day...She never made me wait too long.”(Interview with participant K, 2019).

D. Unethical to American Universities

Nine out of twelve Chinese participants confessed either their application documents were made by ghostwriters, or they used fake application materials provided by their agents, recommendation letters, for example. Based on stories and experiences of research participants, Chinese education agents have to provide unethically cheating services, as these services are so popular in China that almost all agent companies have it. The contracts between education agents and Chinese clients mark that the education agents can only have all the service fees after the Chinese students have accepted by their targeted universities. Thus, education agents have to do all they can do to help Chinese students get accepted by American universities, including using fake application documents and other unethical services. Below are two excerpts from the interview with participants F and J.

“They (education agents) helped me write and submit application essays. I feel that it is an essential part of their work...My agents showed me some sample of the application essays, but they could revise it and make it fit for applicants.”(Interview with participant F, 2019).

“In the beginning, I wanted to ask my professors to help me write recommendation letters, but my education agents told me that recommendation letters of my professors would not be much useful, as my professors are not famous people in the field and they had already helped me prepare recommendation letters from good professors.”(Interview with participant J, 2019).

E. Develop Long-term Relationships with Chinese Clients

Eight of twelve Chinese participants mentioned that their education agents tried to build long-term relationships with them and even care about their situations after they arrived in the U.S. Education agents sometimes asked their learning progress and sometimes asked their feelings of studying in American universities as a Chinese student. Some Chinese students believed that education agents built a long term relationship with them for gathering new information so they could update their data bank with the latest information about American universities. Other Chinese students believed that education agents might want them to further introduce and advertise them to other Chinese students interested in studying overseas, so education agents care about long term relationships with their clients. Below are two examples of conversations from research participants.

“We still occasionally talked on Wechat. They asked about my academic performance and other things. Sometimes if I got problems with my classmates or professors, I also sought suggestions from them. They would reply and offer me some tips.”(Interview with participant A).

“Now, one of my agents and I are still friends. I even visited her last summer break and she wanted me to introduce some clients to their company... I think that I will if I know people around me who need their services.” (Interview with participant I).

According to the five super ordinate themes of this study, a schematic diagram has been created for helping understand the whole images of education agents in Chinese students' eyes. Figure 1 below shows the schematic

diagram.

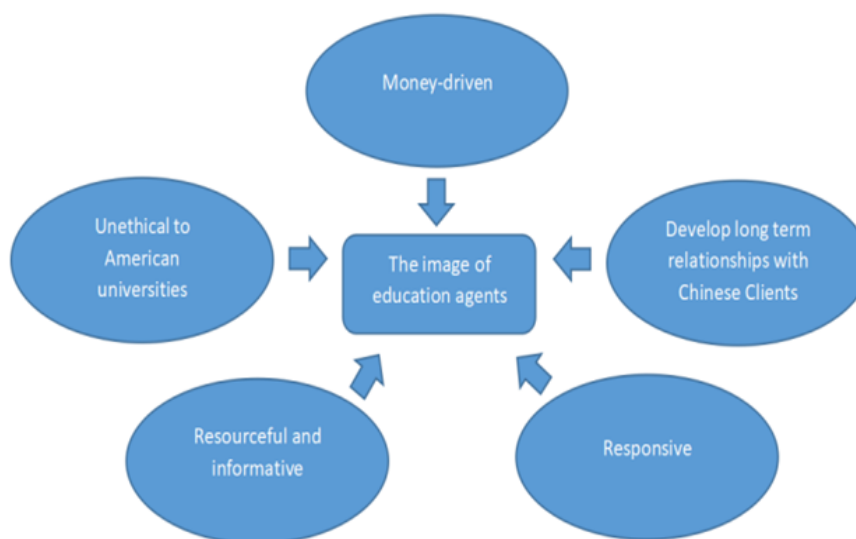


Fig. 1. The schematic diagram.

V. DISCUSSION

With the thematic analysis approach, the image of Chinese education agents in Chinese students' eyes has clearly shown. As for-profit companies, their goal is to maximize their profit. Their role is not only limited to providing formation to Chinese students but includes all fields related to studying overseas, for example, English training and Visa-interview skill courses. These additional services can large the revenue of education agents. As incomes of education agents come solely from Chinese clients but not American institutions, it is understandable that they would act unethically against American universities through hiring ghostwriters and using fabricated materials in the application process to help their Chinese clients. The findings of this study also revealed that the Chinese education agent industry has been highly competitive, as education agents have to be resourceful, professional, and responsive enough to attract and keep their clients. For the past two decades, the Chinese education agent industry has obsoleted many small and unprofessional companies with the development of the overseas study market.

Interestingly, the results of this study did not support the famous agent theory proposed by Eisenhardt (1989), who concluded that agents might attempt to give clients exaggerating information about outcomes for business promotion [30]. Based on the experiences of research participants, Chinese education agents are comparatively responsible to their Chinese clients, as they must be held accountable for the admission outcomes by their clients. The different research results could be partially explained by the update of the technology, especially the popular use of the internet, which made the information about the rankings of American universities available to more Chinese students [31]. As the acceptance letters of a top-ranked university have almost become the only criterion of how Chinese students evaluated the work of their agents, so there was little room to cheat on their clients. If education agents, for example, set up unrealistic goals for their students by choosing top-ranked universities and fail to receive offers, they do not get paid. All in all, the unbalanced power caused by information differences between education agents and Chinese clients has gradually decreased with the wide use of the internet in China, so Chinese education agents have to be more skillful, professional, responsive, and resourceful to survive in the competitive market.

Arguably, American universities should welcome Chinese education agents who have been sending Chinese students to them. Enrollment means the revenues of universities. In recent years, the declined enrollment rate has become a more serious issue for a large number of American institutions [32]. However, in practice, many Chinese education agents are not welcomed as they often adopt unethical behaviors to challenge the admission standards of American institutions, especially those prestigious intuitions. The results of this study strongly implied that the Chinese agents made the admission results of American universities heavily favor some wealthy Chinese applicants by using fake materials blinding admission officers of American institutions, while Chinese applicants who can not afford to hire education agents are in a more disadvantageous position in competing with rich kids.

The results of this study also strongly suggested that there was short of effective regulations and policies to manage Chinese agents that mainly follow the rules of the market. If American institutions and the Chinese educational departments can better guide education agents, unethical behaviors in the applying process can be reduced. An effective strategy of American institutions should be the sharing of the blacklist that all agent companies which used to help applicants to cheat are listed. Then, more Chinese education agents may worry about the severe consequence of practicing unethical behaviors. The other big concern revealed in this study is the high price of service fees charged by Chinese education agents. According to the International Labor Organization, the average annual salary of a Chinese worker in 2014 was about \$ 4,755 [33], while some Chinese agents charged their clients for \$ 20,000 and even more. The unreasonably high price further reflects the lack of enough marketing management in the Chinese education agent industry and the enthusiasm for pursuing a degree at the Chinese students' side. It also shows that the gap between the rich and the poor in China is getting deeper.

VI. LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Just like many other research studies with qualitative research methodologies, this study is limited by its sample size that is confined to the experiences of Chinese students at three American universities in Florida. However, it does offer insightful direction for future research to build on. For a qualitative research study, the sample size can be accepted as a good number. As only limited issues were addressed in this study, the researchers believed the role of education agents in the college application process of international students should be explored more deeply and widely in future studies. For example, how university administrative leaders and staff evaluate the functions and ethics of agents? Unfortunately, the number of both qualitative and quantitative research studies focusing on the ethics of education agents is still small, while the role of agents is getting more significant in international student recruitment.

VII. CONCLUSION

To date, there are not many research papers studying the behaviors of education agents, while education agents have become a more crucial role in the recruitment of international students. The findings of this study fill this research gap by presenting the image of education agents in Chinese international students' eyes, which allows policymakers and educators of American institutions to understand more deeply the role of education agents in the admission process of international students. Moreover, this research study also helps shed light on studying the functions and ethics of education agents, so American institutions can better understand the behavi-

-ors of education agents and adjust their strategy to guide or cooperate with education agents accordingly.

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