Meiguanxi:
Social Detachment and Impersonal Relations in Two Chinese Transient Employment Firms

by

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SUMMARY

There is a legacy of misplaced emphasis on culture by organization and business scholars to explain work and work relations in Chinese small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Often the term guanxi, or strong, long-term, and personal relations, becomes the framework in such explanations. In contrast, this thesis examines the phenomenon of social detachment using a category of relationality I label as impersonal relations. These consist of non-affective, calculating, professional, power-neutral, no-obligation ties, and practices found in two Chinese SMEs, SEA-EAD and QLA, where I conducted my nine-month research in 2009-2010.

I argue that impersonal relations are permanent features of transient employment firms. These firms operate using flexible work practices to facilitate rapid transactions and movement of money and human capital. The result is a firm that is highly fluid, shifting, and uncertain. This type of non-stable firm needs a framework such as Marilyn Strathern’s actor-network theory. The framework advocates for a network model of a firm that focuses on context-specific links as analytical points. Using her framework to study work and relationality, my findings show that there are three types of impersonal relations.

One type of interaction uses ties of information control that produces highly contingent work and work relations as seen at SEA-EAD. The SEA-EAD agents expand ties with education brokers to gather information and restrict access once commissions are awarded. Simultaneously, agents limit information from management to maintain their career viability inside and outside the firm.

The second type of interaction uses ties of individual status that results in more stable impersonal relations and work routines as observed at QLA. The QLA staff performs obedience within office hierarchy as part of their work. However, once outside of work, such as during an office party or the lunch hour, QLA employees use ritual-like practices to distinguish themselves individually and reject food-related overtures for sustained long-term connection.

The third type of interaction uses ties of power difference. My findings show that the restoration of professional interactions during conflict resolution practices are ritual-like, affect-based performances. However, the goal is not to establish personal ties but rather, re-establish trustworthy, power-neutral, professional relations to facilitate swift transactions.

These findings suggest that impersonal relations at SEA-EAD and QLA are highly adaptive to the flexible labour and work demands in SMEs that are transient employment destinations. Employee detachment ensures readiness to move jobs when an opportunity becomes available. Manager detachment allows for rapid troubleshooting and swift decision-making at nominal cost and effort. Professional customer-agent relations restore relational inequity from fraudulent activities. While impersonal relations provide the minimal trust and transactional efficiency, these same ties pose chronic risks to firms such as high employee turnover, work unpredictability, and transaction fraud.
Impersonal relations and the ensuing social detachment transform our understanding of Chinese SMEs as porous anchor points that accelerate the movement of people, information, and financial capital in China’s flexible market-socialist economy.

Keywords: relationality, impersonal relations, social detachment, guanxi, individuality, suzhi, organisational culture, obedient autonomy, office lunch, China, ritual, SME, MSME, microenterprises, migration agents, migration firms, study abroad, mobility, flexible firms, flexible labour, flexible capitalism
TABLE OF CONTENTS

SUMMARY ....................................................................................................................4
Figures ..........................................................................................................................8
Tables ............................................................................................................................8

Chapter 1: Introduction: “It’s Just a Job!” .................................................................9
  1. Defining the Problem ...............................................................................................11
     1.A. Guanxi as Tool in the Neo-Confucian Project ..................................................11
     1.B. Guanxi as Tool within the Hofstede Values Model .........................................18
  2. Proposition Statement ...........................................................................................24
  3. Encountering Impersonal Relations in Chinese Firms ..........................................30
  4. Chapters and Themes .............................................................................................37

Chapter 2: The Acceleration of Transient Employment in China .........................42
  1. The Socialist Work Unit (Danwei) ..........................................................................43
  2. Firm Flexibility: Transition into a Socialist-Market Economy ..............................45
  3. Employee Flexibility & The Growth of Social Anxiety .........................................58
  4. Research Context of SEA-EAD and QLA .............................................................65
     4.A. QLA (Qingdao Labour Agency) ......................................................................70
     4.B. SEA (Sunshine Education Agency) .................................................................75

Chapter 2: Conclusion .................................................................................................78

Chapter 3: Expanding and Cutting the SEA-EAD and QLA Network .................80
  1. Expanding Office Life: Strathern’s Actor-Network Theory ....................................81
  2. The Conditions of Profit in the Foreign Education Network ...................................85
  3. The Network of Impersonal Relations in the Study Abroad Industry ....................89
     3.A. QLA (Qingdao Labour Agency) ......................................................................95
     3.B. SEA-EAD (Sunshine Education Agency – Euro-American Department) ......99

Chapter 3: Conclusion .................................................................................................106

Chapter 4: Information Control: Cooperative Hezuo Ties at SEA-EAD ..........109
  1. Brief Background on the SEA-EAD Fraud .............................................................111
  2. Benefits of Hezuo Ties at SEA-EAD .................................................................114
     2.A. The “Betrayal” of EAD by Ms. Park ..............................................................115
     2.B. Professional Mentorship under Ms. Mina ....................................................121
     2.C. Customer Satisfaction from Unsanctioned Hezuo Tie.....................................125
  3. Risks of Hezuo Ties at SEA-EAD .........................................................................129
     3.A. Surviving General Inquiry using Hezuo Ties ................................................129
     3.B. Advising and Assessment: Calculating Profitable Hezuo .............................131
     3.C. School Applications and Collating Documents: Complex Hezuo ................135
     3.D. Visa Application: High Risk with Unknown Brokers ....................................140

Chapter 4: Conclusion .................................................................................................146

Chapter 5 Information Control: SEA-EAD Manager-Employee Impersonal Ties .................................................................150
  1. Introducing SEA-EAD’s Flexible Operation ..........................................................152
  2. Ms. Jia Resigns (June 2009) ..............................................................................155
  3. Mr. Dian’s Reluctant Re-Assignment (June 2009) ..............................................157
Figures

Figure 1: China: Fourteen Coastal Cities Designated for Development (China’s Special Economic Zones Map 1997, UT Library) .......................................................... 48
Figure 2: Qingdao-China-International Regional Map 2014 ........................................ 67
Figure 3: Shandong Province 2014 and Qingdao Administrative Districts 2014 .......... 68
Figure 4: Diagram of QLA Office Space (not to scale) .................................................. 212
Figure 5: Seating Arrangement During Meetings (I was excluded) ............................ 214
Figure 6: Restaurant Seating Arrangement ................................................................... 228

Tables

Table 1: Statistics of Total Employed Individuals by Sector 2009 - 2012 ..................... 53
Table 2: Number of College Graduates (Wang et. al. 2012) ........................................ 61
Chapter 1: Introduction: “It’s Just a Job!”

During my internship in 2009 at the education placement consulting firm SEA-EAD (Sunshine Education Agency- European-American Department), and the labour placement consulting firm QLA (Qingdao Labour Agency) in Qingdao, China, I encountered a curious phenomenon. The employees, except those who were related to the business owners, systematically downplayed their jobs and social ties with their work colleagues.

Curious to learn more, I set out to investigate the knowledge needed by Chinese employees and firms to operate in a rapidly uncertain and volatile labour environment, especially following the global economic downturn of 2008. Both QLA and SEA-EAD are what I will call transient employment firms, whose college-educated employees join without the desire for a career in the company but merely to find a job until something better transpires. Although such firms are rarely studied, they make up an important part of workplaces worldwide under flexible capitalism, and in China in particular. I found that employees in transient employment firms like QLA and SEA-EAD required a certain social distancing and detachment from their firms and colleagues to fulfil their unremarkable, temporary, and ordinary office jobs. This production of social detachment constituted a significant aspect of work in what would be transient waypoints in their careers.

Nancy, a twenty-five-year-old employee with SEA-EAD, was a potential informant since she was an agent in our department. She twice rebuffed my request for an interview but relented on my third attempt with the condition that I never divulge any details to our
officemates. She did not want anyone knowing anything about her since she planned to leave soon anyway. SEA-EAD was just a way to pass time: “I don’t want to wait for a long time (in between jobs). I want to work continuously.” The result was that she avoided sharing any details about herself or opinions about her job with me. Instead, she talked about her boyfriend who took an exam for the civil service to apply for the Shenzhen Customs.

Debra, our twenty-nine-year-old receptionist and general inquiry point person, also downplayed her job in the company. She told me that this was just a job through which to save money as she built her family with her husband. She grew up and studied in Jilin province, worked in Liaoning in 2003, and moved to Qingdao in 2006 after her marriage. For now, both she and her husband were busy saving before having any children: “This is a job without any need for a hukou (residence permit)…nothing special…It is expensive to have children here if you don’t have any hukou here since you have to pay for school…so we have to work hard first.” Again, Debra was another disinterested party who preferred to talk about the challenges of who takes care of parents and why a married couple cannot work in the same office (a taboo, she said).

Nancy and Debra were not alone. This disinterested stance on their jobs and wariness with colleagues were also found at QLA. Mark, my supervisor, also adamantly refused to answer any of my questions with regards to his work and colleagues: “I just fix the

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1 The hukou is a household registration system developed during the Maoist period to control population flow. It attached benefits, including job allocation, grain subsidy, education and health care, to one's birthplace category – agricultural (rural) or non-agricultural (urban) (see Cheng and Selden 1994). Today, migrants without local hukou are excluded from legal rights to work in certain jobs, local access to public services, and in some cities, house or car purchases (see B. Li 2004, Z. Li and Meng 2016). The implication is that migrants enter into low-paying and low status jobs with little protection or access to legal claims. In 2009, a national policy encouraged SMEs to employ college graduates and relaxed the requirement of the hukou for employment (CECC 2016). However, access to subsidized public services remains unchanged.
website and computers,” he said. He pleaded with me, slightly irritated, “Please don’t ask me anything about them. I don’t know them.” When I asked if he planned to invite the bosses or his office mates to his future wedding, he frowned at me and said, “Why? I don’t want them to feel obligated to me.” These forms of disavowal seemed to be a feature, in varying degrees, within these two firms.

This thesis examines the phenomenon of detachment in Chinese work relations, which I collectively call “impersonal relations,” in two transient employment firms: SEA-EAD and QLA in Qingdao, Shandong Province, one of the coastal economic zones of China. This research takes an anthropological approach to analysing flexible firms and how employees produce impersonal relations in order to get work done swiftly, with few obligations—practices that correspond with management and labour flexibility confronting Chinese firms today.

1. Defining the Problem

One of the major hurdles in studying Chinese SMEs is the legacy of the misplaced emphasis on culture in business literature. There is a strong tendency by organization and business scholars to explain work relations between managers and employees in Chinese organizations in cultural terms such as collectivism, hierarchy, and harmony. Often the term guanxi figures prominently in such explanations (e.g., Smart 1999, 1998). Guanxi refers to a broad pattern of ritualized and everyday practices of reciprocity and exchange carried out with varying degrees of sentiment (affect/emotion gongqing or renqing) and instrumentality or ritual obligations among kindred (father-son, husband-wife), affinal-consanguineal relations (marriage, blood relations) (Gold et al. 2002, Kipnis 1997, Y. Yan 1996, Yang 1994). It even extends to non-kin, like those in unequal, impersonal,
hierarchical status and rank relationships (teacher-student, master-slave, patron-client) (ibid., Wank 1996). This broad definition of guanxi encompasses various types of relations and practices that make it a convenient concept to apply to the analysis of a wide variety of contexts and situations, ranging from personal interactions in the private sphere to relations in the workplace.

Let us use the case of the SEA-EAD New Year’s Eve banquet hosted by the boss, Headmaster Qing, to examine how the guanxi explanation is commonly used. The company had been through a harrowing year of employee fraud, angry customers, successive employee turnovers, delayed salaries, and the implementation of onerous monitoring of daily work by the Headmaster and the information technology (IT) supervisor, Mr. Chang. The last thing everyone wanted to do was to celebrate. Some employees did not bother to attend at all as the banquet was an optional activity. I was hesitant to attend alone. I asked others if they were going, and one replied, “Yes, we deserve it! After all the troubles this year.” Other employees said that they would only attend if their friends were going as well. My colleague Teacher Li from the language division of SEA convinced me to go because she was going. We went together and were ferried to the pre-arranged Chinese restaurant in the company van. Some employees went ahead by themselves. Surprisingly, there were ten tables for about thirty individuals in attendance. It was more people than I had expected.

Teacher Li, a newly hired teacher at the school, positioned herself as a banquet etiquette guide for me and Hans, our new German intern, who completed our table of three. She directed us as to when the appropriate time and opportunity was to stand up for ceremonial toasts with our friends-officemates. She held off on initiating the most
important ceremonial toast with the Headmaster, waiting until right before we left. After about two hours into the event, we wanted to go home. It was at this moment that Teacher Li, Hans and I walked over to the Headmaster's table and offered our salutations. The table was populated by company officials, notably the Japanese deputy headmaster, Mr. Ogawa, and the IT supervisor, Mr. Lin. The Headmaster and everyone else at his table were inebriated and basked in all employee greetings. With his reddened cheeks, the Headmaster greeted us, “Happy New Year!” Teacher Li spoke on behalf of the three of us, exclaiming, “Wishing you success and progress this New Year!” The Headmaster remarked, “I am happy with all the people who attended...this year has been successful for me!”

I could not help but think about the irony of the situation as the Headmaster spoke with Teacher Li. There was widespread anxiety among employees stemming from unpaid salaries, rumours of an empty company bank account were rife, and back-stabbing at the office had fostered low morale among the rank and file. There was a stark contradiction between the Headmaster’s smile and the everyday sorrows of office life.

The banquet episode has some attributes that may be interpreted in the guanxi framework as ritualized food exchange between superiors and subordinates. This instance may be perceived as central to building guanxi. One might wonder, is this fragment of my fieldwork indeed evidence of the existence and strengthening of guanxi ties between SEA employers and employees? Or is it evidence, not of the presence of, but rather an absence or, at best, a very weak form of strong, pre-existing, guanxi-like ties between superiors and subordinates?
If we follow the standard explanation in business and management studies, the term “guanxi” is used as a catch-all concept that captures both the absence and the presence of strong ties. If guanxi or ‘strong ties’ are thought to be present, any observed practice is seen as serving to strengthen it. And if guanxi appears to be absent, such as in the banquet situation described above, any observed practice is seen as serving to restore strong ties. So whether it was there or not, guanxi can always be used as an explanation: it cannot not be there. And whatever practice we observe, it always confirmed the guanxi explanation.

This observation is corroborated in a recent review on guanxi in management. C.C.Chen et al. (2013: 172-173) find that guanxi is used as a broad term and as a synonym for “interpersonal relationship” or “connection.” Based on their assessment, guanxi appears to encompass all types of Chinese relationships, including relations that are not guanxi but are made to fit this frame nonetheless. Stretching the reach of the concept, terms such as impersonal guanxi and contractual guanxi encompass interactions with acquaintances and strangers (ibid: 170-171). Typically, other studies resort to multiple typologies to justify and account for all types of guanxi ties (e.g., Y. Zhang and Zhang 2006, Fu et. al. 2006, Fan 2002). As a result, relations in a Chinese context are all assumed to be guanxi relations.

This circular argument has a long history that has been obscured in Western and non-Western business and management literature. For instance, Jacobs’ (1979) study has been an inspiration for management scholars who has used the guanxi explanation. He claims, on the basis of research into political behaviour in Taiwan, that guanxi ties underpin co-workers, teacher-student, economic, and bureaucratic relations. Despite Jacobs’ warning
that his findings are context-specific, other social scientists like King (1990) picked up Jacobs’ guanxi typologies and applied them to post-World War II Chinese living in areas that became the surrogate for Communist China: Hong Kong and Taiwan (see also Harrell 2001). He creates an influential meta-analysis that links guanxi with Confucianism, family values, and family business enterprises. These become the seminal ideas of later work by business scholars who use guanxi and its “total package” to explain economic success in the Southeast Asian region among populations of ethnic Chinese who owned family-run businesses (e.g., Weidenbaum and Hughes 1996, Crawford 2000, S. L. Wong 1985).

Once mainland China opened its economy in 1978, research into business enterprises there became possible. The earliest workplace studies about mainland China were carried out by Tsui and Farh (1997) and Farh et al. (1998). They applied the guanxi explanation developed in ethnic Chinese communities in Southeast Asia and surrogate China areas. These scholars extended the term “guanxi” to explain workplace relations, including superior-subordinate relations, and also relations with strangers. Thus, the guanxi explanation has been re-appropriated from one field (political behaviour) and geographic location (Taiwan) to another (Chinese manager-employee relations in the mainland Chinese context). Consequently, this generalization has come to dominate subsequent analyses of guanxi manager-employee relations in mainland Chinese workplaces.

There are a number of problems with the guanxi explanation, which I detail further in the succeeding sections. Here, it suffices to say that the guanxi interpretation does not take into account recent longitudinal ethnographic studies that suggest the rapid global integration of work in China since the introduction of capitalism in the 1980s. While the
guanxi explanation assumes enterprise stability, these studies document the rise of uncertainty within the Chinese work environment. As China accelerates its integration with the global economy, employees and firms have been subjected to similar conditions of uncertainty facing workers elsewhere. Recently, researchers have identified job informalization (Friedman and Lee 2010), worker contractualization (ibid.), and the growth of precarious or unstable jobs as urgent issues (Kalleberg and Hewison 2013, C.K. Lee and Yochanan 2012, Z. Zhou 2013). This is not just a problem in the manufacturing sector; it also affects white collar professions such as those in service and office work (Michelson 2006, Ross 2006, Davis 2011, Myers and Chan 2011).

The ethnographic literature reflects the result of uncertainty in two ways. One is the description of the pursuit of self-development by Chinese college graduates that has led researchers to produce a body of occupation-based or career-based ethnographies with limited insights into firm dynamics (Hanser 2006, 2007a, 2007b, Ong 2008, C.S.C. Chan 2006, Hoffmann 2010, but see C.S.C. Chan 2012). The second trend is the description of anomie or the low morale of employees in their jobs within non-supportive firms (Myers and Chan 2011, Davis 2011, Chong 2012). Both these trends have been mostly observed in large international joint venture enterprises (C.S.C. Chan 2012, Hanser 2006, Davis 2007, Warner 2000), state organizations (Hanser 2007a, 2007b, Warner 2000), and multinationals (Ong 2008, Chong 2012, Warner 2000), with little input from Chinese small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (but see Ross 2006, Eyferth 2009). While the ethnographic literature focuses on timely labour issues in general, this body of work provides a limited analysis on work relations and the changing firm structure within SMEs that are specifically transient employment firms. To date, these ethnographic findings have not been sufficiently accounted for in international business and
management studies. There is therefore a gap between the business and management literature that espouses firm stability in China, and more recent findings from ethnographic work that describe firm instability. This gap is problematic because mainland Chinese SMEs have also been subjected to instability brought about by cost and profit pressures from the global value chain and rapid employee turnover.

The analysis of small- and medium-sized transient employment firms has been hampered by a guanxi explanation of firm and relational stability that originated in the complex and historical studies of Chinese SMEs in the East and Southeast Asian regions. The result is that the analysis of firms has not kept up with these rapid workplace changes, such as transient employment, and is limited by an ambiguous and imprecise catch-all concept, namely, the guanxi explanation. This thesis addresses this gap in the literature and demonstrates how individuals build and use impersonal relations and sociality to adapt and cope under these flexible work conditions.

I will first briefly discuss two developments that have contributed to the problems surrounding the use of guanxi before proposing an alternative approach. First is its entanglement with the neo-Confucian movement in which guanxi becomes a tool to perpetuate several political and academic discourses. Second is its role as a tool within the Hofstede culture values global index category for China that is popular in business and management fields. Both these developments have contributed to the problematic use of guanxi in the analysis of transient employment firms. It has become an essentialising concept prone to misuse and misinterpretation.
1.A. Guanxi as Tool in the Neo-Confucian Project

How did the concept of guanxi become so pervasive in the explanation of Chinese business practices and relations? Dirlik (1995, 1997) offers two reasons. According to him, one pivotal factor is guanxi’s expediency as an explanation for the successful economies of the East Asian (Japan, Taiwan, South Korea) and Southeast Asian (Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia) regions during the nineteen eighties. He argues that this link between ‘culture’ and the political economy of the region coincides with the revival of the neo-Confucian framework in academia and among political pundits in the United States. The centrepiece of this movement is the Confucian values paradigm, built on a singular self-image of ethnic ‘Chineseness.’ This self-image rests on selected interpretations of Confucian writings such as respect for elders, the importance of hierarchy/stability within the family, kinship ties and obligations, networking (guanxi), business-mindedness, thriftiness, and assimilationist attitude among others (Dirlik 1997: 311-319). He describes how this reawakening of interest resulted in an increase in funding into the study of Confucianist philosophy and research on guanxi and Chinese family SMEs as a way to understand the link between culture and business/economic growth in the East and Southeast Asian regions (Dirlik 1995). The resulting business literature from this period has been influential in incorporating guanxi, alongside other neo-Confucian values, into mainland Chinese firm analysis.

The guanxi explanation has been an important framework for Southeast Asian management scholars to explain success among enterprises belonging to ethnic Chinese groups (Redding 1993, 1996, Weidenbaum and Hughes 1996, Kotkin 1992). According to these researchers, guanxi has become a significant tool for business success due to three features that they linked with Confucianism. The first is the embedded trust that is
assumed in Confucianism. For instance, Redding (1996: 318 – 319) views guanxi as an interaction control mechanism between family employers, family employee members, and with clients. He reasons that control stems from the Confucian ethics of trust (xinyong) and rapport (ganqing) embedded in guanxi, in which any breach results in shame and social loss of face. The second is that guanxi offers a social network that can overcome structural and geographic limitations. This is what Weidenbaum and Hughes (1996) call the business ‘bamboo network’ of trust that prevails among Overseas Chinese elites. But they fail to specify the details of this network, except to mention that family ties and inter-family marriages establish creditworthiness. Third, guanxi is defined as a pan-Chinese practice embedded within a singular pan-Chinese identity. Kotkin (1992) promotes the idea of ethnic singularity, a global tribe of ‘Chinese’ with common characteristics that resist historical or geographic differences. These developments in Chinese SME analysis have added to the complexity surrounding the use of the guanxi explanation.

Dirlik (1995, 1997) claims that another reason why the guanxi explanation has proved popular is its usefulness as a tool to promote a specific political agenda. For instance, the Confucian values paradigm and guanxi have been appropriated by leaders, such as Lee Kuan Yew in Singapore and local government officials and scholars from mainland China to facilitate free trade and investment. Deploying an imagined pan-Asian culture derived from Chinese ethnicity and identity allowed the two countries to align themselves and their own political and economic decisions against a Western-based model of capitalism (Dirlik 1997). This hypothesis has been corroborated by J. Yang (2010: 3) who notes that concepts such as ‘Asian values,’ ‘soft power,’ ‘guanxi capitalism,’ and
‘Confucian capitalism,’ have been largely developed in the West and continue to be appropriated by local Asian states for their own national projects.

These two reasons given by Dirlik have redefined guanxi as a practice that is compatible with, and an essential component of, the neo-Confucian values paradigm. Thus, the use of guanxi as explanation inevitably carries the weight of the Confucian values approach, as well as its socio-politico-economic implications.

1.B. Guanxi as Tool within the Hofstede Values Model

The concept of guanxi has achieved wide acceptance and application in the international business and management fields due to its convenience as a catch-all concept for a multitude of ideas, values, and attitudes to describe Chinese business behaviour. The most prominent model featuring guanxi and Confucianism has been the Hofstede (2001) global index of values which compares selected cultural traits across national cultures. This model has proved highly influential, having been cited 71,759 times and peaking in 2014 with 5,508 citations in new publications, according to Google Scholar as of January 2018.²

Hofstede’s comparative model of national culture dimensions is made up of a set of variables that describe the attitude and behaviour of individuals, situations, institutions, or organizations at the societal (ethnic) or geocentric (national) levels for their similarities and differences (Hofstede 2001: 25-27). Hofstede uses the International Business Machines (IBM) international employee attitude surveys conducted by the company since

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² Google scholar aggregated the total citations from the various editions and literature pertaining to the Hofstede model, including the 2001 version I used, to the 1991 edition publication of Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind.
1967 across its companies and subsidiaries around the globe (Hofstede and Bond 1988: 9). At the time of his research in 1973, he used this databank to identify four independent variables for cross-national comparison. These variables were power distance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, and uncertainty avoidance. Based on this model, Hofstede characterized China (Hong Kong and Taiwan acted as surrogates) as a highly collectivist culture with a high power distance, wherein higher- and lower-ranking members readily accepted the unequal power distribution among themselves (Hofstede 2001).

China has an important role in uncovering Hofstede’s fifth national culture dimension variable, the long and short-term orientation. His identification of this variable reveals the underlying assumption of Hofstede’s model with respect to guanxi and Confucianism. After the IBM survey, Hofstede was concerned with the Western bias of the questions and researchers. Thus, in 1985, Hofstede and Bond collaborated on the Chinese Value Survey (CVS), a modified IBM-Rokeach American values survey that contained a forty-item list of “Chinese values” that was developed in cooperation with Chinese social scientists to address these shortcomings (Hofstede and Bond 1988, Hofstede and Bond 1988).

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3 By 1973, at the time of his research, the IBM databank had grown to 116,000 questionnaires in 20 languages from 72 countries (Hofstede and Bond 1988: 9). From this databank, Hofstede uses only 53 countries (or companies as he interchanged them) to statistically identify four independent variables in which nations and/or cultures could be compared and contrasted with each other (see Hofstede 1980, 2001, Hofstede and Bond 1988).

4 In the survey, Hong Kong and Taiwan act as surrogates for mainland China and are used interchangeably in some instances. Hong Kong has an index of 68 (IBM country rank 15-16), while Taiwan has an index of 58 (IBM country rank 20-30) for power distance, with 1 being the lowest in power distance (Hofstede 2001: 500; for slight variation in the figures see Hofstede and Bond (1988: 12-13). Meanwhile, Hong Kong has an index of 25 (IBM country rank 37) and Taiwan has an index of 17 (IBM country rank 44) for individualism which place them at the lower end for individualism, and thus, more collectivist (ibid.). Further samples from mainland China were later added after the IBM results were published. “China” has an index, but no country ranking, of 80 for power distance, 20 for individualism (ibid.). These scores are greater than both Hong Kong or Taiwan which still support the representation of “China” as a national culture with high power distance and collectivist in orientation. However, these samples still rely on overseas Chinese respondents and extensive literature review on the overseas Chinese (see Hofstede 2001: 362, 502). I observed that the figures or rankings for “China” changed depending on which Hofstede study one cited and when it was conducted.
Minkov 2010). The CVS and the IBM findings matched on the first three national
dimensions only and uncovered a new dimension of value, which they labeled
“Confucian dynamism” (later renamed “the long/short-term orientation”).

The category of Confucian dynamism reflects a spectrum of Confucian teachings that
Hofstede and Bond interpret as either future-oriented (persistence, thrift, relational
hierarchy, and sense of shame) or past (tradition-bound) and present-oriented
(reciprocity, respect for tradition, protecting ‘face’, and personal stability) (Hofstede and
Bond 1988: 17, Hofstede and Minkov 2010: 494-495). Countries that score the highest
identify future orientation as important. For countries that score the least, the past and
present-oriented values are considered more important. The high score of China, with an
index of 118, indicate that the Chinese display a future orientation—they had a pragmatic
approach to family life, withheld the gratification of personal desires, and exhibited
tenacity and humility (Hofstede and Bond 1988). Hofstede and Minkov (2010: 497)
argue that when these values are transferred to the workplace, they manifest themselves
as an investment in personal networks (guanxi), shared aspirations between
owner/managers/workers, honesty, and self-discipline. Altogether, guanxi, Confucianism,
and the Chinese workplace become ultimately linked with each other.

Hofstede’s fifth national culture variable, “Confucian dynamism” or long-term
orientation, not only conflates guanxi with Confucianism and the workplace, but it also
statistically correlates the “Confucian dynamism” variable with economic growth

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5 Like the Rokeach American values survey, the CVS survey was given to 50 male and 50 female
students from a variety of disciplines selected from five continents, including 20 countries out of the 22
countries covered in the IBM survey (Hofstede and Bond 1988: 15). By the time that Culture’s Consequences
was published, the country sample has since increased to 23 countries with the addition of a mainland
China sample.
6 This is followed by Hong Kong, with a long-term orientation index of 96, and Taiwan, with a
long-term orientation index of 87.
Based on their table for this variable, China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea rank first to fifth respectively (see Hofstede 2001: 356). The researchers argue that these countries exhibit a high “Confucian dynamism” index which demonstrate a causal relationship with wealth and economic growth during the periods of 1965-1985 and 1985–1995 (Hofstede 2001: 367). Hofstede's variable strengthened the then-prevailing popularity of the “Neo-Confucian culture” as the reason behind economic success (see previous section on Dirlik 1997, 1995). Moreover, the concept of “Confucian dynamism entrenched guanxi as an essential Chinese workplace feature based on the highly collectivist, Confucian values-based Chinese culture in Hofstede’s model.

While problems with Hofstede’s method and analysis have been identified, such as the conflation of nation with culture (Ybema and Nyiri 2015, McSweeney 2009, 2002; Fang 2003), his national culture analysis continues to be used in business research when discussing the context of guanxi (see Kirkman et.al. 2017, Tsui, Nifadkar, Ou 2007). These historical, academic, and socio-politico-economic developments create an essentializing concept of guanxi and reproduce its dominance as an explanatory device in Chinese management research (see C. C. Chen et al. 2013: 177-179). A common framework of strong, harmonious, and collectivist relations continues to be used in the analysis of organizations in China (e.g., Hwang 2012, Jia et. al. 2012), especially in the work of those undertaking indigenous management research (e.g., Chou et al. 2014, Chin 2014, and Qiu 2014: 289). This is a similar frame into the investigation of Chinese enterprises found in influential Western-based management journals (e.g., Barkema et.al. 2015, Redding and Witt 2011, A. Wong et. al. 2016). In the following section, I will
discuss why such a view is problematic and how we might pursue a different research agenda.

2. Proposition Statement

There are two main reasons to be critical of guanxi as an explanation for Chinese work relations as sketched above. One is the tautology that arises from using a single concept like guanxi to represent all types of practices and relationships. Guanxi is wrongly assumed to be a term that can explain everything. The second problem is that a single catch-all concept does not only represent practices and relations, but also embeds within it other social, historical, economic, and political developments that have contributed to its use and conceptualization. These transforms “guanxi talk” into a type of “cultural fundamentalism,” as Hannerz (2009) calls the process, in which master symbols and metonyms become reference points for a geographical area. He explains that this is the outcome when a “geocultural imagination,” or the interweaving between the academic and the public, becomes entrenched and widely dispersed (ibid: 269-270). Treating guanxi as a typical trait of all Chinese despite geographic (Southeast Asia, East Asia, mainland China) or historical heterogeneity is an extreme case of such cultural fundamentalism. It inadvertently creates an ethnic singularity and enforces a stereotype of a collectivist and static culture that is resistant to other influences, as seen in models such as Hofstede’s. This poses a problem even for anthropological research because, as Khan (2014) asserts, such concepts become “gatekeeper” terms that block the full investigation into and understanding of a historically complex and regionally diverse culture or topic. The evolution of guanxi as a concept and explanation for any Chinese
business, behaviour, or values has become a dangerous master symbol for China and Chinese inter-personal relationships.

Despite its widespread use, there is reason to believe that the term guanxi, and popular notions of Chinese culture as being collectivist, harmonious, and patriarchal, have been over-extended, and threaten to oversimplify analyses of workplace practices. Various scholars argue that some applications of Hofstede’s categories, for instance, have had harmful consequences. Breidenbach and Nyiri (2009) argue that Hofstede’s classification model has negatively reinforced the stereotype of China as a highly collectivist and hierarchical society through “the respectability of management science” (ibid. 283). They attest that this model has entrenched ideas of cultural determinism and the static culture in management scholars’ analyses of China. For those working in cross-cultural management, Ybema and Nyiri (2015: 43, 46; see also Ybema and Byun 2009) propose ‘culture work’ as an alternative, interpretive, and grounded approach to cross-cultural management studies. Here, the researchers suggest that scholars focus on the context of work and the agency of employees in how they use and deploy cultural differences or other values to articulate, diffuse, and/or resist power asymmetry between national groups and authority positions.

Meanwhile, critical scholars working in the Southeast Asian region have also emphasized the specific political, social, and economic factors necessary to understand the strategies of ethnic Chinese businesses, especially in the use of guanxi (e.g., Verver 2012, Dahles and Ter Horst 2012, Gomez and Hsiao 2004, Yao 2002, Smart 1999, Douw et al. 1999). Some have exposed the discourse behind guanxi and Confucian capitalism concepts (Yao

Rather than ask what has happened to guanxi within firms in China at the onset of flexible practices, and continue the unproductive line of reasoning and debates that has been taken up elsewhere (e.g., Gold, et. al. 2002), this research proposes to examine a neglected category in firm analysis which I collectively label “impersonal relations.” These are relationality practices that can be jokingly labelled *mei*guanxi, a term that literally means “no guanxi” but is colloquially used in the meaning of “does not matter” when responding to a “thank you.”

This thesis rejects the use of guanxi as an analytical concept. The disavowal of social relations by my co-workers and the various uncertainties simmering underneath the surface at the SEA banquet that I described at the beginning of this chapter expose the prevailing problems in analysing company relations in terms of guanxi. With its connotations of harmony and strong relations, guanxi is certainly inadequate to account for the experiences of workers at SEA. Inconsistencies at the banquet, such as the absence of some of my colleagues and the Headmaster's ironic declaration of “success,” must be understood within the context of the stressful everyday working conditions at SEA. These include, but are not limited to, angry customers, employee turnover and fraud, fear stemming from unpaid salaries, rumours of an empty company bank account, and back stabbing at the office. These conflicts brewing in the office are not isolated events that can be simply explained by failed or weak guanxi relations among workers, between managers and employees, or with customers. These instances are chronic features of flexible firms, an outcome of a Chinese socialist-market flexible economy.
The detachment of social relations among work colleagues and between managers and employees form the basis of impersonal relations at work. This category of relationality requires social detachment and the creation of a boundary between personal and professional lives. This boundary is defined by practices that establish non-affective, impersonal, and temporary relations with work colleagues. However, this does not mean that they are empty of significance or disorganized. Actually, the process and formation of impersonal ties are governed by patterns that can be seen in meals, the conduct of work, and conflict resolution. For instance, in Chapter Six, I narrate how customers of SEA-EAD affected by the fraud demanded restitution. They engage in a ritual form of conflict resolution that uses the empty rhetoric of *zuo pengyou* or making friends to demand the return to trustworthy commercial transactions, rather than attempting to build actual personal relationships. QLA workplace dining and food exchange narratives in Chapters Seven and Eight are areas in which ritualised forms are necessary to establish impersonal relations. These may mimic practices that are commonly attributed to creating strong relations but are actually used to reject its establishment.

The appearances of mutual exchange and reciprocity, such as in large company banquets or intimate lunch hour practices, may appear to support the guanxi explanation, but are actually normative performances that run counter to the creation of strong personal relations, social obligations between managers and employees, and job or enterprise commitment. The guanxi explanation, with its connotations of harmony and strong relations, cannot account for the experiences of workers at SEA-EAD and QLA. This appears counterintuitive since these companies are family-owned and operated medium-
sized and small companies. However, unlike other service work, migration brokerage enterprises follow a transaction cost business model that derives its profit from facilitating labour or school applications. They deliver no actual product, require no elaborate fixed assets to perform work, and offer little in the way of salary or career advancement within the firm, or job distinction. Hence, these firms experience high employee turnover, little institutional memory, and become temporary employment destinations for college graduates. I discuss the transformation of work in China from the relative stability of socialist firms into highly uncertain and unpredictable work conditions dominated by flexible and contingent work practices in Chapter One. Family-owned and operated enterprises are equally subject to flexible labour and market conditions. Under these conditions, lower-level employees do not refer to the banquet or everyday exchanges as contributing to any guanxi relations between themselves and with the Headmaster or their bosses. It is also not the case that workers are simply practicing guanxi without being aware that they are doing so. ‘Guanxi as explanation’ does not capture these modes of knowledge practices and strategies by managers, employees, or even customers in these uncertain market and work environments.

At the heart of these contradictory practices, actors adopt strategies to pursue relations that are free of affect in order to perform mundane office work or transient work efficiently and swiftly. In the absence of effective stable or long-term work, adequate compensation for university graduates, low-status rote work, both managers and

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7 There is a disparity in agreement on what constitutes as a small- and medium-sized enterprise (SMEs) globally. Convention follows World Bank/International Finance Corporation (IFC) categories which statistically classify small firms as those with 5-9 employees, medium as 10-99 employees, and large as any firm with greater than 100 employees (Kushnir et al. 2010: 5). In 2011, China refined its categories of SMEs to include micro enterprises as a sub-category of SMEs (Lan 2011). The classification standards now define micro enterprises as having less than 10 employees; small enterprises as greater than or equal to 10 employees; medium-sized enterprises as employing greater than or equal to 100 and up to 300 employees (China Briefing 2013). For brevity and to avoid confusion in the text, I use the World Bank convention to identify QLA as small and SEA as medium-sized.
employees are developing new ways of creating value for themselves in the era of work and management flexibility. These performances emphasize an efficient way to work with minimal emotional or personal investment.

The result is a range of contradictory practices found in SEA-EAD and QLA. For instance, in Chapter Four I show how transaction-based cooperative (hezuo) ties among agents facilitate business with minimal cost expenditure on personnel training, trading of information, or guarantees of profit sharing among agents and/or their companies. Paradoxically, this flexible arrangement produces unpredictable results and institutionalizes fraud in education consulting.

Another contradiction can also be seen in Chapter Five in which I discuss how the SEA-EAD Headmaster deploys a flexible operation (linghuo caozuo) to address problems stemming from fraud by shuffling personnel to help mitigate the crisis at minimal cost. In doing so, this cost-saving measure sacrifices employee cooperation and department stability, and increases employee turnover.

The account of these various impersonal relations provides us with a profile of work cultures based on social detachment. These transactions of employee obedience/subservience, passive or active resistance to managerial control, and the pursuit of self-advantage, are simply ways to get the task done well quickly and efficiently without the burden of emotional investment in a temporary job. Moving beyond the perspective of guanxi relations allow us to understand the strategies enacted by business owners/managers and employees to adapt, profit, and cope with global market integration and local pressures in graduate employment.
In sum, guanxi has become analytically imprecise, misused, and misunderstood as a descriptive and analytical concept by scholars of Chinese enterprises. Furthermore, the focus on guanxi neglects an ongoing common phenomenon in China today—the pervasive, yet largely ignored, role of impersonal ties in the numerous, less desirable or transitory workplaces faced by university-educated workers. Once we resist the lens provided by master symbols such as guanxi or the Hofstede model for China, then we are able to perceive non-affective ties and to acknowledge their important role in the facilitation of efficient work, personal career autonomy, and the accrual of benefits. This thesis serves to not only address this gap in the literature on Chinese work relations but also to shed light on Chinese corporate cultures that operate under categories of impersonal relations.

3. Encountering Impersonal Relations in Chinese Firms

My focus on impersonal relations stems from an interest in corporate rituals as a way to elicit the key components of mundane, everyday work life (see Ybema et. al. 2009: 3-4, Ybema and Kamsteeg 2009).

The only important criterion for my fieldsite that I had set out at the beginning of the research was that the company would be a wholly-owned Chinese entity. I was mostly concerned with issues of access, and deliberately set few criteria that could impede it. I was interested in a broad idea of practical work. My only consideration for the location was financial. Chinese coastal cities outside Beijing were relatively affordable and similar to each other in that most of these cities represented state-led economic and fiscal
development as spaces of transition into the market economy. As a result, the rapid urban development of these coastal centres attracted foreign capital, expatriate residency, an influx of young graduates, and big brand companies that act as anchor enterprise of the city, as well as the presence of smaller entrepreneurs. These features provide a kind of symbiotic relationship between well-known, highly capitalized firms, and smaller enterprises that rely on their co-location, prestige, and the availability of highly skilled educated graduates. These will be discussed further in the next chapter.

I initially chose Xiamen, Fujian province, because of easy access to flights and because it is a city with a long history of ties with southeast Asian ethnic Chinese communities. I had set out to study a large private Chinese-owned enterprise like Lenovo, which I expected would have a Chinese/international corporate culture. However, my attempts to gain an internship in its manufacturing site in Xiamen fell through in 2008.

Another internship opportunity with the China International Fair for Investment and Trade (CIFIT) in Xiamen finally led me to investigate impersonal relations. While I eventually failed to secure a position in their office, the application and recruitment process debunked my beliefs on what it means to have a “connection.” A friend at the local expat newspaper referred me to Ms. Ellen, who was the head of the coordination for CIFIT. She told me to submit my application and ask another friend to do so. I asked Ken, my compatriot, to apply at the same time. After two weeks of waiting for the status on our applications, Ms. Ellen called, not to talk about our application, but to seek our help on a Saturday. We did not know exactly what they needed from us until we arrived at the Xiamen No. 6 Middle School to help with the English examination of at least 300 recruits for the same position that we were also applying for! This unusual recruitment
process culminated in a lunch banquet in which we both sat beside Ms. Ellen. There were a lot of cheers and appreciation during the banquet as part of an elaborate and polite performance of handing our monetary compensation at the end of the meal for services rendered. This ritual-like performance was also the soft blow to a job rejection that came a day after. Despite this, I left Xiamen with a puzzle and a clue: “connection” and its elaborate ritual package was not all that it seemed.

With dwindling time, I quickly approached InternChina to place me in two Chinese-owned companies for a fee of 170 EUR for each three-month placement introduction. InternChina was a firm that specialized in foreign internship placements in Chinese wholly-owned companies in Qingdao in Shandong Province, another coastal economic zone in the northeast. One of the central problems of research in the corporate setting was the issue of time. Internship is akin to a rapid ‘parachute’ style of ethnography commonly used to address design or organisational problems. Isaacs (2012: 92) notes that anthropological research has shifted from the annual long agricultural cycle to the compressed and shortened institutional time of hours, or days to several weeks or months. From a theoretical standpoint, Cefkin (2012: 109) argues that in the corporate context, time is conceived differently. Therefore, she contends that there should be a separation in the judgement of value regarding the length of research time and the quality of data collected. My two months at QLA appeared to be short and unproductive, yet their importance lay in the use of dramaturgical strategies at the workplace. The seven months at SEA-EAD was comparatively long but its importance was directly tied to the four to five months needed for resolution of the company fraud. Despite these relatively short bursts in research, the data collected remain valuable in understanding the life cycle of work in transitory workplaces.
InternChina initially assigned me to an accounting office and a marketing company, but this fell through. They quickly found QLA and SEA-EAD, who were willing to immediately hire me successively in the periods of March-June and June-August 2009 respectively. The fact that their business was similar (as labour and education consulting companies) was serendipitous. Since SEA-EAD did not contest my extension, unlike at QLA, I was able to indefinitely extend my position at SEA-EAD until January 2010. The oppressive conditions at SEA-EAD made a longer stay untenable.

The global economic downturn that began in 2008 still affected Japan, home of QLA’s main clientele. Hence, QLA had few client-related activities and I focused my observations on office-based routine practices like the cleaning and lunch practices. Unlike in the manufacturing sector, the higher education sector continued to be buoyed by Chinese demand for overseas education. Chapters Three to Six of this thesis therefore analyse SEA-EAD activities with their clients. I use one case of fraud as a fulcrum to all the chapters related to SEA-EAD to expose the everyday mundane activities and impersonal relations underlying the department.

My own role as intern-agent became essential to understanding the highly autonomous work of consulting, since SEA-EAD employees were socially detached and avoided discussion of their work. I cast myself largely as an active participant viewing the events unfold around me in order to ask situational questions with my colleagues. This approach was suitable to target my initial question of understanding how consulting and general work was enacted in such companies. However, since I was confined to a specific job and department, I faced similar restrictions to those seen in the situational learning
contexts identified by Downey et. al. (2014) for the apprenticeship method and the anthropologist/consultant in the workplace (Van Marrewijk 2014). As with their experiences, I could not compare workplaces or different job positions in the company; I was excluded from participating or observing executive level decision making; I encountered obstacles in regular note taking and actual recording or photographing; and I was restricted from learning other skill sets from co-workers or other members at the executive level. Similar problems were faced by Liu (2002) in her research among high-technology business owners in Beihai, a southern Chinese coastal city. She found that it was impossible to achieve direct ethnographic observation of actual business practices or of decisions being made by Chinese businessmen. To compensate, Liu (2002: xi) engaged in “ethnographic understanding,” focusing on what her subjects said about what they did, more so than what they actually did.

The empirical chapters in this thesis reflect my deepening understanding of how to be an agent. My analysis followed the realist auto-ethnography style of data presentation as defined by Anderson (2006: 375), in which the researcher is “a full member of the setting”, whose “persona is evident in the text with a research agenda” and who is “committed to improving theoretical understanding of the social phenomena.” This approach was useful to elicit knowledge practices that were otherwise hidden in the job of an agent in the Chinese migration industry. I decided to use a type of analytic auto-ethnography that focuses on learning the role of an agent. The value of this approach is made particularly evident in Chapter Four where I described how a cooperative agent network in the migration industry used unethical practices to make a profit. In Chapter Six, I narrated my experiences of customer emotional outbursts in order to understand the nature of impersonal relations in conflict resolution. My internship produced a kind
of “informational yield” that was similar to participant observation (see Tope et. al. 2005). In their review of workplace studies, Tope et. al. (2005: 479) highlight how participant observation is ideal to investigate work processes, worker behaviour, group dynamics, and manager-employee relations. I, therefore, have produced both external and internal perspectives of the highly transient, secretive, and hostile workplaces within the migration industry.

In becoming a researcher-agent, one critical challenge was balancing the need to become a more proficient member of the group, while continuing to maintain an observational distance, be an employee, and produce field notes simultaneously (see Anderson 2006: 380). My foreign identity combined with my overseas Chinese ethnicity affected my proficiency in the workplace. I looked and was expected to be “Chinese,” including being a part of a guanxi network. However, this was not what happened as the thesis show.

Another challenge that I faced concerned ethics and research in the grey area of migration brokerage. Some activities were not necessarily illegal, but were highly prejudicial to customers. My experience was not necessarily akin to Nordstrom’s (2000) description of quasi-legal, extra-legal, and outright illegal activities. However, migration consulting as a business model is similar to her ‘shadow’ networks because the potential for fraud is linked to the participation of non-formal institutions and state-bureaucratic institutions. In this case, international schools and institutions play an indirect role in these unethical activities. As I learned more about education consulting and hostilities at the firm level, I decided to use my own position as an agent to select options that were least harmful to customers but not necessarily profitable for the company. I avoided placing EAD employees at even greater risk in their job security or creating further
suspicion among the Headmaster and management, given that they might be involved in potentially grey schemes within the company. My independence as a researcher was greatly diminished as I worked as a “agent,” albeit an unpaid one. Furthermore, two specific fieldwork stress points were the time pressure to solve fraud problems for multiple clients and my refusal to participate in an instance of deceiving a client that was requested of me as part of my job.

Given the focused perspective of my study, I supplemented my understanding of these impersonal relations with publicly observable actions. I was invited to participate in another company’s anniversary and out-of-town employee tour. This company, DARE Adhesive Supply, had refused my request to become an intern at their workplace. However, they invited me to attend their special events, a liminal situation in which DARE personnel were relaxed. I was allowed to visit the office once and saw how the everyday situation at their office was tense, marked by the operations boss cursing and shouting at the employees. Like SEA-EAD and QLA, their everyday situation was a stark contrast to their relaxed company parties. While DARE operated in a different industry, they were also a family-owned and managed entity like SEA-EAD and QLA. These accounts were excluded from this work, but nonetheless informed my analysis of the importance of everyday impersonal ties in balancing observable ritual practices. After fieldwork, my short stint with my consulting company in the Philippines led me to be in touch with a Qingdao-based international lawyer, Steve Dickinson, whose views on guanxi and its business consequences are based on his experience from advising and litigating numerous and costly errors made by foreigners in China, all detailed in their leading law blog www.chinalawblog.com. My experiences informed the rest of the empirical chapters as an employee, researcher, and entrepreneur.
4. Chapters and Themes

The second chapter sets the research context of transient employment firms SEA-EAD and QLA. I first briefly outline the historical transformation of work in China from a stable and permanent arrangement during the socialist era into one that is largely uncertain and unpredictable after transitioning into a market economy. As a consequence of this transition, flexibility has produced various forms of firm structure in China: those that adhere to scientific management, multinational firms that subscribe to global values, manufacturing firms that rely on “agency workers” or the “just in time” principle, among others. However, one type of flexible firm structure, represented by migration firms like SEA-EAD and QLA, are examples of SMEs that are transient workplaces that graduates pass through on their way to better job prospects. These service providers are characterized by work practices that must adapt to the highly uncertain globalized markets like foreign education and the lackluster employment prospects of China’s college graduates.

The third chapter discusses the flexible conditions of the global market for higher education and labour export. This industry requires a porous firm structure that consists of highly impersonal relations among various players at the global and local level. While QLA is a labour exporting agency and SEA-EAD is a study abroad agency, the difference between them is largely superficial. Both firms offer intermediary services and broker overseas placement services for Chinese students and labourers. I, therefore, discuss them as equivalent firms that only differ in their position in the local Chinese migration industry. I dissect the deregulated international higher education industry to
show how the two Chinese SMEs in the study profit, based on their position in the local Chinese migration market. SEA-EAD forms the core of the data chapters because there was more work in student recruitment than labour recruitment in 2009.

The fourth chapter establishes how a flexible firm built around impersonal ties operates. I present the case of SEA-EAD, an education placement/migration department of the language school, with a structure characterized by blurred “inside” and “outside” firm boundaries. I highlight a case of fraud to expose a firm structure that is porous due to the cultivation of temporary relations that are free of affect in order to perform the work of education consultation. I discuss insights from my job as an education agent to present one form of impersonal relations, the cooperative ties that expand and contract to a limitless network of agents. Based on my study, agent network expansion serves to access temporary mentors in the absence of professional training, to gain access to concealed education and visa information, and to extract specialized resources and credentials of other agents. I demonstrate how foreign commissions and transactional efficiency become decision points and stop the expansion of relations. This porous structure is made possible by cooperative ties that enable faster and more efficient transactions without long term social or financial obligations or the necessity to perform the exhausting “face” work typical of strong personal ties. However, these loose arrangements subject placement firms like SEA-EAD and their clients to chronic risks of fraudulent activities with little accountability or criminal liability.

In Chapter Five, I examine how the impersonal relations are revealed between the Headmaster and the staff at SEA-EAD through the managerial practice of “flexible operation.” Following the SEA-EAD employee fraud, the Headmaster troubleshoots its
repercussions by shuffling employees from outside the department to increase personnel without necessarily hiring new employees. Without the consent and prior knowledge of the employees, this act provokes resentment, disengagement, or resignation. However, in two instances, employees maneuver to take advantage of the situation and disclose their personal ambitions. These impromptu strategies and hidden motivations characterize the impersonal relations between the Headmaster and the staff at SEA-EAD. While the managerial prerogative of “flexible operation” is to cut cost, it nonetheless contributes to an unstable work environment and low morale among the staff.

Unlike the preceding chapters, the subsequent chapters showcase a more ritual form of social detachment. Rather than impromptu decisions, actors use social norms that may be misread as ways to establish personal relations rather than impersonal relations. In Chapter Six, I detail the various types of conflict resolution strategies made by customers of SEA-EAD who were affected by the fraud. The cycle of conflict resolution starts with an empty rhetorical exercise of *zuò pengyou*, “building friendship” or bargaining using emotional appeals that may appear to convey a desire to create a personal relation. However, as the four cases in this chapter progress, conflict resolutions conclude with the return to impersonal yet efficient and trustworthy commercial transactions. These ideal impersonal commercial relations are notable for the lowering of unequal power relations, long-term obligations, and the reduction of emotion work for an education agent.

In Chapter Seven, I present another instance of ritual-like practices that establish the dynamic of social detachment among work colleagues at QIA. Here we see the dynamic of employee unity prior to the start of office hours and competitive employee status.
distinction outside of the office environment. This difference is a boundary-making practice between work and the personal life of the employees. Both forms establish social detachment practices that allow work to proceed at QLA and to disengage from the firm after work.

In the final chapter, I return again to the symbolism of food and dispel the notion that sharing meals, even in an intimate lunch environment, only creates strong personal relations between managers and employees. QLA employees borrow the social norms surrounding food practices to reverse managerial control, reject accruing social obligations, and retain individual autonomy. QLA lunch time practices delineate the personal and professional lives boundary of employees without necessarily agitating work relations. QLA intimate mealtimes serve to expose the impersonal ties prevalent among work colleagues and between managers and employees.

In conclusion, this research challenges the use of guanxi as an analytical category to study transient employment firms in China. Instead, I focus on social detachment to demonstrate a spectrum of relation-building neglected in Chinese firm analysis. While impersonal relations are not inherently new phenomena, they are usually not addressed within the context of firm analysis. The study of impersonal relations within transient employment firms, and in particular in intermediary companies like SEA-EAD and QLA, poses a challenge to how we understand flexible firm structures, work relations, and work in China. These two companies exemplify the structure of flexible firms and employment uncertainty in the labour market for graduates who use these as way stations for their careers. Moreover, they also typify the vulnerability of family-owned and operated firms facing changing national policies and globalising industries. The result that
we see in these two firms is highly adaptable structures that enable them to survive and profit from this uncertain and vulnerable period. These adaptable structures include the porous boundaries of firm structure that substantially reduce operating costs but increase and cement risks of fraud. Another is wide-ranging impersonal relations that suit the porous boundaries of flexible firms. These come into two forms. One form is highly adaptable to changing circumstances, contingent on problems, and involves the strategic withholding and releasing of information. Another appears in a ritual form that uses socially acceptable social norms to reproduce social distance and detachment. All these practices constitute work in transient employment firms like SEA-EAD and QLA. By participating in practical work in these firms, I hope to contribute a different analytical framework to the study of one type of mainland Chinese SMEs.
Chapter 2: The Acceleration of Transient Employment in China

This chapter tracks the rise of transient employment and the firms that accompany such changes in China. This historical process is intimately tied to the transition of China from a socialist into a hybrid market-socialist economic model in the 1980s – 1990s. Consequently, work relations have also shifted from a relatively stable and predictable arrangement into highly uncertain and contingent forms. The maturity of the Chinese economy after this period has brought further labour and firm instability as China began to share similar problems faced by other developed countries, such as the glut of college graduates, the increase of labour costs, and the volatility of businesses reliant on a robust global economy.

These conditions set up the context of SEA and QLA as transient employment destinations. I begin with a brief discussion of state firms and work relations in the urban area during the socialist era, when most of the urban population belonged to a state work unit (danwei) and had relatively stable living-working arrangements.

In the second section, I introduce the transition into a post-socialist period in China in which the danwei model is dismantled and radically transformed into firms with a financial objective, short-term contract labour force, and mixed international management practices with the influx of foreign investment. As China matures into its economic development, we see conditions of manager and employee flexibility coupled with social anxiety that contribute to accelerating transient employment in most private enterprises.
In the third section, I introduce Qingdao, Shandong province as an example of this state project of economic development. While attention has been given to the development of this city as a favourable economic zone for foreign direct investment and large enterprises, SMEs like SEA-EAD and QLA inadvertently benefit by being in the same location and having similar access to graduates that flock to the city. All these conditions help us to understand the firm dynamics at SEA-EAD and QLA.

Finally, in the last section, I structure the discussion of the company profiles around the two different work generations present at QLA and SEA. The business owners are part of the cohort who benefitted from the early high-growth period of China in the 1990’s until the early 2000’s and are rewarded for their foreign knowledge and experience. In contrast, employees are recent college graduates who face challenges in employment, wages, and career mobility. The result, I argue, is two different perspectives and motivations in the workplace that contribute to the dominance of impersonal relations at work in SEA and QLA management and operations.

1. The Socialist Work Unit (Danwei)

During the socialist era, the social contract of the nation-state with its urban citizens was embodied by practices within the structure of the work-unit (danwei). The danwei was not just a work unit but also a socio-economic and spatial organization used by the communist state to consolidate the work/life of the urban population to create social unity, instill political control, and fuel industrial growth within one or several walled compounds with overlapping functions in their neighborhoods (see Bjorklund 1986, Lu
This socialist space sought to re-interpret feudal relations rooted in the family and the spatial structure during the imperial period and re-incorporate it into a hybrid form of socialist proletarian collectivity (Bray 2006: 13-14, Dittmer and Lu 1996). Bray (2005:94) reported that by 1957, after the ascent of the Communist Party in 1949, over 90 percent of the urban population belonged and identified with a specific danwei. He defined this form of organization as a Foucauldian model of Chinese communist governmentality and urban planning that aimed to control Chinese everyday life at the micro level.

One of the ways control was achieved was through the granting of material goods and benefits (baoxialai) to the members of the work unit (Bray 2005: 97). The reliance of the members to lifetime housing, food, education, marriage, job, and travel permit from their danwei was described by M. Yang (1989) as a kind of gift economy between citizen and the nation state. However, M. Yang (1994) also described a counter gift economy practiced among citizens to circumvent this same government control and material scarcity she called guanxi. It remained to be seen whether affect was involved in this context. In the rural areas, Yan (1996) described a system of gift exchanges with and without affect between friends and among ritual relations. This distinction was less apparent in the urban environment. In contrast, Walder (1986) argued that this system of gift exchange was an institutional-based patronage system of “organized dependence.” It arose as a neo-traditional industrial work relations due to “a formally organized particularism in the distribution of goods, income, and career opportunities, a network of patron-client relations maintained by the party, and a rich subculture of instrumental – personal ties independent of the party’s control” within the factory system (ibid.: 7, see also Oi 1989 for rural areas). He attributed this behaviour as part of the challenge of the
factory manager to manage stockpile-based planning during this period. Whether as gift or patronage, this period was characterized by a continued sense of stable exchange pattern found socially and within firms in which manager allocated benefits and employees granted cooperation and compliance.

In contrast, the predictability and stability of exchange within the danwei were unavailable to non-danwei member citizens. The self-employed workers, petty entrepreneurs or those who fell outside of the danwei environment had diminished political, economic, and social status (see Hershkovitz 1985). Hershkovitz (1985) found that this was largely due to the diminished access to circuits of social mobility and goods and services such as job security, pension, housing, and hospital benefits which were exclusive privileges of urban workers linked to a danwei. Hence, during this period private enterprises were low status and disparaged. There was already a form of hierarchy and discrimination between state enterprises and private firms, as well as differing benefits between urban and rural citizens. This inequality increased during the transition.

2. Firm Flexibility: Transition into a Socialist-Market Economy

With the advent of the opening up of China to capitalist practices in 1978, the once stable and predictable social contract between the state and its citizens would be redrawn towards ‘flexibility’. China would enter the global trend of ‘flexible capitalism’ which Kjaerulff (2015: 6) summarized as a period in the 1970s in which the liberal market ideology of the Euro-American economies coincided with fiscal flexibility (see also Harvey 1990: 141-172). China’s transition into market-socialism linked it to the other worldwide transformations. The opening of China as a new target for the global
expansion of investment globally and the linking of China coincided with the emergence of new production processes such as the just-in-time and tailor-made systems that coincided with technological and computing advances; and new forms of organization of labour, mainly ‘subcontracting’ and other forms of recruitment (Kjaerulff 2015: 6). This period of changes had been described by scholars as the risk society (Beck 1992), the network society (Castells 1996), and the postmodern condition in which work ceased to be stable, permanent, and lifetime (Harvey 1990). Concurrently, in China this transition was marked by the severing of the social contract and exchange relationship between state and its citizens. This was done through the state’s withdrawal from management of its state-owned enterprises and devolved decision-making at the firm level. Ding and Warner’s study (2001) exemplified this break with the dismantling of the three irons: the removal of permanent and lifetime employment (the iron rice bowl), a unified flat wage structure (the iron wage), and the political cadre management system (the iron chair). The state-owned enterprises (SOEs) became just as uncertain as other business enterprises. Both were engaged in financial objectives that supplanted the primary directive of social order in the danwei (Oi 1995).

The new form of social contract and work relations were laid out in the labour contracting system which White (1987: 365) described as shifting state allocation of jobs to the market, diversifying market labour exchanges, firm autonomy in hiring, disciplining, and firing workers, assigning performance-based wages, and contract-based relationship among state workers. Meanwhile, Ding and Warner (2001) documented uneven results of these changes, the most dramatic was the loss of jobs and bankruptcy of state-owned enterprises industry in areas like the northeast which were the industrial manufacturing centres (e.g., C.K. Lee 2007). These changes radically reorganized labour-
management relations and work in state organizations that included the institutionalization of temporary job contracts, performance-based wages and incentives, and adoption of mixed Western-based human resource management (ibid., Ding et. al. 2001).

The market-based labour contract implemented in firms and the phenomenon of employee self-development played out in China’s economic zones. Ding and Warner (2001) reported that the practices were first used in Foreign Invested Enterprises in the Shenzhen Economic Zone to hire labourers during the periods of 1981 – 1994. Starting from 1982, they noted that SOEs had followed suit with a two-tier system being implemented within their firms. In this set-up, they studied how new hires were governed by the short-term labour contract while the permanent workers still enjoyed full state benefits. However, after the adoption of the new labour law January 1995, this sweeping labour contract law placed all employees under this market-oriented system (Ding and Warner 2001: 321). This resulted in the layoff of 30 million SOE workers fomenting labour movement (cf. Lee 2007) and the increase of job informalisation (Kuruvilla et. al. 2011: 5).

The loss of stability within the danwei was accompanied by wider and heightened uneven geographic development that polarized wealth and progress between the urban-rural areas and coastal-inland areas. This can be seen in the historical pattern of macro-economic policies of experimentation beginning with the designation of four special economic zones found along the coast: Zhuhai, Shantou, and Shenzhen in Guangdong Province and Xiamen in Fujian Province (see Yeung et. al. 2009). By 1981, these areas had accounted for sixty percent of China’s foreign direct investment, mostly originating
from Hongkong and Macao (ibid.: 224). Following the success of these areas by 1984, the central government expanded the model to fourteen “coastal open cities”\(^8\) from the north to south, including Qingdao, for further development (see Figure 1).

*Figure 1: China: Fourteen Coastal Cities Designated for Development (China’s Special Economic Zones Map 1997, UT Library)*

These spaces of designated development became initial sites to play out the new social contract of flexible relations between the state, the firm, and its citizens. For non-danwei members, including the largely peasant/rural population, these changes brought forth a paradox (see Blecher 1983). The fixed locational identities between urban and rural populations had loosened and internal migration into these urban special economic zones became more pronounced and allowed economic mobility (e.g., ibid., Solinger 1995). At the same time, this “freed labour,” once the exulted working class, now

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\(^8\) These include, from north to south: Dalian, Qinhuangdao, Tianjin, Yantai, Lianyungang, Nantong, Shanghai, Ningbo, Wenzhou, Fuzhou, Guangzhou, Zhanjian, and Beihai.
became “labour reserve” with little benefits and tenure (Solinger 1995). Their position accelerated towards precarity with a high number of labour disputes with the institutionalization of short-term labour contracts under the 1995 National Labour Law and its 2008 version (Kuruvilla et. al. 2011, Gallagher and Dong 2011).

However, the forms of flexible practices and the types of firms varied in the Chinese context. Here, I do not consider works on factory environments that use Taylor’s scientific management and Japanese lean management, such as Z. Lu (2015, 2008) who found a two-tiered labour system in joint venture factories using regimes of “lean-and-dual,” or the contrast in benefits and pay between formal workers and temp agency workers, or “lean-and-mean” or the high wage and high turnover policy for all workers. Instead, I focus on the office/service environment associated with college graduates. The examples of firms demonstrate a hierarchy of employment preferences based on ‘modern’ or ‘international’ management philosophy led by multinationals, transnational, and homegrown large Chinese firms in contrast with the small family firms that offered little training, low technology services, and goods. Thus, these small firms, while providing employment, became less desirable than their counterparts.

One of the main drivers of market flexible practices were the Chinese educated returnees, or the (hai gui) or sea turtles labelled by popular media, who were lured with attractive incentives by the Chinese government to return (see Hao and Welch 2012). They jumpstarted new industries particularly the high technology industry, and led research and development in academia, multinational, and transnational corporations. In their study, Wang et. al. (2006: 297) reported that 198,000 have returned from about the 815,000 individuals, or 24 percent, who studied abroad between the periods of 1985 –
2004 with the numbers spiking in 2001. During that period, they provided expertise, introduced different management philosophies within these firms, and maintained their high status.

In China’s Silicon Valley, Zhongguancun, IT companies such as Baidu, China’s leading search engine, is one such example. Robin Li, a foreign-educated Chinese returned to Beijing after his graduate studies in the U.S. His talent and experience created one of the first internet companies listed on the NASDAQ in 2001 and according to its 2016 second quarter report, the company netted 2.7 billion USD (Baidu 2016). The company was built around a corporate culture of what their former director of international communications Kaiser Kuo, called as “simple and reliable” (jian dan ke yi lai) a model in the style of its American counterpart (Quora 2016). He described a flat structure, with little formal or honorific names or titles, straight talking, a form of “democratic centralism” in which problems were discussed until a decision was made (ibid.).

The impact of returnees to academia and other leading research positions contributed to the internationalization of firms and locally-educated managers. For instance, with Huawei, Xu (2012) identified it as exemplary of this Chinese-Western fusion. Huawei, an ICT company was established by a former Chinese engineering corps civil engineer Ren Zhengfei in 1987 (Huawei 2016). According to Xu (2012: 92-93), in 1995 Ren asked management experts from the Renmin University of China to compile the Huawei Basic Law, a “systematic and scientific management methodology for Chinese enterprises” to embody the lessons learned in ten years of “optimum thinking and methodology.” By 1998, these learnings were supplanted by the integrated product development (IPD) of
IBM as product implementation principles at the local level. This is one such example of the shift towards international management thinking in large Chinese-owned businesses.

Another example is the transformation of a state-owned enterprise such as Qingdao’s Haier Group using a combination of traditional management philosophy, modern management, and foreign technology. Today, Haier is one of a handful of Chinese consumer-goods companies with a global reach and brand recognition. In his study on Haier’s CEO, Zhang Ruimin, J. Chen (2016) explains that the CEO formulated his “Haier is the Sea” concept of corporate culture based on Daoist philosophy but also inspired by modern management techniques that included programmes such as Overall Control and Clear (OCC) techniques to streamline employee daily work load and innovate from task targets. Another program called HOPE (Haier Open Partnership Ecosystem) empowered employees to become innovators and entrepreneurs, or self-managers, within the company itself. Both these programmes ensured that the appliance manufacturer became one of the world’s top five appliance brands.

Multinational and joint venture firms run by a combination of expatriates and foreign-education Chinese also implemented hybrid workplaces. C.S.C. Chan (2007) identified two types of work culture in four insurance firms in Shanghai—local insurance firm Ping An, joint venture firms Pacific-Aetna and Allianz-Dazhong, and foreign firm AIG. She found that Ping An and Pacific Aetna used group-centred activities such as ceremonies, retreats, group excursions to motivate their sales force. In contrast, she identified the American and German-based training templates of AIG and Allianz-Dazhong focused on rational, self-reflective, storytelling discourses for their insurance agents.
In contrast, most Chinese SMEs do not offer long-term investment into such management philosophies. By their very nature, Chen (2006: 145) remarked that Chinese SMEs required “small investment, fast yield, flexible operation, and quick adaptability to market changes.” Furthermore, he also pointed out that they had a short period of development while requiring extensive growth. He argued that this led to SMEs’ absence of management philosophy, style, industrial structure or product that can innovate or compete in the market (ibid.: 146). Chinese SMEs, in contrast to larger more international firms, were exposed to the harsh uncertain and unpredictable flexible work arrangements without the embellishment of extensive management philosophy.

Aside from this, Chinese SMEs also suffered from the ambivalent support from the government (Chen 2006, Tsai 2016). Ideologically, Tsai (2016: 2-3) reported that it was only in 2001 when President Jiang Zemin revised the CCP constitution to allow capitalists to become members in the party. Furthermore, it would be as late as 2002 when the party state legislated the SMEs promotion law, and only in 2004 when it granted the legal status of the non-public economy within the socialist market economy (see Chen 2006). This imbalance was reflected in one of the main problems facing SMEs today - the lack of access to bank financing, which meant that business owners must turn to other non-formal means of funding for growth or expansion (see Tsai 2016).

This slow shift towards the legitimacy and recognition of SMEs in the early 2000s reflected its growing importance in the Chinese economy. The private sector, in particular the services sector, has now almost overtaken manufacturing as the leading contributor to China’s GDP at 44.5% (Economist 2013). Concurrently, this tertiary
sector has exceeded manufacturing as the primary sector of employment by 2.1 percent (China Statistical Yearbook 2013).

*Table 1: Statistics of Total Employed Individuals by Sector 2009 - 2012*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Primary Industry (million)</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
<th>Secondary Industry (million)</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
<th>Tertiary Industry (million)</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>25.773</td>
<td>33.6</td>
<td>23.241</td>
<td>30.3</td>
<td>27.690</td>
<td>36.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>26.594</td>
<td>34.8</td>
<td>22.544</td>
<td>29.5</td>
<td>27.282</td>
<td>35.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>27.931</td>
<td>36.7</td>
<td>21.842</td>
<td>28.7</td>
<td>26.332</td>
<td>34.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>28.890</td>
<td>38.1</td>
<td>21.080</td>
<td>27.8</td>
<td>25.857</td>
<td>34.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It was difficult to ascertain the specific figure breakdown of SME ownership, size and type (a problem equally shared by Tsai 2016: 3). In her computation, Tsai (2016:3) estimated that 7.5 million can be called private out of a total of 8.2 million corporate figures. She roughly calculated that 2 percent were large private or state-controlled which left 98 percent as SMEs. From this amount, she approximated that SMEs number around 6.9 million, representing 94.1 percent. Another data on SMEs by Zhu (2014) broke them down further to distinguish micro-enterprises, firms similar to my research sites. Using the statistics from the State Administration for Industry and Commerce (SAIC), Zhu reported 11.7 million small and micro-sized enterprises or 76.57 percent of total businesses in China. If private ownership was taken into consideration in the figures, his numbers increased to 94.15 percent (ibid.). Both sources came up with a range of seven to twelve million SMEs and micro-enterprises in operation.

I highlight the difference between the large private enterprises and SMEs to illustrate the aspirations (in job preference) and actual employment of Chinese college graduates. Li and Matlay (2005) found that university graduates still preferred to work in larger
organizations and these preferences largely hold today (see Fong 2011, Hoffmann 2010). This phenomenon was supported by other studies tracking the job destinations of graduates from ordinary colleges such as Jiujiang Financial and Educational College in Jianxi (Fladrich 2006) and Zhejiang University of Technology in Zhejiang (Chen and Fu, n.d.). In both studies, the findings indicated that students preferred to live and work in big cities, what Chen and Fu called the “love knot of the big city,” and a love knot for large enterprises and multinationals (Chen and Fu n.d.: 764, 766). I cited these small city figures alongside with those from the transnational students of Fong (2011) to show a convergence of aspirations. These convergence can be described as part of the imaginary of what middle class life and “paradise” represented, that was, jobs that can provide large homes, cars, and high salaries several times above the average (Li 2008: 7-8, Fong 2011: 10 – 11). SMEs gained some prestige by being located in big cities and in the periphery of the large enterprises. This symbiosis between the two types of firms ensured a constant supply of potential employees in the city. The influx of poor graduates in high economic growth cities can be seen in cramped, congested neighborhoods populated by “ant tribe” college graduates and job seekers (Kan 2013, X. Zhang 2013, X. Zhao 2009) or “rat tribe” living in illegal basements (NPR 2014, VICE 2014) in Beijing and Shanghai.

The dissonance between job expectation and reality was apparent with the grim prospects facing current college graduates. A great proportion of graduates are employed by these SMEs rather than their preferred big prestigious companies. In Zhu’s (2014) report, he showed that these Chinese SMEs and micro-enterprises created 70 percent of new jobs. However, the economic and employment significance of private SMEs did not necessarily correspond to their desirability as a workplace by university graduates. In the

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9 This desire was common even among working class children living in the inland provinces (see Jankowiak 1993) and also those during the socialist era (see Bruun 1993).
same report of Zhu (2014), two thirds of the 11.7 million private SMEs enterprises were found to be in the low-value technology sector. This further reduced their prestige and desirability for college graduates in the labour market. The result was a gap between job aspiration and employment reality for college graduates. Nevertheless, the employment competition intensified even for these low preference SMEs. University graduates were under a lot of pressure to consider employment in these SMEs due to a highly competitive labour market, despite the low wages they paid (Jacobs 2010).

The outcome was that Chinese SMEs remained unstable and manager-employee relations impersonal and tenuous. Impersonal, non-affective ties allowed graduates to work in these SMEs by providing them professional work experiences while maintaining poised to shift careers. These firms must contend with employee turnover with the confidence that a steady supply of low-paid Chinese university graduates remains readily available, especially if they were located in cities.

If we look at the ethnographic evidence, the researchers demonstrated the shift in social relations in a time of uncertainty and flexibility in Chinese workplaces. These studies exposed the contradictions due to flexible practices and relations underneath the veneer of various management philosophies of large and private firms. Yet, employee reactions to these shifts were often misinterpreted as culturally-conditioned by expatriate managers. For instance, in his research on the technology knowledge sector in Shanghai and the Delta River, Ross (2006) described how foreign managers characterize their Chinese employees as having detrimental “Confucian obedience” (risk averseness) and “ethical blindness” (minor cheating) simultaneously (ibid.: 205). Ross observed how these “false pretense of cultural stereotypes” stem from management desire of an idealized worker
with high productivity but came cheap (ibid.: 203). He contended that these contradictory perceptions contributed to a lack of corporate loyalty, insecurity, and work relationship dissatisfaction even in highly sought-after foreign multinational technology companies. However, as a provider of cheap labour in the global chain, he argued that Chinese technology firms required an increase in productivity without necessarily increasing wages or personnel. The effects of this productivity, he claimed, pushed employees to switch jobs when offers of a higher salary beckoned.

In joint venture and multinational retail environments like Walmart, Chan (2011) and her team of scholars demonstrated how the fusion of the global retail logistics protocol with stringent ‘American’ corporate disciplining, had diminished firm and co-worker support for both managers and employees at Walmart. In their study, they showed how “Walmartization” in China engendered diminishing degrees of corporate discipline and increasing alienation between manager and employees as one went down in the organisational structure. Overall, across all positions, the role of anonymous reporting on worker’s performance (manager-employee; employee-customer) contributed to weak co-worker ties (see Davis 2011). At the managerial level, Davis reported that managers were subject to a promotion regime that demanded dislocation and isolation from social and familial ties to enlist greater corporate loyalty. Junior supervisors also suffered from a lack of institutional support in the course of their duties, such as inadequate provision of a food allowance during supply trips (Myers and Chan (2011). The entwinement of the global retail protocol with local implementation resulted in a firm structure that exhibited little employee support or firm loyalty.
In another multinational management consultancy firm in China, Systeo, Chong (2012) described a form of labour management or corporate ‘culture’ that manifested as an ethic, a duty to subordinate employees to shareholder value culture (ibid. 2012: 96-97). She portrayed the management of labour potential as the essence of financialisation, a type of firm flexibility around shareholder value that stemmed from the global re-ordering of new forms of knowledge and value to generate profit and capital (Ho 2009). Chong explained that this subordination relied on the separation between cost generators such as the shared service knowledge workers and revenue generating consultants like an accounting balance sheet. Employees, especially ‘cost’ shared service knowledge workers, were seen as destroyers and not as creators of value. Promotion and hiring therefore relied on embodying ‘value’ and becoming a financial asset (2012: 230 - 231). This illustrated how a firm engaged in financialisation itself had to transform its structure into a financial asset and this required the transformation of manager-employee relations into a balance sheet. She explained that this system of accounting segregation and the failure of the company to convert and completely instil these Systeo financial values had resulted in the lack of company loyalty, integration, and the high turnover of employees.

I highlight these examples of aspirational workplaces – large, private, with international management practices – to demonstrate that these enterprises share a common feature with SMEs. Given that there is little information on practices of firm flexibility in SMEs, the ethnographic evidence suggests that larger aspirational enterprises also exhibit firm flexibility and transient employment, including those with Western-style human resource practices. Moreover, the global value chain has exerted various degrees of work devaluation in Chinese workplaces across various industries. These flexible practices manifest themselves differently across different types of companies. In my particular
setting in the migration industry, flexible practices are the foundation of SMEs in order to profit efficiently at the lowest cost and investment possible. Unlike larger firms that can invest in Western-based human resources and management practices that potential employees aspire to work for, SMEs that are transient employment firms offer little job status and distinction to their employees.

In sum, the new social contract of flexible and contractual relations in China’s socialist-market transition was state-led. Special economic zones, coastal cities, and various technological parks became transition sites to align to the financial objective of the market. Within these spaces, two factors accelerated firm flexibility: the institutionalization of the short-term contract and the alignment of work cultures to international standards by Chinese returnees and local business leaders who imported various international principles. The result was a conglomeration of firms that exhibited various forms of flexibility. The most prominent were the high technology industry wherein Chinese wholly-owned firms like Baidu, Huawei, and other global companies practice techniques inspired by Western and Japanese models. Chinese returnees who managed joint venture or local firms borrowed and implemented various management philosophies to align the workforce to the financial objective. With little attention given to SMEs despite their economic role, the ethnographic evidence showed the varied forms of firm flexibility even in these large aspirational or desirable workplaces. The guanxi explanation is inadequate to analyse this changing work dynamic of flexibility and impersonal relationships in Chinese organizations.

3. Employee Flexibility & The Growth of Social Anxiety
With the transition of Chinese firms towards flexible work arrangements after the 1980s, working adults and college graduates in the 1980s, 1990s, and the 2000s were increasingly focusing on developing their personal skills and advancing their own careers with little firm loyalty (Hoffmann 2010, Duthie 2005, Rosen 2009, 2004, Anagnost 2008, 1997). The result was that strong reciprocal ties became unnecessary and cumbersome for managers and employees in various industries where low status work, job hopping, and short-term employment were widespread.

The impetus for self-development indicated by job hopping or short-term employment was the outcome of a historical state-sponsored move to hasten the development of China starting with the individual and then the population. However, it is inaccurate to assume that individual autonomy emerged from nothing. In the long-term study of Yan (2003) in socialist rural China, he found that the rise of intimacy between couples, youth autonomy, and female emancipation during the rural collectivization were precursors of this change towards self-development. He argued that these practices aligned and intensified once China opened up its economy to market reform.

The remaking of the Chinese working class population during this period of reform required a re-alignment towards the ethic of market and capital in order to turn the individual into capital itself. China scholar Anagnost tracked the different state discourses since the reform to implement this objective. First, she identified the rise of the moral discourse of prosperity to address the social pressure of economic and social inequality at the advent of reform (Anagnost 1989). Then, as economic reform progressed, the prosperity discourse no longer held sway among the population confronted with the rising income disparity and sudden wealth. So, Anagnost (1997: 78-79) identified a
second state-sponsored moral discourse on ‘quality’ of being or (suzhi) linked with another discourse; that of, civility (wenming), to transform the Chinese individual and population into bodies suitable for the “‘flexible accumulation’ of global capital.”

The blurring of fixed socialist archetypes – the rural/urban in particular, was one tangible evidence of a new status evaluation criterion focused on individual characteristics, suzhi. Initially, Kipnis (2006) reported that the usage of this term stemmed from a political project of the government to push for quality over quantity to justify their aggressive one child birth control policy. Hence, he defined the word suzhi as referring to the cultivation of an individual’s body, mental, moral, and educational levels (ibid.: 304). The discourse of suzhi made practices of flexible capitalism and intervention of the state tangible at the individual level. The argument of suzhi had been compelling for those studying migrant workers as they struggled for social and economic mobility in the market economy (e.g., Ngai 2003, Y. Yan 2003, Anagnost 2004). This shift towards self-development as a virtue and national duty had far reaching implications for how people perceived their occupations and status in life (see Yan 2003a, 2003b, Ngai 2005).

One implication was that individual status can be changed especially through higher education. The Chinese higher education expansion program since 1998 was part of the aggressive push by the Ministry of Education to absorb high school graduates, retrenched state workers, and to promote domestic consumption (Bai 2006, Wang et. al. 2012). But it also had far-reaching consequences for employment, job competition, and wage rates. This prediction was foreseen by Bai (2006) who calculated that higher education expansion would create future graduate unemployment and underemployment.
Table 2: Number of College Graduates (Wang et al. 2012)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of HEIs</th>
<th>Net Enrolment Rate (%)</th>
<th>Number of Enrolment (million)</th>
<th>Number of Graduates (million)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>1,552</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3.8217</td>
<td>1.8775</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>1,731</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>4.4734</td>
<td>2.3912</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>1,792</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5.0446</td>
<td>3.0680</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>1,867</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>5.4605</td>
<td>3.7747</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>1,908</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>5.6592</td>
<td>4.4779</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>2,263</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>6.0766</td>
<td>5.1195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>2,305</td>
<td>24.2</td>
<td>6.3949</td>
<td>5.3110</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

HEIs = Higher Education Institutions

This dire prediction came to fruition now that 25 million students entered university and graduates had steadily grown to 6.59 million in 2014 (Chinese Statistical Yearbook 2015). This year the State Council (2016) estimates the number of graduates will be 8 million. The easy access to higher education by the masses had triggered anxiety among parents who now demanded foreign degrees and immigration options to help distinguish their children in the face of fierce competition for white collar jobs (Xiang and Shen 2009: 516). The result was an aggressive drive towards overseas education and the sprouting of SMEs like SEA-EAD to meet those demands. However, the outcome was equally grim for returning educated Chinese who in 2010 numbered 134,800 (Yue 2013: 24). They were increasingly disillusioned (Fong 2011) and faced unemployment and underemployment upon their return. In their report, Wang et al. (2012: 338 - 340) identified several factors that contributed to prolonged overall graduate unemployment. These were the skills mismatch between college degrees and job availability or industry demands; the lack of institutional support in career development; and the disconnection between graduate attitudes and job expectations. Once lauded for their expertise, these Chinese educated returnees face unemployment and were now labelled seaweed (haidai),
homophone of “overseas unemployed” or those who have difficulty in securing jobs or waiting for suitable employment (Xiang and Shen 2009).

Social and economic mobility of graduates, once accessible with a higher education degree, were now hampered by a glut of graduates, a devaluation of graduate degrees, and the dampening of wages for graduates in the labour market (Wang et al. 2012, Bai 2006). The economic returns of a higher education degree had not delivered (see Mok and Wu 2015). The devaluation of the college degree had pushed wages of employees to a low gross income of 1200 RMB (125 EUR in 2009) at SEA to a high provincial average of 4,000 RMB (476 EUR) in Shandong province in 2014 (Chinese Statistical Yearbook 2014). These wages were comparable to those earned by migrant workers which ranged from 800 to as high as 1600 RMB (83–166 EUR) in 2009 (People’s Daily 2010). The stagnation or depression of wages in the burgeoning college-educated group and the rise of the wages in the scarce skilled worker category was a phenomenon dubbed by economists as the Lewis turning point (see Cai and Du 2011). This was a trend where labour demand had exceeded labour supply thereby pushing ordinary wages of highly-sought migrant factory workers upward (ibid.). Now, factory labourers earned more than or equal with their educated counterparts who had borne the cost of additional schooling (ibid 2011: 606). This convergence of wages earned by factory workers and graduates meant that investment in university education had not delivered

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10 I have used the OANDA online currency converter set at the date of July 01, 2009, which marked the mid-point of my research period between QLA and SEA-EAD, for all currency conversions. The OANDA currency converter is officially recognized at Macquarie University as the rate of conversion in financial reimbursements. Therefore, for conversion guidelines, I use this website and set the date as such. For all other time periods, I use the specific date in the original source unless it is not indicated.

11 Unfortunately, the provincial wage average in Shandong found in the Chinese Statistical Yearbook lumps all private enterprises across all types of industries together and may explain the high average rate of salaries. However, the China Labour Bulletin (2016) reports varying monthly wages for rural migrant workers in various industries that average around 2,600 RMB in the area of sales to as high as 3,500 RMB for the construction industry in 2015. For state-owned enterprises, they report that office workers receive 2,000 to 3,000 RMB per month while management level employees receive 12,000 RMB.
expected benefits and had only exacerbated employees’ need to constantly move workplaces. This depression of wages of the educated group contributed to the creation of the “poor second generation” of urban citizens which were traditionally represented by factory workers (see Ngai and Lu 2010) but which now included university graduates.

Social anxiety among graduates was directly linked to a high number of university graduates, low wages, and intense competition for limited high status jobs. These issues were severe enough that in a visit to Tianjin in 2010, Xi Jinping, China’s current president, encouraged future graduates to “take even the most grassroots jobs” and to “issue extraordinary performances in ordinary job situations” (Gu 2013, see also Jennings 2010). This plea recognized the strain and high pressure that graduates underwent to support themselves and their families, as well as find jobs commensurate to their expectations and investment in higher education. But the plea also suggested to young working adults they should temporarily accept ordinary work as steps in their career. These “grassroots jobs” had been provided by Chinese SMEs like SEA and QLA as temporary, stop gap, job destinations. Given this situation, the work environment was likely to drive employee self-development and job-hopping in SMEs that now became transient employment destinations.

What is the effect of this phenomenon of self-development in the study of firms? One result is that the depictions of jobs in various ethnographic accounts demonstrate an occupation-based perspective and a retreat from firm analysis. This phenomenon has been predominantly analysed using the framework of neoliberalism to describe Chinese white collar professionals and their conditions at work as I discuss below.
Scholars of China have called this self-development phenomenon in the workplace the “enterprising self” (Hanser 2002), or “self-fashioning” behaviour (Ong 2008) undertaken by “patriotic professionals” (Hoffmann 2006, 2010), or a phenomenon of “white collar (jobs) with Chinese characteristics” (Duthie 2005). For instance, in *Privatizing China*, Ong (2008) described how Chinese employees in an American corporation in Shanghai predominantly self-fashioned or self-managed themselves through a mix of risk and opportunity presented by local and global markets. She argued that this behaviour was unencumbered by management norms, social obligations, or accountability to institutions. She pointed out that even hierarchical norms were used for self-advancement. Her analysis concluded that the significance of the Chinese case was that this type of self-interest had been circumscribed within the confines of a Chinese market and political sovereignty rather than through corporate culture alone. Yet, American managers misrecognised these practices, attributing friction with Chinese employees to their “Confucian” culture or the lack of it. Hoffman’s research subjects were autonomous, optimistic, and educated youth who displayed seemingly contradictory choices by working in foreign companies for their self-development, while simultaneously disparaging these same companies, and expressing their patriotism towards China. These accounts of employee self-development made it appear that employees had a “boundariless career” but were actually outcomes of flexible conditions of the economy that directly affected firms (see Rodrigues and Guest 2010).

In ethnographic studies of service jobs that did account for firm relations, the results were grim. These studies described coercive work environments and the low status of workers. The impetus for self-development appeared as coping strategies of employees in the face of managerial control and labour regimes of deference, especially in the
hospitality sector Otis (2008a, 2008b) and retail industry (Hanser 2007a). While these two types of ethnographic studies on service work are different from migration consulting work, both exhibit various types of social detachment or impersonal non-affective ties and individual autonomy in the workplace.

In sum, there is a connection between the conditions that historically created the primacy of self-development among graduates/employees and contemporary social detachment and non-affective ties in transient employment SMEs. The foundation of self-development and individual autonomy had its roots during the socialist era and accelerated during the reform period. The Chinese party-state deliberately directed the population towards the socialist-market moral order that prioritized the accumulation of capital during reform. This push destabilized fixed socialist identities such as the rural/urban dichotomy and allowed for social and economic mobility for individuals and families. This reform of social attitudes drove the demand for higher education and ‘white collar’ work. Furthermore, the government expansion of the higher education industry to absorb retrenched state workers and spur domestic consumption inevitably led to current labour and wage problems. These included the devaluation of college degrees, wage stagnation for graduates, and social anxiety of graduates and their families to achieve middle class consumption capabilities.

4. Research Context of SEA-EAD and QLA

This section examines the place of SEA-EAD and QLA in the coastal city of Qingdao, Shandong Province. I locate these two SMEs as part of the city’s contradictions and suggest that they exist in symbiotic relationship with other larger firms in the vicinity.
The company profiles mirror the contradictions inherent in market socialism. I highlight the relationship between the peripheral status of QLA with the other larger, more prominent enterprises at the technology park. This is the same for SEA-EAD which rubs off prestige from its location with the nearby financial institutions. At the firm level, both firms consist of two generation of educated Chinese, Chinese returnees turned entrepreneurs (“sea turtles”), and the educated younger generation with some foreign experience (“seaweed”), returning with little career prospects commensurate to their education or experience. These two different generations of educated adults demonstrate the current challenges of detachment and impersonal relations confronting workplaces.

Qingdao, Shandong Province, similar to the other fourteen cities earmarked for development like Xiamen in the southeast and Dalian in the northeast, is a translocal and transnational space for capital. These cities were earmarked for early development because they exhibited key characteristics including geographic location (port or river access inland), previous economic legacies regarding investment or existing industry policies, and even the local entrepreneurial culture that promised rapid growth. Qingdao is a city of eight million residents, although only about 3.6 million of these were formally registered residents in the city as of 2012 (Qingdao 2014).

Qingdao is one of the main cities of China’s seaboard, with geographic advantages such as its proximity to Japan and Korea, access to a port, and a mild temperature. These features help to attract foreign investment and facilitate expatriate life. The result is that this manufactured city of investment creates a melting pot of Japanese, Korean, foreign nationals, and local Chinese residents, thereby creating a multi-cultural city. Its premier
position as an ideal coastal city was confirmed when it was chosen as the site for the sailing competition of the 2008 Summer Olympics.

Figure 2: Qingdao-China-International Regional Map 2014
Qingdao City in relation to China and its closest international neighbors
In the 1980s and the 1990s, Qingdao, like all other coastal open cities, followed what Chung (1999: 923) called a “recipe for development.” According to him, these cities were initial experiments in fiscal deregulation and market reform that would attract foreign investment and be allowed to operate outside of ideological or even institutional constraints. The designation of the title of “coastal open city” conferred a range of benefits upon these cities including Qingdao. According to Chung (1999: 925), these advantages included local foreign exchange retention, local government autonomy in approving foreign investment, economic development, flexible tax rates for foreign investment, and the right to fiscal and political autonomy from central and provincial authorities.

These pockets of growth were similar to other Chinese cities in their accelerated urban growth, vibrancy, and development (see Dicken 1998 and Hoffmann 2003). In effect,
these cities shared Chinese urban narratives of modernity, attractiveness, and a place for “talent” for the highly educated citizens (see Hoffmann 2006).

Qingdao is a gateway for foreign investors. The city investment office promoted Qingdao in the mid-1990s as part of the broader imaginary of a pan-yellow sea region, positioning itself as a production and export base for declining Japanese and Korean labour-intensive industries (OECD 2009: 178-179). The geographic proximity of Qingdao to South Korea was one primary reason why Qingdao was able to attract 31.65% of Korean foreign direct investment (Zhao et. al. 2012: 841). The result was a city with a multi-ethnic composition of expatriates dominated by the Koreans. According to Won (2007) in 2004, there were 5,700 registered Korean enterprises in Qingdao with a total investment of 2.4 billion US dollars (1.8 billion EUR). This was complemented by forty thousand Korean nationals that lived in and around the city (Kim 2013: 4). An important segment of the city were the ethnic Chinese-Koreans (Chaoxianzu, one of the thirty ethnic minorities in China) who acted primarily as interpreters, translators, and support staff. This group had emigrated from their traditional location, the autonomous prefecture of Yanbian in Liaoning Province, to bustling coastal cities. In 2005, Paik and Ham (2012) found that about 40,000 were officially registered as having moved to Shandong province, but unofficial estimates of Chaoxianzu indicated that the number could be as high as 200,000 migrants.

The Japanese also constituted a significant presence in the city, although most of their factories were concentrated in Dalian (Kim 2013, C. Zhou et. al. 2002: 72, 76, Nakagane 2002). The most recent figures released by JETRO (Japan External Trade Organization) and the Japanese Consulate General in Qingdao (JETRO 2016: 12) showed 1,044
Japanese enterprises operating in Qingdao in 2014. The most prominent “face” of Japan was a Japanese shopping mall, JUSCO (later renamed AEON after having been looted in riots that stemmed from the Japan-China diplomatic row over the Senkaku Islands) (Kyodo 2012).

I highlighted the presence of these ethnic groups to indicate the international profile of the city and the mediation business opportunities these presented for SMEs like SEA-EAD and QLA. While the Koreans and Japanese were both viewed by the locals with ambivalence and disdain, they, nonetheless, influenced the cosmopolitan character of the city. However, underneath the macro-economic glow of foreign investment, state development, and modern appearance lie the social and structural inequality that sustained SMEs and enabled graduate job seekers to live in a relatively expensive city.

4.A. QLA (Qingdao Labour Agency)

QLA was located in the periphery of the Qingdao Hi-Technology Park that was dominated by three large state-owned companies, Haier, a Qingdao municipal-owned, multi-million Chinese electronics giant, household appliances brand AUCMA, and plastic mould manufacturer HiSense. This outsider status of QLA within the park reflected the position of small and independent entrepreneurs vis-a-vis the larger enterprise anchor brands that attracted foreign direct investment into the park as well as talent into the city. This peripheral location remained attractive for smaller entrepreneurs who had returned from overseas and were given tax breaks and rent-controlled status at the China-Qingdao Returned Overseas Students Association building as part of the party-state enticements
for educated professionals (see Zweig and Rosen 2004). This property was meant to support and develop business start-ups.

The contrast between the large and branded enterprises with the fledgling enterprises was also mirrored with the geographic inequality necessary to maintain a technology park. To increase the value of the area, the high technology park was ringed by newly-build residential buildings and a sports auditorium. These gated communities and new residences catered to the middle class and the rich, who preferred to live in suburbia, with well-appointed high rises, and owned cars. I lived with a family in these new apartments, and was therefore able to directly observe how the heads of families were almost always absent, since they left for work early in the morning and entertained for long hours at night. They were rarely able to enjoy their beautiful homes situated in manicured landscapes with “Mediterranean” and generically suburban themes.

However, factory and office workers lived around the outer ring of the park in the less developed eastern area of Laoshan District. They were at least a half hour’s commute away, through some muddy and unpaved roads from the technology park. Cheaper housing options included the old brick “four corner” sibeyuan courtyard houses, which have one shared bathroom for all occupants. Mark, my QLA supervisor, lived in one of these cheap rentals and shared a bathroom and a laundry area with several other renters in the other flats. But at a rental rate of 300 RMB (31 EUR) per month, such one-room non-insulated flats enabled him to survive and save his paycheck, approximately 1,200 RMB (127 EUR) per month, the going rate for basic office work. These stark differences demonstrated the unequal foundation of an international city like Qingdao.
Mr. Ying, QLA’s owner, chose to set up his company in Qingdao due to the presence of a friend who helped him develop his business back in 2001. QLA was established as a small family-based business operation. “I am an overseas Chinese (huaqiao). I was once a teacher in Middle School but I was sent to the provinces for two years (during the Cultural Revolution) before I had a chance to go to Japan to study for my higher education. When I was in Japan, I had to do casual work (dagong) until I was able to get to the level of a (sarariman) (a Japanese term referring to a salaryman or an employee) job. But the job became mediocre after many years so I decided to return to China and set up a more lucrative and profitable business (in 2001) by placing Chinese labour in Japan.”

One of his perks as a returnee was the right to apply for a space at the China-Qingdao Returned Overseas Student Association building. In order to qualify for this space in the technology park, QLA also imported Japanese low technology goods, for example, water purification products, with a view to replicate and sell them cheaply. So long as the business brought in “technology” products, they were allowed to stay in the technology park. Since, this technological process was time-consuming and tedious, Mr. Ying’s multiple business strategy allowed him to dabble in other forms of money-making ventures such as business consulting, business mediation in China, and sending Chinese labour to Japan. However, out of all the different business ventures that QLA operated, including facilitating new business ventures, labour export remained its profitable segment. The labour consulting business of QLA made money by connecting to Japanese clients directly and operated remotely. As such, it did not rely on a key location in the central business district of Qingdao and was suited to occupy in the remote location of the technology park. The labour export (laodong shichu) of QLA involved two kinds of “talents,” explained Mr. Ying. The first type were the engineers with
Information Technology (IT) and Computer Assisted Design (CAD) skills. The second type were the semi-skilled Chinese workers such as seamstresses or other Chinese vocational technology graduates destined for Japanese factories under a “foreign trainee” scheme (see Friman 2002). These “trainees” paid for the opportunity to work for a two to three year contract in Japan in order to save money and return to China with substantial capital for a wedding celebration or business purposes.

The QLA office also reflected the two different work generations in China. Mr. Ying returned towards the end of the period when Chinese overseas returnees were still valued and highly sought for their knowledge and experience. However, during my research period in 2009, that perception had dimmed and the term sea turtles (haigui) for overseas Chinese returnees had evolved towards the term seawed (haidai). Those who were highly skilled and came from high status universities may have no problem but with the explosion of overseas education and the ability to gain international experience possible, a substantial number of them were in competition to gain jobs in large and big brand companies. Moreover, those who returned from abroad with added skills, but not necessarily highly-skilled or from prestigious schools, were left to scramble for jobs in smaller enterprises. This was the plight of two of the Japanese work returnees at QLA, Helen and Sandra.

Helen, after high school, just wanted to break away from her parents and be independent so she thought that going abroad to work in Japan provided her that chance. Meanwhile, Sandra decided to work in Japan for money but also to master her Japanese language fluency prior to graduating from college. Both were able to leave for Japan through QLA. After they finished their contracts, they did not know what to do when they returned to
China. They applied to other companies, waited around, but was offered jobs at QLA by Mrs. Ying due to their exemplary work attitude in Japan and language fluency. Ben, Mrs. Ying’s son from her first marriage, was also hired at QLA after his two-year Japan work contract ended. He was plucked from Mrs. Ying’s hometown, where he stayed after the dissolution of the first marriage, in order to be sent to Japan and trained in the business. His case would be an exception among his peers.

Stephanie and Belle, in contrast with their overseas returnees colleagues, were typical local college graduates who needed a job to supplement the salary of their husbands. Stephanie was six months pregnant at that time and wanted to save up for her family and this job suited that purpose. Belle was a bookkeeper and accountant for QLA and this regular job, with predictable hours, and steady paycheck was to save prior to them planning for a child. Another example was Mark, a college graduate who came from a rural background, who decided to stay in Qingdao after university. He worked at QLA because he also signed up with them and wanted an assurance to work in Japan so he could save money for a future business and his wedding. Both the overseas returnees and the local graduates worked in an ordinary workplace to save up for their own personal future plans, collecting the same salary. Although I did not know the actual salaries of the employees, Mark was paid about 1,200 RMB (127 EUR) and the individual differences among them would be by about a couple of hundred RMB more or less, with no commission and mandatory benefits such as the required social insurance and food allowance.

Mark also left QLA a month after my departure in May 2009 due to his disagreement with Mrs. Ying over her refusal to expedite and guarantee his overseas departure. QLA’s
rental contract at the Qingdao High Technology Park ended in 2010, and so QLA relocated to the old central Shinan district in Qingdao. The relocation was the impetus to reduce the size of the staff and eventually ended the contracts of all non-family employees.

4.B. SEA (Sunshine Education Agency)

The business model of SEA relied on two crucial factors: the prestige factor of its location and the foreign employees. As a medium-sized enterprise with no specific brand identity or recognition, the location of SEA in the heart of the financial and business district of Qingdao at Shinan district became crucial. The location of the school building complex was dwarfed by the luxury department store Sunshine, multinational retailer Carrefour, Bank of China, and the other office and residential high rises in the vicinity. The prestige of these other firms was essential to draw in walk-in customers inside a rather ordinary, small, and unremarkable foreign language school. SEA fashioned itself as a one-stop service provider of study abroad services – from language training, testing, placement, and paper processing, in a complex that consisted of three buildings. The ground floor of the main five-storey building was the office for both agents and the school teachers. The upper floors consisted of dormitories and classrooms for students from far flung areas of Shandong province. The basement had two additional dormitory rooms as well as the kitchen and dining hall for the entire staff. The adjoining six-storey building was allocated as residential apartments for the four Japanese nationals who taught the language at the school. This number included the Japanese supervisor, Mr. Ogawa who also lived there. The penthouse was occupied by Headmaster Qing and his
family. These facilities that made up the SEA complex impressed visitors and additionally raised the credibility of a rather unknown school in Qingdao.

The work environment at SEA reflected three tensions: the work generation difference that we saw with QLA, the full-time and part-time arrangements of personnel, as well as the presence of foreign nationals at the work space. These features divided the employees further, aside from their job designations.

Similar to Mr. Ying, Headmaster Qing also studied abroad in Korea and Japan, and now returned to become a self-made entrepreneur that capitalized on his work and living experience abroad. Furthermore, his Korean-Chinese ethnic identity (Chaoxianzu), served to his advantage in the intermediary business. SEA’s integrated service of language learning and study abroad packages served to milk profit across different categories including visa processing and flight booking. However, this same advantageous ethnicity also disconnected the Headmaster with his ethnic Han Chinese employees. In one of the informal gossiping sessions among employees, they told me that the Headmaster’s ethnicity “proved” to them that he was untrustworthy, that he was too different from them. This for them explained the bad business and the fraud that I will discuss in detail in the following chapters. This generational and ethnic difference of the Headmaster with his employees created distance between them.

The ethnic divide also cut across the teaching staff. The Japanese nationals did not interact with the Chinese staff from both the school and the study abroad agencies due to the language barrier and cultural animosity. All transactions were filtered through the Japanese supervisor, Mr. Ogawa and his translator, Mr. Xiao, who was also department
head at the Japanese study abroad division. Among the teaching staff, ethnicity and status affected relations. The part-time teachers for the Korean and English languages were generally isolated from the everyday dynamics at QLA. This included the one part-time German national who also taught English. Teacher Li, the lone full-time teacher in English was separated from Mr. Smith, an American who taught the same subject, by income. The former received a little above the minimum paycheck of 1200 RMB (125 EUR) while the latter enjoyed the market rate for foreigners of 10,000 RMB (or approximately 1,038 EUR) for a twenty five hour work week. This difference in salary rates also alienated the part-time foreign/local instructors with the regular staff.

I raised these undercurrents within the workplace to describe that family-owned firms were confronted by a variety of challenges in an international city like Qingdao. But I also highlighted it to indicate that my foreign presence at SEA and at EAD was not necessarily different from the existing company culture. SEA had three study abroad divisions: the Korean, Japanese, and Euro-American Department (EAD). These departments operated autonomously with little inter-departmental cooperation and had a mix of senior personnel managing junior staff. The Korean and EAD had two full-time senior staff and the Japanese had four full-time staff with Mr. Xiao as the senior manager. Three of its personnel spoke Japanese from their period abroad.

EAD only had two senior employees who had some degree of reading and writing fluency in English. Mr. Lao who was approximately in his mid-fifties, worked on the American education market. Meanwhile, Ms. Mei Lin who was approximately in her early thirties, handled the Australian and UK education market. There was no cooperative link between those two as the international study abroad markets were designed to operate.
with as little connection as possible as I shall discuss in the succeeding chapters. Unlike the joint cooperation between senior and young college graduates in the Japanese study abroad division, both EAD personnel were agents who came into SEA with previous work experience in this industry. Hence, both agents guarded their knowledge of particular markets with as little involvement with each other as possible. This was due to the commission structure and guarded knowledge necessary to successfully send a client abroad. I will discuss their work and the social dynamic in chapter four. The complexity of overseas education at EAD overlay the simmering tension and undercurrents of inequality at work in SEA.

Chapter 2: Conclusion

The phenomena of social detachment and impersonal relations at QLA and SEA-EAD were exacerbated as China’s reforms progressed towards flexible capitalism. I examined the historical development that had changed from stable and predictable relations into one that was contingent, uncertain, and detached. During the socialist period, evidence from the urban danwei studies showed that impersonal relations existed at the social and work level. However, jobs and living arrangements were permanent, tightly regulated, and predictable. Hence, these relations had been described as a kind of gift economy at the macro level and as organized dependency at the enterprise level.

This stable social contract was torn with the economic reforms. First, permanent jobs were eliminated with short term-contracts which could be readily seen with enterprises in special economic zones. These coastal cities were sites of economic deregulation to attract foreign investment and local talent. Moreover, these economic experimental areas
also accelerated transient employment and social detachment within firms. One such city was Qingdao in Shandong Province, one of fourteen cities slated for development. Qingdao, like all the others have become the site of large branded private and state enterprises as anchors of technology parks and progress. These cities thrived due to geographic and social inequalities that formed the basis of economic development. The Qingdao Hi-Tech Development Park demonstrated one such example. This was a space allocated for big, famous brands, and state-owned manufacturers such as Haier, AUCMA, and HiSense. These brands were crucial to uplift the profile of the city and the park to attract talents from local and abroad. Chinese small and medium-sized enterprises like QLA and SEA-EAD thrilled in the shadow of these large enterprises and glittering urban gentrification. The influx of such talents into the city had resulted in enterprises established by an earlier generation of overseas Chinese returnees and largely employed college graduates and young overseas returnees. At SEA and QLA, we saw the two different generations of workers under different periods of China’s economic development. Currently, college graduates were under a lot of pressure to get middle class jobs in competition with those who had gone abroad and with foreigners. These tensions and other undercurrents within the firms were effects of the wider state policies and accelerated the use of impersonal ties to maintain job mobility and employee independence within the enterprises.
Chapter 3: Expanding and Cutting the SEA-EAD and QLA Network

This chapter uncovers how transient employment firms like SEA and QLA operate using impersonal relations within the global and Chinese migration networks. I use Marilyn Strathern’s re-interpretation of the actor-network theory, to understand the tenuous and porous boundaries of service firms that use information, knowledge, and relationality as the nodes to relationships. Her relational-based model of the network re-conceptualizes how anthropology can be applied to the twin problems of this thesis, the link between relation-building and service work in contemporary Chinese service SMEs. Her framework allows me to integrate and demonstrate links between these two seemingly unconnected domains and examine how profit and impersonal transactions determine the dynamics of transient workplaces within the international and local migration networks.

In this chapter, I discuss the hierarchy of Chinese work and study emigration as a single process since Chinese state policy covers both labour export and overseas education. This results in a similar structure and business model for intermediary services that cater to both types of emigration. Therefore, while SEA and QLA operate in different types of markets, with the former being an education placement agency and the latter being a labour export agency, their difference as a business is relatively superficial. Here, I analyse them together as equivalent entities because they belong to the same migration structure. However, their different hierarchical positions in the migration industry affect their access to profit and markets. Hence, the forms in which they cut and expand their
networks vary due to the global and local restrictions imposed based on their hierarchical positions.

I begin with a discussion of Strathern’s actor-network theory and how it captures the porous forms of transient employment and flexible work firms such as SEA and QLA. Her theory merges relationality and profitable intangible intellectual property within information-based workplaces. Then, in the next section, I discuss briefly the commodification of education and the necessity for intermediaries within the network of the foreign education industry. Following this, I use the two companies in this study, QLA and SEA, to link the profit imperative node with practices of social detachment. I then show how the profit and relational nodes operate as the main drivers in the international and local Chinese emigration network. Overall, this chapter links the phenomenon of social detachment and the proliferation of impersonal ties as essential to migration office work for Chinese SMEs like SEA and QLA.

1. Expanding Office Life: Strathern’s Actor-Network Theory

The decline of classical kinship studies in anthropology reflects how little resemblance its theoretical foundations bear to the complex, messy, and difficult to categorize relation-building on the ground (see Schneider 1984, Peletz 1995, Carsten 2004). The reconstitution of kinship can now be seen in anthropology’s shift towards other fields such as gender (Collier and Yanagisako 1987), new reproductive technologies (Strathern 1992, Inhorn and Birenbaum-Carmeli 2008), and other ways of creating relatedness (Carsten 2000, 2004). In China, classical kinship studies have been observed by Smart (1999) to be supplanted by the field of guanxi studies and the gift exchange that
accompanied it. Thus, with the increasing integration of China with flexible capitalism, the necessary step among academics of China is to assess what happened to guanxi and relationality in general especially in the conduct of work (see Gold et. al. 2002). If I continue to explore whether or not guanxi still exists, a binary question, this direction becomes a dead end. Instead, I explore how relational ties shift between these binary categories of work and relation-building, and the conditions that define those shift at SEA-EAD and QLA.

The theoretical difficulty of moving the focus of the research from binary categories (for example personal-impersonal) to the examination of the shifting nodes between these categories stems from the epistemological roots in anthropology. In his essay that question the mode of anthropological query, James Weiner (1993: 286-288), follow the assertion of Marilyn Strathern (1990a in Weiner 1993), who argues that the concept of society is theoretically obsolete. The bold argument of Weiner (1993: 286-287) summarises Strathern’s and his position by pointing out that various social theorists such as Leach, Durkheim, and Marx, using various frameworks from different temporal periods, all conclude that individuals simultaneously have the potential for relationships and are embedded in networks of relations. He laments that our theories and models hinge on the assumption of relationship and reciprocity to the extent that we systematically exclude non-relational aspects (ibid.: 290). His conclusion render classical kinship studies, for instance, as ineffectual in capturing social reality. Furthermore, he observes that the consistent conclusion of anthropology’s epistemology is the identification of society and the individual, as in the case of British anthropology. He recommends instead beginning any anthropological investigation with the assumption

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12 A similar observation and conclusion is also made by Latour (1993: 91-92) for anthropology’s inability to bridge the gap between science and society due to its epistemological foundation.
that social relations are the “pre-figured end-product of anthropological analysis” (ibid.: 289). He proposes that it is our task in the discipline “…to specify the conditions under which the world is perceived to be relationally based (by ourselves as well as our hosts) prior to our analysis of it” (italics his, ibid.: 288).

One of the frameworks that make visible this relational-based world and the conditions that define it is the actor-network theory proposal of Strathern (1996). She integrates classical knowledge with new forms of knowledge in contemporary society, primarily around property ownership. In her re-interpretation of the actor-network theory, she creates a hybrid definition of “network” that synthesizes two types of network theory: that is, its reference as the range of connections or contacts, and its reference as the mix or intermingling of technical knowledge and social relations in these nodes or connections. Her interpretation of actor-network theory borrows from the wider actor-network theory (ANT) that bridge the dichotomy between nature and society (see Murdoch 1997 for extensive review). Strathern takes off from the work of Bruno Latour (2013, 1993) who traces the link between the work in the laboratory of scientists to the wider society. For Latour, he argues that only by investigating the association between two seemingly disconnected entities can one glean the totality of what is social (2005: 5). In doing so, a small entity such as a confined laboratory is directly connected with the farmers or the general public outside of it. In other words, the organization is not necessarily bounded but porous and his challenge for researchers is to ensure that connecting points, such as global or local for instance, remain flat or placed side by side in order to render it visible and explicit (ibid.: 174). This is what she and Latour call as “symmetrical anthropology,” a collapse of bounded cultures or other entities such as
science, religion, or law, and even temporality (an asymmetrical arrangement) because the nodes in the network are constantly evolving and renewing (Latour 1993: 91-92).

Strathern’s network theory takes up this challenge of a symmetrical anthropology and integrates two seemingly disjointed entities such as relationality with property ownership. With her network theory, this apparent disruption is a false one. She locates the social in the individual and vice versa as a singularity, conceived into the body of the person. The difference between an individual and the social lay in what Munro (2005: 247) explains as the suppression or discarding of features of differentiation. Instead of meta-concepts, Strathern’s focuses on social relations, seeing “society” as a network with lengthening and contracting of connections via persons first, whether through kin terms, blood, property, or ownership (Strathern 1996: 529 italics mine). Hence, the key questions for her are how the people themselves stem the flow and enact limits and thereby shape the kind of connections possible. As Weiner (1993: 292) writes in support of this premise, “the task confronting humans is not to sustain human relationship… [but] to limit [and] restrict its extension.” This process of expansion and contraction of connections animate the quality, or in our case the impersonal relations, that people form in their network as well as the establishment of intellectual property ownership or boundaries with others.

With the network perspective, Strathern sees people’s interactions as contingent and fragile (1996: 523). Hence, her primary recommendation is to examine how relations persist and are made durable or conversely, are stopped and culled. This winnowing of the limitless connections is what she calls as the “cutting the network.” In the contemporary urban context, Strathern relates this to intangible knowledge work like scientific inventions wherein scientific contributions are built on top of each other and
expand indefinitely while patent ownership restricts it (1996: 523 – 525). This is helpful in an industry such as education or labour consulting since the business artefacts are primarily intangible such as knowledge and information.

This is merely a segment of a much wider Strathernian approach to kinship, personhood, and property, but also to anthropology overall (see Street and Copeman 2014). I use her actor-network theory as a conceptual toolkit to displace dominant thinking about Chinese relations and workplaces. This is a challenge of Law (2009: 141-142) when he states that the understanding of this multi-disciplinary framework depends on empirically grounded practices. It is necessary at this stage to begin re-thinking about the structure of firms, work, and relations by de-stabilising these concepts and their links with each other. In the following section, I examine the profit nodes of the education consulting industry to track how and why SEA-EAD and QLA expand and contract its relations with other entities.

2. The Conditions of Profit in the Foreign Education Network

The profit structure of foreign education unravels the link between destination countries and education institutions, brokers such as SEA-EAD, and the potential candidates. The vehicles of transactions are impersonal relations at the enterprise level and the lucrative commissions for every full-fee paying international Chinese students successfully enrolled with an international education provider. Both the nodes of profit and relationality are engines of the migration industry. This network is constructed around the commodification of education and the state deregulation of the industry, leading to
the necessity of middlemen agents to link candidates with the destination countries and institutions.

The current study abroad industry began with the transformation of education into a commodity. Robertson (2006) tracks the historical development when education became a commodity. She describes how education became part of the trade in services as a result of the 1995 Uruguay round of negotiations that governed the removal of barriers to labour mobility, cross-border consumption, and supply of services (ibid.: 4, 6-7). She reports that the result of this agreement led to education being governed by GATS (General Agreement on Trade of Services) under the auspices of the WTO (World Trade Organization). However, prior to the early 1980s, Robertson noted that education was still seen as a public service by state governments (ibid.: 4). Although she describes that this had changed during the 1980s when the Thatcher-led UK government began to implement a fee-regime, followed by Australia and New Zealand, to generate export revenue. These countries had inevitably spurred direct competition with the U.S. (ibid.: 5). Thus, the “commercial export-oriented approach to international student recruitment” has become the model by which countries contribute to their gross domestic product (GDP) as well as subsidised the spiraling costs of higher education in which government subsidy had retreated (Pan 2013: 251-252).

This export model of education and its by-product of aggressive student recruitment cannot be underestimated. To understand it, one needs to grasp the direct and indirect magnitude of profit generated from these international students, I focus specifically on Chinese students. Let us consider the three countries that are the top exporters and preferences for education destination by Chinese students. These are the United States
(US), United Kingdom (UK), and Australia. The Chinese international student is the leading figure in all three countries.

According to 2016 data, there were 328,547 students from China in the US, placing them at the top of the roster, well above India with 165,918 students (IIE 2017). In 2016, the UK recorded 91,215 Chinese students, an increase from the 78,715 Chinese students in 2011, in all higher education institutes, representing a 16 percent increase (HESA 2017). Meanwhile, the Department of Immigration and Border Protection of Australia issued 70,465 Chinese student visas in 2016, a 7% annual increase from 2014-2015 (DIBP 2017: 20).

The number of international students provide a lucrative income overall in these destination countries. To illustrate, the US education sector collectively earned 32.8 billion USD (29.5 billion EUR) in international fees and tuition in 2015 (IIE 2017b). Meanwhile, for the year 2014-2015, the UK declared an income of 3.6 billion GBP (4.5 billion EUR) from non-EU overseas tuition, representing 12.7 percent of the overall income of 27.9 billion GBP (34.8 billion EUR) in tuition fees 2015-2016 (DET 2016). China contributed 26.4 percent of the total at 5.3 billion AUD (3.7 billion EUR) (ibid.). Despite the uneven records on monetary gains and benefits, overall (HEFCE 2014: 15, 17). For Australia, the total income from education-related services by international students was 20 billion AUD (13.8 billion EUR). These income was a result of the policy of education commodification in which the benefits of fee-paying international students secured its continued policy.
To maintain the ease of these service transactions, the WTO/GATS agreement stipulates fewer barriers or government restrictions. The result is that state governments largely act as a guide and rely on free market regulations to facilitate and control mobility and profit. For instance, a New Zealand study by Collins (2012) notes that the state passed a Code of Practice in 2002 to set ethical standards, implement a grievance system, and create sanctions to which institutions and their agents must subscribe and adhere to. He reports that one outcome of this state-sponsored ethical guidelines led to the creation of an independent accreditation body, New Zealand Specialist Agents, which function as an office that oversees training, does reference checks for accreditation, and pledges to enforce ethical standards every two years on agents (2012: 146 – 147). He further describes this body as separate from the industry entity, Education New Zealand (or New Zealand Education International Limited), that promotes a market orientation of the education sector (ibid.: 144). His finding shows that this self-regulation system shifted the risk of recruitment from education providers to agents thereby creating the agent as an important actor in the industry while relegating the state to a passive governing role (2012: 147). Moreover, his study shows that intermediaries are indispensable for education providers and potential students.

Middlemen agents and agencies are important links in the network of student mobility. The fuel is the lucrative commissions awarded by international educational providers as incentive to quickly convert potential candidates into enrolled students. These commissions set the context for aggressive competition and recruitment of international, especially Chinese students. In a *Times Higher Education* investigation into UK universities, Havergal (2015) shows that in 2013-2014, 106 out of 158 higher education institutions who disclosed information, 86.7 million GBP (117 million EUR) were awarded to
education agents. He reports that this came to an average of 1,767 GBP (2,387 EUR) per non-EU student recruited (ibid.). Overall, the total commissions are a 16.5 percent increase from the 74.4 million GBP commissions given two years ago (ibid.). He lists Coventry University as the top spender which paid out 10.2 million GBP (13.8 million EUR) to agents for the three-year period of 2011-2014. However, the profit link between education providers and middlemen is fraught with barriers, complex, indirect, and opaque. Therefore, the examination of the profit link alone is inadequate to understand the network within the education industry. In the next section, I discuss the information network between multiple middlemen actors to expand sources of knowledge about the industry and restrict access to commissions.

3. The Network of Impersonal Relations in the Study Abroad Industry

Despite the lucrative profit in a deregulated system of foreign education, the middlemen-centric system in student recruitment is riddled with challenges and restrictions in accessing commissions. These include market-based certification bodies and licensing procedures. These regulatory bodies act as a sieve to conduct cursory financial and ethical audits of agents and companies. Middlemen agencies between destination and sending countries generally must conform and adapt to these regulations in order to receive commissions. One of the outcomes of regulation is the creation of multiple hierarchies between licensed and unlicensed members within the recruitment industry. Therefore, middlemen agencies and agents primarily use a network of impersonal relations to navigate and circumvent these industry restrictions to access commissions. I will show in the succeeding paragraphs how this expansion and contraction process applies to the Chinese industry and the roles of SEA and QLA in this environment.
The Chinese party-state relaxed emigration control and partially retreated in regulations on education mobility even prior to its accession to the WTO in 2001. This was part of the decision to spur domestic consumption, absorb retrench state workers, and unemployed youth (see Bai 2006, Wang et. al. 2012). This loosening of control resulted in a network of collusion and battle for control among complex, fragmented, and uneven hierarchies of state entities, private agencies, and agents. This is what Xiang (2003, 2012) refers to as a predatory system for consumers in which recruitment and placement transactions are opaque, unsecured, and chaotic. This same predatory model also severely affects small or medium-sized firms like SEA and QLA which must compete against larger, globally-licensed, trans-national intermediaries. In this system, both firms are subject to global restrictions and local limitations to commissions and are thereby forced to become agile and adaptive to overcome them. Consequently, consumers become recipients to the risks that enterprises undertake and subject to the adaptive strategies of these firms.

In this dense migration network, Xiang (2012) describes a hierarchy of three levels of gatekeepers. The top level in the hierarchy consists of a unique chain of state entities, private individuals, and migration agencies whose main business is to provide licenses, certifications, and paperwork. But below them, these gatekeepers rely on a secondary chain of licensed agents and agencies that, in turn, also rely on a tertiary level of various unlicensed enterprises and agents for recruitment. These secondary and tertiary levels are not as clear-cut as the players are further differentiated into various dense vertical and horizontal networks of internationally and locally accredited members, Chinese-only accredited and licensed firms, and unlicensed entities.
The scramble to secure commissions by all secondary and tertiary level parties leads to the aggressive marketing campaign of intermediaries to secure a reliable supply of students. This acceleration of recruitment predisposes the system to forge tentative and temporary relationships among agents and customers at all levels of the hierarchy to quickly convert customers into fee-paying students. The result, Xiang (2013) argues, is an intermediary trap for potential migrants who must navigate through various hierarchies of unsecured and unpredictable infrastructures that commonly result in fraud and cheating. Underlying this system are impersonal ties that simultaneously facilitate both successful applications and fraudulent transactions.

Tertiary level migration agencies and agents equally face a risky and challenging work environment. With local de-regulation, Chinese tertiary level recruiters and independent agents become subject to the international system of recruitment. They face financial and ethical audits in an international accreditation process, as well as the hefty payments for membership. Those that do not submit to these certification processes are cut off from the lion’s share of foreign commissions awarded by education providers to the second level agencies or agents who are internationally accredited, and these accredited entities become gatekeepers. The unlicensed and unaccredited members adapt and profit instead by using impersonal ties free from any personal obligation or social accountability. This inadvertently creates anonymity which shields entities from any financial or personal culpability. However, Xiang does not remark on the paradox of social detachment and impersonal ties that form the basis of the profit model among different licensed and unlicensed brokers.
In an intermediary business, the assumption is that personal ties or strong trust sustain connections among brokers and between brokers and customers. Yet, this is not the case and matters little in the actual mediation process. Brokers dispassionately interact with other brokers to fill in the gaps in the market, establish impersonal ties with customers to reduce emotional costs, and potentially yield a quick and successful transaction. This becomes a paradox in which transactions are efficient and cost effective, yet risky for all those involved. Whether licensed or unlicensed, education providers and agents at the secondary and tertiary levels are ultimately linked by these impersonal ties. Impersonal ties are the norm for both parties to quickly transact and convert recruits into fee-paying students to secure commissions from international education providers. These ties allow all parties to be interdependent but autonomous, working to insulate each other from proprietary information sharing, interactions that overturn license or regulatory agreements, and most especially from any risk of fraud or unethical practices.

The case the U.S-China higher education link is an example of the propensity of fraud in the system. For instance, the non-profit American International Recruitment Council (AIRC) serves as a vetting agency with the Department of Justice to assess education providers and agencies (AIRC 2015). For this service, AIRC charges 2,000 USD (1,817.74 EUR) for agency accreditation and provides a quality assurance for education providers and customers. However, this combination of a state-market regulation remains expensive for smaller enterprises and agents and fails to completely stem anomalous practices and student victimization from China. The list of accusations levied against accredited Chinese companies includes charging exorbitant placement fees, extracting a percentage from a student’s scholarship or financial aid awards, and submission of fake reference letters or student essays (Golden 2011). The unsecured
links in the Chinese migration network results in the periodic surfacing of fraudulent activities in which unregulated smaller intermediary agencies have duped Chinese students headed for the U.S. This has led EducationUSA, an information arm of the US State Department, to cease institutional partnerships in China for unethical practices (AIRC 2015). However, treating problems of student recruitment into ethical issues rather than as structural flaws of self-regulation in the industry ignores the chronic condition produced by impersonal ties in the network.

The American case is no different with the fraud problem in the UK wherein education providers, who enlisted recruitment agencies in China, are reportedly unaware of the unethical practices of their agents. These illicit activities include promising entry to clients with below average scores or providing inaccurate study information to clients (see Watt and Newell 2012, Watt et al. 2012). These ties insulate the various individuals and entities from any ethical, legal, or financial culpability; prevent in-depth information sharing with each other; and, yet, paradoxically enable transactional efficiency and successful applications. This scenario is typical among education providers and their intermediaries.

Reliance on a self-regulating industry has created a system of risk in the migration and foreign education industries. Differentiating between licensed and unlicensed recruiters cannot fully protect consumers from unethical practices. This is because impersonal relations help migration enterprises overcome the state-specific policies that regulate them, as well as industry-led barriers imposed by professional licensing associations, pan-continental regulation organizations, and school-specific regulations that supposedly prevent imprpropriety and ethical transgressions.
Despite this risky environment, foreign education and student migration remains in high demand among Chinese consumers. Xiang and Shen (2009: 514) find that the frenzy towards overseas education in China is due to three factors. One is the growing social anxiety of a future with increasing social stratification. Second is what they call the “last-bus sentiment,” wherein a foreign degree is believed by parents to distinguish their children in the face of fierce labour competition for white collar jobs. Third is what Xiang and Shen see as the local re-ordering of social status around foreign education. Like domestic higher education, overseas education is seen as a form of “venture investment” by Chinese families without guarantee of returns (ibid.: 514). They argue that elites must now send their children abroad at a younger age as foreign education becomes more accessible. Moreover, they point out that the efficacy and value of education abroad help to “lift” people to a higher scale of capital conversion” (ibid.). They observe that the party-state adds political value to international education through the differentiated treatment of educated returnees. This high demand for overseas education ensures that the risk of fraud among consumers remains significant with little changes within the industry.

I turn to the transient employment SMEs, SEA-EAD and QLA, to examine in detail how these firms have porous firm structures that link them to the industry via the nodes of information control to secure commissions and impersonal ties. I begin with QLA because it is positioned uniquely as a “client gatekeeper” and subsequently, QLA focuses on acquiring employer clients rather than worker recruitment as its primary business model. Meanwhile, SEA-EAD is a licensed Chinese recruiter but unlicensed internationally. Its business model relies on partnership with licensed brokers and secondary level firms, direct volume recruitment, including from unlicensed independent
players. Both agencies profit from the use of impersonal ties among other workaround strategies in order to circumvent international and local restrictions to access to commissions.

3.A. QLA (Qingdao Labour Agency)

QLA profited from its position as a database, a type of gatekeeping and vetting system for its Japanese clientele, and levied an undisclosed fee for this service. The Chinese labour export to Japan is a multi-billion-dollar industry. The last overall estimate was in 2009 in which profit was calculated at 8.1 billion dollars USD (5.8 billion EUR) (CLB 2011: 13). More recently, Xinhua (2012) reports that Shandong, to which Qingdao belongs, emerged as the leading labour exporting province in China, with overall profits at 4.47 billion USD (3.38 billion EUR), and Japan remains Shandong’s largest employer market. Chinese trainees on three-year contracts (2009-2012) reportedly pay 30,000 RMB (3,500 EUR) in service fees and an additional 4,550 RMB (530 EUR) as bond, refundable upon their return or contract completion (see also Harney and Sladkowski 2014). The individual figures are close to the rates charged by QLA for semi-skilled workers. The possibility of taking a share in this lucrative market attracts entrepreneurs like Mr. Ying, since he can serve as intermediary for Chinese candidates into the Japanese trainee and technical intern program. This program provides a legal pathway for Chinese unskilled or semi-skilled workers to enter and work in Japan in the guise of “training” (see Kondo 2002).

QLA has no problem in attracting applicants. Chinese vocational and technical school graduates can earn a monthly remuneration of around 3,000 to 5,000 RMB (320 – 530
EUR) for a one- to two- year fixed contract for low skilled to semi-skilled work in Japan like agricultural work, garment sewing, and electronic assembly. This amount is roughly the equivalent of a management level paycheck in China in 2009. This opportunity for quick and fast cash even attracted university graduates like Mark who wanted to quickly save money to set up a future business, to buy a house, or to fund their marriages upon his return.

As a “database” gatekeeper, QLA also profited from direct applications into the QLA candidate roster with placement fees that ranged between 5,000 to 10,000 RMB (530 – 1067 EUR), price negotiable, with the understanding that there was no guarantee of work. This was the same standard fee that QLA charged licensed or unlicensed independent recruiters who approached QLA to sign up their own stable of recruits. QLA did not cultivate any long-term personal relationship with these tertiary recruiters. These mostly unknown recruiters charged their own fees to their respective candidates, independent of QLA knowledge, who can pad recruitment fees above the 10,000 RMB QLA fee (1067 EUR). This impersonal middleman chain of fees can extend indefinitely with various individuals taking a cut of the payment without QLA or any parties necessarily being involved or aware of each other’s transactions. The original fees eventually bloat in cost for candidates.

The other sources of QLA income stems from different shares from fees and commissions as part of the recruitment process. These included added services such as facilitating paperwork and coordinating Japanese language and etiquette training with other entities. For instance, once a client successfully selected a candidate, they underwent training and testing for at least six months to a year with other QLA partner
institutions such as the Jinan Going Abroad School. This was where selected QLA candidates were being sent to learn Japanese language and culture, while QLA processed their visa papers. These training classes incurred additional costs from candidates on top of their QLA registration fees. These sub-contracting of processes and tasks created multiple income streams that allowed QLA to have less than ten staff members and a relatively less chaotic, more stable routine office operation that was largely insulated from the frenzy of direct recruitment practices at the tertiary level of the migration industry. In this way, QLA outsourced its work while continuing to earn income through coordinating with their partners.

The bulk of my research data in the empirical chapters demonstrated the volume and intensity of work between a database gatekeeper with a locally-licensed recruiter like SEA. Furthermore, the global economic downturn beginning 2008 had reduced demand for Chinese workers in Japanese businesses. The number of guest workers in Japan had fluctuated through the years peaking at 72,000 in 2007 and dwindling to 45,000 in 2010 (ibid., see also MOJ 2010: 9 – 10). Moreover, the earthquake and the Fukushima disaster led to the decline of new Chinese entrants and had also prompted Chinese workers on contract to flee (Nishimura and Takano 2011). These factors had contributed to the idle working period at QLA while management were considering other labour market options such as agricultural work in Australia in 2009. Despite this low demand for Chinese workers, a long list of candidates in the QLA database anxiously awaited departure. These numbers would grow as Japan’s economy slowly recovered. By 2014, figures had risen. Harney and Sladkowski (2014) reported that 70 percent of 155,000 trainees came from China. During my internship in QLA in 2009, two batches of garment workers of
40 individuals were in different stages of the six months pre-departure language and culture training at Jinan Going Abroad School.

QLA, according to its company brochure, had a registered capital of five million RMB (534,000 EUR) and a limited liability firm with twenty employees listed in its roster, including three lawyers as consultants. It was primarily an import-export company for existing high technology and environmentally sustainable products from Japan for distribution in the Chinese market, such as, chemicals that cleaned waste water and household cleaning products. Mr. Ying imported these expensive Japanese products and technology with the intent of replicating and manufacturing them cheaply in China. QLA also dabbled in other forms of money making ventures such as business consulting, business mediation in China, and sending Chinese labour to Japan. It held a 2008 Foreign Labour Cooperation Qualification authorized by the Ministry of Commerce and an ISO 9001-2000 International Quality Systems Certification. This was a common all-around business model for small entrepreneurs returning to China as Mr. Ying explained. So long as the business brings in “technology” products, they were allowed to stay in the technology park. However, out of all the different business ventures that QLA operated, labour export remained its profitable segment.

Mr. Ying was the president of the company and formally listed as handling six departments: the finance, management, manpower deployment, education, labour cooperation, and foreign trade. However, Mrs. Ying wielded substantial power over business operations. Half of its six employees were dedicated to maintaining the applicant database, build new business or markets, and search for Japanese clients. All of the employees had college degrees and half of them were themselves returnees from
Japan and now worked in the office. Three of them, Ben, Helen, and Sandra, had already worked in Japan on three-year contracts through QLA. Three of them were local recruits. Mark was an aspiring Japan applicant who was the information technology (IT) staff member. Belle was the bookkeeper and payroll assistant, while Stephanie was another administrative staff member primarily in charge of the applicant database and records. The rest of the listed employees were linked to their investment partners, other school, and manpower partners. Without a clear pathway to becoming promoted within the firm, non-family related QLA employees were there to earn and save money, rather than viewing their job as a career track.

The rental contract of QLA at the Qingdao High Technology Park ended in 2010, and so QLA relocated to the western area of Shinan district near the old city centre. This move prompted the resignation of this batch of non-family QLA employees.

3.B. SEA-EAD (Sunshine Education Agency – Euro-American Department)

SEA-EAD occupies a double position in the Chinese migration hierarchy, which demonstrates the multiple opportunities open to it. It is both a local gatekeeper and a recruiter. SEA was a limited liability company established by Headmaster Qing, an ethnic Korean Chinese (Chaoxianzu) who studied in both Korea and Japan in 2000. He returned to Qingdao to cash in on the boom in the market for foreign language study. His stature as an educated returnee enabled him to easily secure a certificate from the City Board of

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13 I use SEA to refer to the entire organization – the language school that teaches English, Japanese and Korean and the other study abroad divisions such as those for Japan and Korea. I use SEA-EAD or alternatively EAD to refer specifically to the system in the department that handles study abroad to the rest of the world, primarily the US, Canada, and Australia.
Education to hire foreigners. He was able to attract a co-partnership arrangement with Japanese national, Vice Principal Ogawa, and thus, hire six Japanese nationals to teach Japanese at SEA. The rest of his teachers were Chinese nationals who taught English or Korean, including three part-time Korean language teachers who were from the local Chaoxianzu community. This composition had divided the school between the Japanese, Chinese and the rest of the international management and staff with their local Chinese counterparts. Vice Principal Ogawa managed the Japanese teachers and the language program while Mr. Feng managed the rest of the staff, day to day scheduling, and operation of the school. At the time of the research, student numbers were low with 11 students studying Japanese, 4 students of Korean, and only 5 full-time students of English.

With the SEA as foundation, the business eventually expanded into the study abroad program in 2003, sending students to Japan. The Japanese department was the largest among the other study abroad units, with six personnel and a supervisor. Half the personnel spoke Japanese and had previously lived and studied in Japan, the other half were local recruits with no study abroad experience. A second small Korean department, was manned by Mr. Shin and one of the three rotating receptionists. Altogether, there were two staff members handling Korean language and study abroad queries at any given time. The Euro-American Department (EAD) was founded at the same time as SEA. It sent students to the United States, Canada, Australia, and the UK, but it also covered various schools and systems in Europe (such as Italy and France), or Asia (including Singapore and Malaysia). Unlike the single country department for Japan, EAD had to answer queries from multiple countries’ school and visa systems. At the time of my research, there were only two personnel in EAD, Mr. Lao and Mei Lin. They specialized
in sending students to the United States, Canada, and Australia. At the time of my research, no Korean study abroad student was processed. The Japanese study abroad had 11 students in various stages of the application process with all of them from the SEA language program. The EAD had 27 cases with Mei Lin and at least 5 with Mr. Lao. The overall historical figures of clients for all the study abroad units were not recorded except in financial transactions which were made unavailable for the research.

As a Chinese-licensed recruitment enterprise, with a special permit to hire foreign teachers and personnel, EAD occupied a gatekeeper-like position in the recruitment hierarchy compared to unlicensed agents and enterprises from smaller and less prestigious firms within and outside of Qingdao. It can therefore also act as a local gatekeeper for these smaller entities and individuals that were looking to place their own recruits but were outside of any legitimate access to schools or commissions. Similar to the situation with QLA, these independent or external agents may opt to file candidate applications with EAD, charging additional fees, on top of EAD gatekeeper fees, to recruits without EAD necessarily knowing about this. These middlemen ties may be reproduced in countless ways and extended to various levels outside of the control and knowledge of SEA-EAD. This expansion of middlemen agent ties was made through impersonal ties in which there were few obligations between both parties, except for the potential for commission if the chain maintained integrity and delivered services. Sometimes this chain delivered, but most times it will not, with the unfortunate result of fraudulent transactions for the customers who had invested their money.

SEA-EAD functioned like a gatekeeper for unlicensed agents and entities below their hierarchy. However, in comparison with internationally-licensed and joint-venture firms
from major cities such as in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, SEA-EAD was like any other unlicensed recruiter that supplied students to them. Without any international licenses or certification for its company or agents, EAD was not a legitimate firm from the point of view of international education providers. EAD cannot directly enroll or receive any recruitment commissions from international institutions, except through the partner firms of education providers in China who held exclusive access contracts.

Without any international recognition, EAD found itself stuck in the bottleneck between gatekeeper firms and international policies and practices that restricted them from direct access to commissions and information. The only chance was to leapfrog using flexible practices, primarily around the use of impersonal ties. These impersonal work relations were not just efficient; they also lowered transaction costs. In chapter four, I discuss how education consulting quickly establishes no obligation ties with other agents for information and strategies to access restricted markets and education providers. A manager-centric practice of a “flexible operation” (linghuo caozuo) tolerates the ambiguity of these impersonal ties since these are free and require little substantial investment on institutional licensing and employee professional training.

Given this workaround strategy, SEA-EAD could freely engage with and adapt to different profit streams. One approach was to occasionally work with these first level gatekeeper enterprises. This was necessary when these enterprises were exclusive representatives of top tier or popular universities that were in demand by SEA-EAD customers. SEA-EAD stood to gain little profit in this type of transaction. The full commission, which can easily top ten percent of the first-year tuition fee awarded by education providers per student, all went to the second level gatekeepers. Third level recruiters and student suppliers, like SEA-EAD, only received a paltry one percent or
less as share of the commissions from the second level gatekeepers. Therefore, as much as possible, these transactions were minimized by firms like SEA-EAD. Exceptional circumstances, such as the recovery of commissions from fraudulent transactions, required intervention from second level gatekeepers on behalf of third level firms like SEA-EAD to education providers. This mediation was done in order to regain official representation of a client and thereby be eligible to receive or recover any fees, if at all possible. SEA-EAD lost money, sometimes as much as 1,000 to 3,000 RMB (104 – 311 EUR) per client in payment for this mediation and troubleshooting services. Therefore, EAD limited engagements with these agencies and maximized other profit streams to offset these operating losses.

The second strategy to generate income was to sell value-added services. SEA-EAD marketed itself as a one-stop education placement service provider that offered the total application package from language training, testing, education placement, up to visa processing. Prior to the enlistment, all advice given by education agents was free of charge. The key was to convert a motivated individual into a formal client and subsequently levy additional charges beginning with formal education consultancy services. As a recruiter, SEA-EAD formal consultancy charges were based on country destination demands. Fees amounted to as low as 10,000 RMB (1,037 EUR) for Southeast Asian countries like Singapore and Malaysia, to as much as 30,000 RMB (3113 EUR) for Australia, and 50,000 RMB (5,188 EUR) for the US in 2009.

One value-added strategy was to link foreign education alongside the parental demand for foreign language education for their children. SEA language school offered English, Japanese or Korean language training and testing. With a license to hire foreign staff,
Headmaster Qing distinguished the school by employing four Japanese nationals to complement the two other local Chinese teachers of Japanese. The Japanese teachers were all supervised by QLA Japanese Headmaster, Mr. Ogawa, who oversaw and supported non-English and non-Chinese speaking Japanese teachers. His local counterpart Mr. Xiao provided him assistance. Aside from their four Japanese foreign nationals, SEA also employed one full-time American, Mr. Smith and another part-time German foreign national to teach English to supplement one full-time local teacher of English. The ethnic diversity in SEA’s workplace also included two part-time Korean language teachers from the local ethnic Korean community. The employment of foreigners, therefore “international,” increased the stature of SEA compared to its other local school competitors (Henry 2013, Pieke 2012). The ultimate objective was for young adults to continue their foreign language education abroad.

Another value-added strategy that completed the service package was offering a canteen and dormitories for students from outside Qingdao, especially the far-flung areas of Shandong province. Headmaster Ying had bought and renovated two buildings that formed a compound that made up SEA. One six-storey building, fronting the main road, was reserved as his penthouse residence and the rest were converted residence units for SEA’s four Japanese nationals. The other five-storey building behind it was the site for the office at the ground floor, a basement for the canteen and dormitory, second floor for ten-room dormitories, and the last top floors were for classrooms. The expanse of the SEA property impressed walk-in customers and enlarged a small business operation.

The third overall strategy of EAD was to leapfrog second level gatekeeper agencies and international certification guidelines and to promote lesser known private schools. These
lesser known educational providers allowed third level unlicensed recruiters to bypass international accreditation for agents or firms and granted full access to their support services. One leading advantage they hold was that they awarded a full twenty to thirty percent commission from the first-year tuition for each successful international recruit. This lucrative reward by these education providers countered the higher transaction costs from international certification bodies, their small marketing budgets, fierce competition against better funded and more popular schools, their location disadvantage, and their poor promotion from the first level gatekeeper firms. The lure of higher commission tempted firms like SEA-EAD and their unsuspecting customers to a higher risk of encountering fake schools or a lower-quality standard curriculum. Using non-affective, calculating ties, the entities were largely unaccountable for any unconventional educational placement decision and potentially unethical tactics.

Finally, the fifth strategy for profit was also an illicit choice. Instead of the company, employee agents can simply file client applications to schools and re-direct commissions towards their own bank account. Since impersonal, calculating, business ties were the basis of business transactions, the education provider had little incentive to verify the identities or destination of payments. Employee-agents can choose to pocket these commissions without the company’s full knowledge. The structure of impersonal ties and flexible practices easily accommodated concealed and autonomous decision-making that had made fraudulent transactions common in the recruitment process for companies and students.

This profit and impersonal transaction system is unlikely to change in the near future because the global study abroad business is a de-regulated commodity in the multi-
billion-dollar service export industry for destination countries and education institutions. An investigation by Watt et. al. (2012) in the UK reported that the recruitment of foreign students had been estimated as an industry worth 17 billion pounds (21 billion EUR). But income estimates for the study abroad mediation and brokerage system in China were difficult to ascertain. Some commission figures that were disclosed by UK universities alone had revealed that they had disbursed a staggering 60 million pounds (74.3 million EUR) to as high as 120 million pounds (139.2 million EUR) to all their recruiters (Paton 2012, 2013). The lure of profit perpetuated the risky environment in education migration.

SEA-EAD and QLA offered intimate understanding of the nodes of profit and impersonal relations that linked the dense international and local networks of the foreign education industry. These nodes allowed migration SMEs to bypass profit restrictions and in the process facilitated quick transactions and overrode consumer protection from unethical practices; it also enabled networks to become opaque, unaccountable, and highly risky. In the next chapter, I will discuss one type of impersonal relation, the hezuo cooperative tie, to examine the network restriction and expansion during the recruitment process.

**Chapter 3: Conclusion**

In this chapter, I situate the transient SME firms SEA and QLA within the local and international networks of the migration and foreign education industries. I used the study abroad industry as an example to showcase the complex connections and transactions between the education providers with the distant potential candidates in China. In
between these two parties was a web of transactions and relations with nodes that had roots in information control and profit. Following Strathern’s actor-network theory, I described SEA and QLA’s company profile and operation as flexible porous structures. I argued that SEA-EAD and QLA were linked to the migration and foreign education industries through nodes of profit and impersonal relations. The framework allowed me to emphasize that transient employment SMEs were not self-contained or stable entities. These two nodes had consistently destabilized the chains in the networks and had created an environment of risk, uncertainty, and chronic fraudulent transactions that extended outside of the office.

Historically, this system had its origins in the commodification of higher education and the state deregulation of the education sector. This had created a gap in which the private sector played a role to connect the candidates with the schools in both destination and sending countries. The destination countries relied on ethical guidelines and third-party certifications to vet agents. From the point of view of the sending countries, in this case China, such guidelines added barriers to commissions. Since China joined the WTO, the deregulation of the migration system had produced an intermediary trap for consumers (Xiang 2012) but also for smaller intermediary companies such as SEA-EAD and QLA. Impersonal ties were the basis of this system in which fraud and unethical practices were rampant. These ties were flexible and allowed agents to gather information widely. These ties also allowed firms and agents to leapfrog regulations and second level middlemen hierarchies within the system to directly access foreign commissions.

Strathern’s actor-network theory overcame the conceptual divide between office life and the wider industries, knowledge, and relationality. I argued that her framework bridged
the conceptual opposites such as the inside and outside of the firm and re-thought
contemporary issues of flexible capitalism with classic problems in anthropology such as
kinship and relationality. This perspective rendered the distinction between dichotomies
such as inside-outside, personal-impersonal, affective or non-affective, gift-commodity
relations, society-individual as unhelpful and unproductive (see Strathern 1996: 518).
Instead, I approached the analysis of transient employment firms like SEA and QLA by
focusing on the ways in which they built their workplaces and operations around
expanding impersonal relations to access and restricting commissions within the
migration and foreign education industries.
Chapter 4: Information Control: Cooperative *Hezuo* Ties at SEA-EAD

In this chapter, I delve deeper into the role and dynamics of information control as a central node in the networks between SEA-EAD education agents. I introduce one type of workplace relations that primarily uses information control among education agents, the *hezuo* (“working together”) cooperative relation. “Let us work together” was a common request and response among agents, both online and offline, when they introduced themselves, made cold sales calls, and offered their services to me when I was an SEA-EAD agent. This willingness to embrace all opportunities for information with all types of people, regardless of their positions, came with no obligation or any burden of building a personal relationship. Indeed, no one even bothered to ask me about my credentials as SEA-EAD employee, inquired about SEA’s credentials, or even the Headmaster’s name. It was unnecessary. Hence, this term was also used as a point of common reference between two individuals who were in close proximity, whether offline or online, but who did not know each other personally except through a minimal understanding of working together.

This term ‘hezuo’ describes the transactional relationship that exists only for the duration of the relevance of information in the transaction. More often than not, you would not work together or hear from each other again, unless a mutually beneficial opportunity came along. This Chinese term, unlike the English terms that I use in the text such as cooperation and collaboration, suggests minimal interest and a tentative, future possibility to work together provisionally with no secure commitment or guarantees. Conversely, the term can also be used to dismiss any intimate knowledge of the other
person, the significance of the relationship, and consequences arising from it, as in: “We are only working together.” Hence, hezuo serves both a friendly term to signify interest in working together as well as a term for disavowal of any responsibility or repercussions arising from the use of the information from this relationship. This term is an important component of social detachment at work. The main goal of expressing the wish to hezuo by all these agents is to provide and exchange information including their contact details in case I ever needed their services in the future.

While agents appear to operate alone at the office cubicle, education consulting is a process in which managers, agents, and brokers are all linked in a dense concealed network of independent, impersonal, and unsecured cooperative ties with other firms and agents. These hezuo ties are essential strategies to expand and tap a broad number of specialists for access to international markets, seek information, all in order to secure a commission and successfully send a student abroad. These hidden, largely unpaid hezuo ties between agents are a cost-effective arrangement that allow SEA-EAD to formally employ a small staff of two to three people, since they can rely on the relatively free and unpaid labour of numerous unnamed external agents and firms. These informal ties take the place of SEA-EAD in-house employee support and training and provide information, knowledge, and support for its agents.

However, the reliance on hezuo ties presents a conundrum because these same links create and sustains the highly risky migration and foreign education industries. These connections systemize fraud across all channels throughout the industry. Furthermore, these links risk destabilizing the already transient work environment at SEA-EAD. Hezuo opens the company and agents to unpredictable results, unsecured transactions,
and untold risks to all parties, especially clients. I use an incident of fraud at SEA-EAD as the context to discuss the costs and benefits of impersonal cooperative ties in this chapter.

I have divided the chapter into three sections to describe how brokers expand and restrict ties in the process of student applications. I begin with briefly discussing my discovery and unraveling of fraud at SEA-EAD. The case of Mei Lin’s fraud reveals the ambivalent characteristic of hezuo ties. Rather than classifying them as “good” or “bad,” in the next sections I outline the points and work scenarios in which hezuo presents both the risk of success and failure. The second section presents the scenario for success in three cases. The first case defines and establishes the impersonal nature of hezuo even in a long-standing and company-approved relationship with an agent. The two other cases show how expanding impersonal ties to other agents extract benefits such as mentorship, transactional efficiency, and customer satisfaction. The third section outlines the four stages of student application processing that demonstrate the various types of risk for fraud, miscommunication, and transactional inefficiency at every stage. Here, I describe how ties are restricted, avoided, or cut to avoid any transaction costs and full accountability.

1. Brief Background on the SEA-EAD Fraud

Mei Lin was the designated education agent for the Asia-Pacific region, including Australia and Europe for the SEA-EAD study abroad unit. At the time of my entry in June 2009, she went on a wedding leave and I inadvertently took over her position. This
included acquiring responsibility for twenty-seven cases in various stages of application. However, I did not find any information about these cases in her computer or client records in the office. This was the first alarm bell in my head. No one knew anything about her clients – not her EAD colleague, Mr. Lao, or Headmaster Qing. This was the second alarm bell.

Mei Lin’s various clients came into the office, one by one, looked for her and then asked if their visa had been released or demanded their case updates. Her absence suddenly launched deflection and avoidance techniques at SEA to disavow any knowledge or responsibility for Mei Lin or her clients. I would later find out that this was much easier when work relations were impersonal.

It became a game of musical chairs. The front-line receptionists diverted phone calls to me and or to Mr. Lao. He, in turn answered, “I don’t know,” and quickly passed on the client to me. The social expectation was that I would also play the game and I should also divert responsibility and refer them back again to Mei Lin. This I did, but it was not enough. It did not stop customers from barging into the office and shouting expletives to me and Mr. Lao. Clients would call Mei Lin and she assured them that everything was in process and that their visas will be released soon. Yet, they continued to come to the office demanding answers. I had none, but it was easy enough to find them.

Since I had little clue about the business, I went to the end of the chain. I called up the Australian visa office to verify client applications; I contacted universities to inquire about application statuses. I was not surprised when I found out that no application was received or lodged in the majority of the cases. I informed the Headmaster about this
and he initiated his private investigation into Mei Lin’s transactions. The aftermath of the fraud is detailed in the next sections and in the succeeding chapters five and six.

As I would later learn, the work of an education agent was highly autonomous and the application process opaque. My own learning experience as an agent exposed the reliance of the job on other known and unknown agents. My reconstruction of Mei Lin’s cases showed that her decisions and actions used a similar pattern compared to mine and was not necessarily erroneous. The use of unknown and unofficial agents was typical practice in the business and was, in hindsight, not necessarily an indicator of outright fraud. While it was clear she may have intentionally planned or diverted commissions earned from her clients, I was not wholly convinced that it was simply a case of Mei Lin’s morals or ethics, even if it constituted a significant part of it. I suspected that it was not the first or the last time something like this will happen. Indeed, the veterans in the industry, such as those who worked in the Australian consulate and the international universities, acknowledged that fraud was endemic, especially in China.

At SEA, I found that the risk of fraud and job efficiency was simultaneously embodied in these fluid hezuo ties. After all the investigation by the Headmaster and the staff, it remained unclear what had actually happened to Mei Lin’s transactions. No client documents were ever recovered from her or her partners. Her hezuo ties in Qingdao and in Australia were not fully known because some individuals in her interaction chains remained concealed by virtue of its impersonal, tentative, and fluid nature. However, she also worked with legitimate agents that represented universities. She was able to send clients abroad successfully and was successful at her job. In the next sections, I discuss how hezuo ties exemplify these contradictions and create an environment of risk.
2. Benefits of Hezuo Ties at SEA-EAD

Impersonal hezuo ties deliver benefits such as providing employee workload support, training, and service delivery for clients at little financial cost to firms like SEA-EAD. The risks that SEA-EAD inadvertently incur from an agent's use of their hezuo ties to get their job done are offset by savings on additional personnel, training and support costs, and legal liability in a highly volatile and risky industry. These benefits ensure that the business model of a flexible firm remains resilient and profitable in a cutthroat industry. The guanxi explanation is inadequate to explain how and why the most cost-effective business model relies on the use of impersonal ties.

In the following section, I describe three case studies in which I performed as an agent, to draw out the different forms and benefits of hezuo ties. I begin with a case, an office-sanctioned tie, with Ms. Park that confirms that hezuo ties are highly impersonal, instrumental, and case-specific. The second case with Ms. Mina, an agent from second-tier agency Global Shanghai, demonstrates the possibility for mentorship, training, and workload support that an impersonal hezuo arrangement can provide. The third case with Jessica, an unsanctioned one-off hezuo tie, shows that work efficiency, profit, and customer satisfaction can be delivered by temporary and contingent impersonal relations. Overall, these calculating, professional ties offer opportunities for employee support and self-development that may be otherwise unavailable within the internal structure of flexible firms.
2.A. The “Betrayal” of EAD by Ms. Park

The story of the “betrayal” of Ms. Park illustrates how impersonal and instrumental relations form the foundation of hezuo ties in the education consulting business. Hezuo relationships offer few personal and social obligations to each other outside of a particular case. Unlike guanxi relations, in which people sustain social, moral or affective obligations to each other, hezuo ties are contingent on undertaking a specific goal or task for a single client. This singular focus offers little in the way of long-term mutual obligations, except for cases in which there is ongoing potential for profit sharing built on mutual trust and cooperation.

The aftermath of the Mei Lin incident triggered the Headmaster to instill control of the EAD. One of his directives was to course all transactions through Ms. Park as a quick and temporary solution. It came as a shock to me to find that my working relationship with Ms. Park turned out to be what it was: a money-based transaction, rather than as something akin to friendship. After all, we had worked together on an almost daily basis to successfully troubleshoot numerous client problems and we had formed a very good working relationship. Despite this regular contact and mutual trust, our relationship remained a strictly professional arrangement.

Since the Headmaster bestowed transactional exclusivity on Ms. Park, it would be reasonable to assume that they had a strong personal relationship based on trust. But actually the basis of this trust was tentative. Ms. Park was an independent education agent who formerly worked with the Academy International agency in Seoul, Korea. She left to become a stay-at-home mother, and now worked part-time as an education agent. She retained her international licenses and affiliation with schools in the United States.
and Canada and can be categorized as a second-tier agent. This meant that she was recognized by the international education providers and thereby entitled to full commissions. When I asked her about her relationship with the Headmaster, she said, “I’ve only met him once when he visited Korea. But I do not really know him (personally).” When pressed further, she became vague about the nature of their working relationship. The Headmaster was equally vague about his personal relationship with her, but he told me that he was happy that she was not affiliated with any other agency, as this would cut further into his profit. The basis of their ongoing trust relied on trustworthy sharing of commissions with each other via direct bank transfers. He had not had any problems with her in the past. Furthermore, the Headmaster could work with her without paying upfront. Moreover, the Headmaster secured full knowledge of every client re-application by funneling all transactions to her. His semblance of control came at a cost for her services.

Despite the lack of a strong friendship, their substantial professional trust rested on a rolling credit system between them. Based on simple email invoices she sent, Ms. Park charged six hundred thousand won (EUR 413) for every technical vocational application, seven hundred thousand won (EUR 482) for each university level application, and eight hundred thousand won (EUR 550) for each graduate study application. However, these fees were flexible and negotiable with the Headmaster on a case to case basis, regardless of negative outcomes such as a visa rejection. He would then transfer service payments to Ms. Park’s account. The trust that they built for at least two years now was built on this reliable transaction arrangement.
The difficult case of Ms. Yan exposed the contingent nature of hezuo ties between the Headmaster, Ms. Park and me. Mei Lin promised Ms. Yan in early 2008 that she would be able to commence a Master’s program in Physics in the U.K. by the spring term of 2009. Nobody had told them that a UK Master’s program rarely commenced in spring. At the time I met Ms. Yan in October 2009, I found no school acceptance letter or any indication of an application made by Mei Lin to any school under Ms. Yan’s name in the office. It turned out that Mei Lin had neglected to submit Ms. Yan’s application, even though her case was relatively straightforward. One possible reason for this omission was that these top-ranked U.K. institutions did not offer any commissions; therefore, these applications ranked low in the priority list of Mei Lin. Another could be a failure in Mei Lin’s hezuo arrangement. Whatever Mei Lin’s reason, Ms. Yan’s mother came to the office in mid-October to calmly demand a refund and withdraw their application. Based on this negligent action by SEA-EAD, I thought that Ms. Yan was entitled to some form of restitution. But the Headmaster disagreed.

The response of the Headmaster to Mother Yan was to ignore her direct request for two weeks. It was only when she threatened the Headmaster with a media exposure that he made her case a priority. In our department meeting, the Headmaster ordered me, “Tell Ms. Park to apply to three universities (for them) immediately today!” Since the transaction entailed no foreign commissions, the cheapest solution was to file these applications myself; but since I was still new then, I simply followed his instructions. To mitigate the impending disaster, the Headmaster asked me to look for Ms. Park. I rushed on MSN chat messenger to ask her: “…Yan case, can you apply to three universities for her today, it is urgent!” But to my surprise, Ms. Park withheld urgent support for the first time. She flatly refused to help out until she received payment. She told me, “Okay, tell
Mr. Qing if I apply for them, the fee will be three hundred thousand won (about 200 EUR).” For the first time in the two and a half months of our communication, Ms. Park demanded payment first before giving any assistance or advice.

I had a misplaced assumption that my continuous communication with, and guidance from, Ms. Park implied a personal friendship. Prior to Ms. Yan’s case, we had been working together since the start of my internship. Typically, she responded immediately to any request or question I had, and I reciprocated by promptly meeting her every request in other cases. It became a predictable and reliable relationship. This was not to be the case with Ms. Yan. Ms. Park took advantage of our vulnerable position by demanding immediate payment, rather than continuing with the status quo. This case opened an opportunity for her to reveal our hezuo for what it was, a money transaction.

Ms. Park saw this as an opportunity to put pressure and demand payment in the face of our crisis at SEA-EAD. I had wrongfully assumed that during this most crucial moment at SEA-EAD, she would promptly help us. Now I was in a tight situation as a mediator and as a conduit to which Ms. Park could directly express her demand for immediate payment from the Headmaster. This was contrary to the existing rolling system of credit that had previously applied. But I also knew full well that the Headmaster would refuse immediate payment if he could avoid it.

There were multiple interests at stake here. First, SEA-EAD was going to be publicly shamed on local television if the mother pushed ahead with her threat. Second, Ms. Yan could still study abroad if we moved fast enough. Third, as employees of SEA-EAD, we were instructed during office meetings to shield the Headmaster whenever he delayed
payments with working partners. I was under pressure to acquiesce to all the varying needs of different parties.

Agents, such as me, were stuck in between the dynamics of other hezuo ties, such as between the Headmaster and Ms. Park, while working in the frontline with customers. In my case, this assumed that the Headmaster would fulfill his end of the promise of payment and let Ms. Park believe that she will be paid. With trepidation, I ran back to the Headmaster and told him about Ms. Park's demand. He waved me away and said, “Xing, xing, xing… (agree, agree, agree) just tell her to apply immediately and I want it tomorrow!” I ran back to my workstation quickly before I lost Ms. Park on MSN. I gave her my standard reply, masking any sign of panic, “This will be no problem, and just send the bill to him (via email).” However, she insisted on receiving the payment first before proceeding to file new applications. I was stunned by this and disappointed since she knew that I was caught in the middle. So, I went back to the Headmaster to inform him that he needed to pay Ms. Park before she applied. The Headmaster asked me again several hours later if there was an application yet, but I said that she was expecting payment first. It was a stalemate and there was no progress on that day and the day after.

But on the third day, Ms. Park contacted me and I asked if the Headmaster paid for Ms. Yan. While she was evasive about it, she did say that they settled his past bills. From this point on, I was disabused of the idea that I shared any friendship with Ms. Park. Clearly, this was an impersonal, professional, working relationship – nothing more. From here on, we focused on Ms. Yan’s applications to her three preferred schools: Imperial College, Warwick University, and Leeds University. The next day, she returned with some positive
news about her applications for Imperial College, which was the client's first choice. In her broken English, Ms. Park told me her good news via email.

“Her major physics (graduate in research programme - so very competitive major offering almost 99% scholarship) and they open ONLY FALL TERM. But I suggest the school, willingly do interview, if they want., and plan to take ELS (English language) prior to academic program...Anyway, school MAYBE contact with her directly.... not to us... When you meet Yan on coming Monday...you say all~ confidently, but no open for Spring... I just wish luck~ Anyway let us wait....” (bold letters hers)

The role of these external partners during times of crisis cannot be overestimated. With their international accreditation and long-standing connections with these institutes, external partners can provide provisional acceptance even with incomplete documents. With Ms. Park’s second-tier licensed status, she was able to secure provisional applications not just from Imperial College but also Warwick University and Leeds University using only copies of Yan’s transcripts and her IELTS score.

Cooperative hezuo relationships can deliver fast and efficient service at a cost. The relationship between Headmaster and Ms. Park was based on tense assurances of payments rather than deep friendship. This non-affective relationship also applied to an intermediary such as me. In this case, Ms. Park leveraged a crucial case to her own advantage and turned the appearance of friendship into a transactional relationship. This overrode the ongoing credit arrangement. This instance highlighted that hezuo relationships were about one-on-one immediate exchange of services for a specific client
in which the past may have little bearing on the present decision. Indeed, it required closure or erasure of any past obligations before a present became possible. My projection of any friendship or affection was misplaced, since this case demonstrated that my hezuo tie with Ms. Park was nothing more than another mundane transaction. My own clarity of impersonal hezuo relations with her assured me that she could efficiently deliver client service in succeeding cases.

2.B. Professional Mentorship under Ms. Mina

This section examines a kind of cooperative relationship that approaches a professional working relationship, which is typical of everyday office life. In the previous example, I showed how a sustained hezuo tie can be intimate yet impersonal at the same time. In this section, I demonstrate easy and efficient transactions when a short-term hezuo tie operates in a less affective, straightforward manner.

Unlike the vagaries of my long-term sustained transactions with Ms. Park, Ms. Mina from Global Shanghai consistently offered me impersonal and prompt assistance. This type of limited, short-term tie demonstrates how a professional cooperative relationship can run beneficially in the Chinese migration marketplace. The implications of these kinds of ties are myriad. Such highly functioning ties provide an efficient and cheap support structure for SEA-EAD education agents without any accreditation or training; it provides easy access to a wide range of education providers without the cost of international certification or financial audit with third parties; and, it relieves the burden of the processing work load of an education agent with a reliable assurance of service delivery.
In the next example, I present the hezuo between the Headmaster and other staff of SEA-EAD with Global Shanghai to troubleshoot Mei Lin’s Australian transactions. Ms. Park only specialized in applications for the United States and Canada. Strategically, then, it benefitted SEA-EAD to work with second-tier partners that specialized in other regions. Hence, third agencies like SEA enter into short-term limited working relationships with second-tier agencies like Global Shanghai for assistance and resource access to specific schools and countries.

The inter-firm relations between Global Shanghai and SEA-EAD are unequal at the macro-level of the emigration industry. Hezuo relationships at the agent level reflect this inequality yet these provide an efficient support structure that untrained and new SEA-EAD personnel like me and new EAD hire, Mr. Bei, need. It was within this disadvantaged context that Ms. Mina was appointed to assist SEA-EAD staff. She gave me pointers about the Australian and New Zealand school systems while she taught Mr. Bei how to lodge electronic online visa applications. Mina, and the institution she represented, opened their global resources to SEA-EAD, and in the process temporarily incorporated our department into their system.

Since I effectively had no departmental supervisor at EAD to train me, my professional ties with Mina fulfilled this role. She explained to me how Chinese students with low or below average grades entered Australian schools: “Anyone can enter. There are pre-foundation and foundation courses and a whole program of English courses that Australian universities and institutes have put together to address the academic and language proficiency discrepancy of Chinese students.” Mina showed me a file listing the different universities and institutions with which they were affiliated with. This global
system of access opened options for SEA-EAD to offer Chinese families whose children had few academic credentials, but who had money to pay for a foreign education.

The relationship with Ms. Mina was a professional one. She withheld any client judgment, administered impartial advice to desperate clients, and recommended study programs. Ms. Mina had been briefed by her boss Manny not to answer any questions about Mei Lin’s case or about SEA-EAD. She always emphasized to me, that this was just work. For instance, she did not emotionally react to clients who constantly changed their minds; rather, she simply followed their requests. Ms. Yu was one of those EAD clients who had not yet enrolled and who kept switching her study preferences, first from horticulture to patisserie, and then to hairdressing. Mina advised me to simply tell her that she needed a minimum level of English proficiency of 3.0 IELTS to enter any technical school or vocational program in Australia. Mina was unfazed with these constant client changes. She did not complain or pressured the client, but rather simply waited for any new development from EAD. Her impartial approach extended to the other cases. For instance, Mr. Fang, a male college graduate, wanted to pursue his Master’s degree in the UK. He had above-average academic grades and a sufficient English score of 6.5 IELTS. His preference for a graduate degree at Newcastle or Sheffield Universities offered no commission for Global Shanghai or SEA-EAD because of its relatively above average rank among university choices. Nevertheless, Ms. Mina did not present other lucrative institutional options or pressured me into steering the client into more profitable arrangements. Due to the urgent time frame of the entry period, she quickly applied for him and facilitated his visa through Mr. Bei without any problems.
One important strategy I learned during my mentorship process with Ms. Mina was how to place below-average applicants. For example, Mina easily created a pathway program for Ms. Lai who wanted to pursue a degree in accounting. Since her credentials did not allow her direct entry into the bachelor program, Mina placed her into a foundation course at SIBT (Sydney Institute of Business and Technology) prior to her qualifying for the Bachelor degree at Macquarie University. This ladder package would set Ms. Lai back 22,000 AUD (15,512 EUR) in tuition in her first year. But Ms. Lai was more satisfied with this new program than with the Diploma program at the Australian Industrial Systems Institute, a vocational education provider that Mei Lin had previously endorsed. This presentation of other options by Global Shanghai eliminated the commission of SEA-EAD from the vocational institute, but matched the customers’ preference. This was a common dilemma faced by agents.

Mr. Bei also had little to say about his cooperation with Ms. Mina, since it was a straightforward process. He received her help in learning how to file Australian immigration applications on his own. He did remember that he would only ask Ms. Mina questions if he could not understand something, such as how to create unique personal accounts on behalf of each client. He recounted that since there were different requirements for those who went to English language schools, vocational programs, and degree programs, he had to learn how to fill in the form. Other than that, the process was easy as all he needed to do was upload the scanned documents and passport. He remarked that the transaction number tracker system made his life easier, since he and the clients could simply log in and check the status of their applications anytime without bothering him at the office.
As Mr. Bei and I slowly became proficient in the Australian market, interactions with Ms. Mina became much more stable, unremarkable, and straightforward, until they completely waned. SEA-EAD self-sufficiency ended further online communication with Ms. Mina. She eventually said goodbye with a message: “Hey, I am being promoted to a new department…I am not in Australia anymore but you can send me a message anytime if you need me…Fred is the new person for Australia.” She sent the same message to Mr. Bei. Her replacement effectively shut off any possibility for me or Mr. Bei from cultivating any closer personal relationship. This move also decreased any institutional risk for Global Shanghai in terms of accountability and any other fraudulent transactions. Ms. Mina and Global Shanghai provided an example of professional and straightforward working practices within the unequal hierarchy of the emigration industry.

2.C. Customer Satisfaction from Unsanctioned Hezuo Tie

Client choices about city and country destination required agents to seek out one-time unique ties with little official knowledge or sanction by the Headmaster. This section discusses another highly impersonal hezuo tie with a Singapore education provider that has a branch in China. This one-time temporary work tie became beneficial to me because it reduced the burden of my work; helped create an appearance of efficiency for SEA-EAD, and most of all, provided direct and full access to foreign commissions.

Given the highly autonomous nature of consulting work, education agents must balance profit with delivering school/destination matches for their clients. In some cases, both these needs come together. Hezuo ties, though socially distant, provide the greater speed and work efficiency necessary possible in the impersonal migration market.
Sean and Josie were part of Mei Lin’s clientele list but were not affected by her actions. They received an original school offer for a June 2009 entry that had long since passed, but the two were willing to wait for a 2010 entry. These candidates were a couple who jointly planned to attend the same institution and enter an Advanced Diploma in Hospitality Management at the Carrick Institute in Australia. As with all the cases in which Mei Lin was involved, the first step was to identify if there were any officially designated agents, apart from SEA-EAD, that affected any commission payout. Fortunately, none were listed in their school applications, eliminating any need to seek assistance from a second-tier agency to facilitate recovery of commission.

As previously instructed by the Headmaster, I tried to refer these two cases to Ms. Park, who in turn passed me on to her former office, Academy International. The firm referred the cases to a certain Ms. Soong who specialized in the Australian market. My initial chat with her indicated that she was less motivated and less fluent in English than Ms. Park. I observed that Ms. Soong proved to be difficult to work as they only filed school applications but not assist with the visa application. This meant that I had to involve Mr. Bei to help file their visa applications. Adding two more individuals to the application process would prove to be highly inefficient. In addition, there would be onerous fees and shared profit with Academy International. I could opt to follow this route as it had little financial repercussion for me. However, this entailed more coordination work and greater chances of miscommunication with Ms. Soong.

To make things easier for all parties, I needed a backdoor. A quick online search led me to a solution. Apparently, Carrick Institute had a branch office in Beijing. These meant two things: one, direct communication with the school representatives would make for
faster and transparent transactions; two, our share in commission would largely remain intact as we would not have to relinquish full control of the client and disburse a portion of the commission with a second-tier agent. It was, therefore, an easy decision to “disobey” instructions from the Headmaster to forward all transactions to Ms. Park in order to make work easier, faster, and cheaper.

Since this was a Chinese branch of the Carrick Institute, the office facilitated easy transactions. They updated, extended, and renewed the expired school offers of Sean and Josie to February 2010 with little necessary work on my part. Once this was done, the next phase relied on waiting for the clients’ final decisions. They had a deadline of August 30 to pay for the reservation in order to receive the Confirmation of Enrollment (COE) letter necessary for visa processing. After twenty days, the clients suddenly decided, without any warning or discussion, to switch to Singapore.

At this selection stage, clients often changed their minds multiple times. Based on their own online research, Sean and Josie had decided that it would be better to get a Bachelor Degree in Hospitality Management at the East Asian Institute of Management (EAIM) in Singapore rather than a diploma degree from a vocational institute in Australia. They asked me to assess the school further. Armed with Ms. Mina’s previous tutoring, I studied EAIM’s education package of an English language course, leading to a Bachelor degree track in hospitality. They had an opportunity to upgrade their degree with an additional diploma from EAIM’s partner school, Queen Margaret University of Edinburgh, Scotland. It was a program that suited their time availability, financial capability, and academic level. I approved their choice of program and school.
Once again, I employed a similar strategy as with the Carrick Institute and checked if EAIM had a branch office in China. Indeed, EAIM re-directed me to their Guangzhou office branch. I called them, and I was assigned to an agent called Jessica. Like Ms. Mina, my interactions with her were the kind of mundane transactions that governed most commercial exchanges. Once the clients submitted all pertinent documents, I was advised to pass these documents on to them and wait for the result. Jessica explained that this was a month-long process that required seven days of processing in Guangzhou prior to forwarding their applications to the Singapore school. From there, an expedited system was in place that guaranteed school enrollment and the visa release in a matter of three weeks. She advised me that, after adding on a few more days for courier delivery, we would have the passport and visa stamps in a month. Indeed, we received Sean and Josie’s passports in Qingdao within a month of submission. Jessica remarked that Singapore had a special visa arrangement with China and everything was easy.

As I faced the clients, I reaped their surprise and pleasure at the speed of their application. “We did not expect it to be so fast or without problems!” they exclaimed. After the troubles with Mei Lin, customer satisfaction was a rare occurrence at the office. This case illustrated the ideal scenario between agents and their customers and between agents and their partners: an impersonal hezuo tie that delivered quick results.

Impersonal ties contributed towards appearances of reliability, organization, and predictability in a largely uncertain and untrustworthy study abroad industry. These direct impersonal transactions remained important and essential sources of information and training, especially for uncommon destinations like Singapore. Moreover, these transactions in low status office jobs provided periodic satisfaction of delivering good work and receiving customer appreciation.
3. Risks of Hezuo Ties at SEA-EAD

In the previous section, I showed why hezuo ties are dominant in the migration industry. The impersonal, instrumental, and context-specific function of hezuo provide cheap, immediate, and to some extent, satisfying service delivery. However, agents and companies also take on significant danger when they rely on these impersonal hezuo third-party ties to mediate and file applications on behalf of their clients.

In this section, I describe how these ties create high risks by examining the application process at SEA-EAD. I have identified four general stages with various types of hezuo interventions during inquiry, advising, applying for schools, and visa. Every stage provides opportunities to successfully match a client in his preferred destination with the most profitable incentive from an education provider. However, these are also chances for fraud and profiteering. I reconstruct some of the decisions undertaken by SEA-EAD agent Mei Lin who enlisted her own and company’s hezuo ties. I combine this with my own consulting process to demonstrate that the contradictions and fragility of the system do not rely on individual agents. Instead, I argue that the use of various hezuo ties and the outcome of fraud are chronic outcomes in a system that value flexibility and rewards risk taking.

3.A. Surviving General Inquiry using Hezuo Ties

As I described briefly in the previous chapter, SEA-EAD or EAD (European-American Department) refers to the foreign education placement department of the SEA (Sunshine
Education Agency) language school. SEA is the main corporate entity of which EAD forms just one of the migration placement entities under the language school.

Most clients using the placement service arrived through a process of online inquiries and then face to face visits with an agent. Clients were also sourced from the SEA language students. Once they paid their placement fee, they formalized their status as EAD clients. This was just the first step in a lengthy process that involved multiple meetings, the submission of a seemingly endless stream of documents, the payment of additional processing, and school fees. While this placement process was unfolding, aspiring students may take English review lessons in preparation for tests. Finally, if the process was completed successfully, the students embarked on their study abroad program. The most popular study abroad destinations were the United States (U.S.), Australia, and the U.K.

The placement process was at least as complex for agents as it was for clients. The everyday life of an agent at EAD consisted of typing and chatting online in EAD’s own electronic bulletin board to answer all types of queries regarding overseas study, even prior to any final registration or payment at SEA-EAD. Seasoned agents had enough work experience to answer and verify wide ranging questions from course selection, foreign education system, immigration, visa procedures, and financial preparation.

For first time agents who were learning about the job, this task was overwhelming. SEA’s largest department, the Japan study abroad group, had a supervisor and several co-workers who formed a team and support structure. However, in a small department like EAD, education consulting was a highly autonomous profession. It offered little
managerial support and relied on self-initiative to learn the education systems of several countries and their corresponding consular systems. Unlike the single country destination of other departments, EAD covered the rest of the European and Asia Pacific markets.

One of the fastest ways to learn about foreign education procedures was by reading online forums and gathering information from overseas enrollment as quickly and as widely as possible from various webpages. Another was to cast a wide net and form impersonal hezuo ties with other agents from various education providers and firms specializing in different countries. These agents exchanged information freely via MSN or QQ messaging platforms with the possibility of securing future potential cooperation and shared commission. The rapid, on-demand online exchanges provided by these agents online may help convert the everyday inquiries into actual partnerships with SEA-EAD. These factors motivated a broad range of brokers to aggressively court new connections, especially in new markets in smaller cities like Qingdao. These tenuous ties provided agents with new information for online queries.

3.B. Advising and Assessment: Calculating Profitable Hezuo

For education agents, the process of placing students in universities or schools overseas involves making calculations to balance profit-maximization against taking on a reasonable workload and meeting client’s expectations. This process involves competing interests, since what is best for the agent is not always best for the client or even for SEA-EAD. Agents use hezuo relationships to maximize the benefit for all parties involved.
Once a paying client enters the EAD system, the agent discusses with him options if he has not decided on an education plan or destination. The client takes the lead in identifying his preferences - the type of school, city, country, and his future life goals all of which are crucial to the assessment process. At this stage, agents must assess three critical points and adjust strategies accordingly. These are the candidate’s preparedness to study a program that matches his academic level, his commitment to living abroad, and readiness for independent life. An agent’s honest assessment may run counter to a client’s preferences and aspirations. During this assessment process, an SEA-EAD agent must use his wide and non-committal ties to seek help and information for a profit-maximization calculation.

In chapter two, I described how the global migration industry stifled profit margins of Chinese companies. In sum, a direct application to a school is the ideal arrangement, since education providers grant the full commission to the agent. But this may not necessarily benefit the client, since agents may prioritize a smaller school in an unpopular city in order to gain full commission. A compromise would be to work with a highly competent and connected second level partner with international accreditation and certification who can arrange study packages in highly in-demand cities and universities. In this case, the student, including an average to a below average academic performer, is able to attend a well known university in a popular destination, while agents share the commission pay-out. A larger commission is granted to an agent who can place a foreign student in a high-demand university or city destination as well as enrollment in a language training programs or foundation courses prior to a bachelor program. These programs are largely designed by education providers to attract full-fee paying international students who would otherwise be ineligible to directly qualify into a
bachelor degree program. This placement is highly profitable for second level agents but not for third level agents who receive a disproportionate share of commissions in these kinds of transactions. In exchange for lower commission disbursement, second-tier hezuo agent ties take on the burden of cost for international accreditation and certification that allow for university access and yield greater education information support to third-tier agents.

Second-tier agency hezuo ties aided agents such as Mei Lin, the lead consultant for the Australian market at EAD, as well as efficient service delivery for clients like Mr. He who had specific preferences. Since SEA-EAD lacked international recognition, it was common for her to form partnerships with first-tier agents. Mei Lin worked with such an agency, BIC Beijing, to file Mr. He’s application to study in Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia. Her challenge was that Mr. He only had average grades and a minimum score of 5.0 IELTS, which did not allow him direct entry to the bachelor degree in business. Mei Lin enlisted BIC Beijing to prepare a university pathway program that will allow him to do so.

Using this hezuo arrangement, BIC Beijing bundled together a study package that began with an ELICOS (English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students) intensive program in order to help the client reach the minimum 5.5 – 6.0 IELTS level to study at the university. If he achieved this target, he could then continue to study for an advanced diploma course that would prepare him for the bachelor degree program. Second-tier agencies like BIC, who were officially recognized by the university, easily arranged such programs with few problems. Thus, this hezuo relationship was advantageous for Mei Lin, since BIC undertook all the burden of processing with a guarantee of final approval.
In exchange, BIC acquired official representation of the client to the education provider which in turn granted them full commission and total control in its disbursement to third-tier partners. Mei Lin and EAD only received a portion of the commission, but she nevertheless only had the visa processing to contend with. In this particular case, the client’s preferences took precedence over maximizing profit.

Mei Lin’s use of hezuo ties yielded contrasting results. Her use of hezuo ties eased her workload, but it also opened up possibilities for her to conduct fraud. All commissions from every transaction were paid to SEA-EAD or into the personal bank account of the Headmaster directly. This flexible financial arrangement had been in place during my internship and was deemed normal and acceptable at SEA (see Hung 2008 for a business case in China). Within this opaque accounting system, agents can choose multiple ways to extract illicit profit unless there is a strict supervisory guidance at the department level. Previous documents showed that Mei Lin originally filed Mr. He’s application with Global Shanghai, another second-tier competitor, but she discontinued it for unknown reasons. The Headmaster suspected that her arrangement with BIC was part of her plan to divert the commission directly into her own account rather than to SEA-EAD or to him. Since the COE (Certificate of Enrollment) of Mr. He had already been issued, BIC was uncooperative with EAD and refused to change agents. This attempt of EAD to formally change agents implied that BIC would be automatically disqualified from client representation and thereby lose their commission. Similarly, Macquarie refused to communicate with EAD or put on hold any financial disbursement of commission related to Mr. He’s case. International education providers did not directly deal with third-tier agents or agencies like SEA-EAD without formal accreditation or international certification. The only way the Headmaster could retrieve the BIC share in commission
was to extract it from Mei Lin directly. From the client’s and agent’s perspective, the transaction proceeded successfully. Mr. He was able to leave for Australia. But for the Headmaster and SEA-EAD, this transaction resulted in financial loss.

The use of hezuo ties involves calculated risk. It may ease work for the agent and cater to the client’s preference for a prestigious school in a popular city. This ease and prestige come at the cost of less profit in commission, surrendering control to a second-tier agency for official representation of the candidate, and the company risk for agent diversion of commission.

3.C. School Applications and Collating Documents: Complex Hezuo

Once the client formally enlisted with SEA-EAD, document acquisition simultaneously began. Depending on a client’s situation, the three major types of paperwork required – school transcripts, visa-related papers including bank records, and identification documents - took several weeks or up to several months to acquire. This process required full and active client cooperation, including help from their family, friends, and relatives in order to meet the document submission deadlines and entry dates of an education provider. This was one opportunity to profit in the migration industry as the use of fake documents increased at this point. Clients may supply fake documents themselves, or they may work with other unauthorized agents to supply them these false documents at their own peril. As far as I could see, none of my client’s school or identity records were false, but there was no way to actually verify the paperwork.
The two academic documents that were the most difficult to acquire were the English proficiency exam, and the English translations of original transcripts of academic records that were duly stamped and certified by Chinese universities. These can be tricky, especially when customers had moved away from their hometown residences or several years had elapsed since the graduation period.

However, for most candidates, the toughest hurdle to overcome, if they had not done so already, was to pass an English proficiency exam, such as the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) that was generally used for the British and Australian educational systems, or the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) exam for the American system. This English language study and testing can take at least a year of full time preparation from the candidate and must be considered in the application process and entry timeline. This was when SEA (the language school) and EAD may work together with a shared client.

The English proficiency document and certified academic records were critical in order to submit an application and secure a place from an education provider. Once these tasks were done, a client then paid a deposit or a percentage of the first-year tuition fee to guarantee his place for the term. Then, the education providers verified that all documents were in order (sometimes provisionally for accredited agencies and agents), cleared the payment, and eventually granted the Certificate of Enrollment (COE).

This seamless procedure was made possible by cooperative hezuo ties, although these may be complicated behind the scenes. For instance, another case, such as Mr. Wei’s, revealed the difficult nature of coordination in what could have been a straightforward
matter of coordination between Mr. Lao, the SEA-EAD US-Canadian agent, and Ms. Park, the Headmaster’s preferred second-tier agent based in Korea. These three, along with Mr. Wei’s family and other education providers, became entangled in a complicated case that took a great deal of time and effort to resolve due to Mr. Lao and Ms. Park’s poor communication relationship, multiple back and forth ineffective emails, and ruinous miscommunication between them. Ms. Park enlisted my assistance to help intervene, since she and I had worked together easily and successfully on other cases.

Several problems occurred while this group attempted to coordinate the submission of Mr. Wei’s application. One was that Mr. Wei insisted on an industrial design program at York University/Sheridan Design School in Canada, which did not match his academic achievements, art skills, or language capabilities. Mr. Wei did not have sufficient academic grades to enroll in the bachelor degree program directly, he had a low IELTS language score of 4.5, and he did not want to submit an art portfolio. Two, Mr. Lao ignored this mismatch and told his parents that SEA-EAD could get the student admission to this study program. He was banking on his promise to Mr. Wei’s parents that he could secure admission to their preference with little effort on their part. This went against the advice of Ms. Park, who had already warned Mr. Lao that Mr. Wei would not be able to enter York/Sheridan. Nevertheless, as an alternative, Ms. Park applied to the York University English Language Institute (YUELI), which was still affiliated with York University but not with its design program. This meant that Ms. Park had to persuade the family to accept another design program in a different school after his language training. Third, this process of negotiation was complicated further by the fact that there was a failure in information exchange between agents. Mr. Lao thought that a YUELI program was enough to get a student visa for Canada, but visa rules
required a degree program with a language course. Ms. Park tried to tell him but somehow this was misunderstood by Mr. Lao.

This series of interrelated problems created further setbacks. The parents of Mr. Wei now had a false expectation that York/Sheridan would accept their son, and so they had already paid the administrative fee of 100 CAD (64 EUR) and a portion of the language tuition fee of 1545 CAD (988 EUR). Mr. Lao was unaware of the new visa policy and only submitted the YUELI Letter of Offer to the Canadian consulate. With the possibility of visa rejection looming, Ms. Park quickly enlisted Mr. Wei in two other smaller colleges: Fanshawe, almost two hours away from York University, and Humber Institute of Technology, about twenty minutes away from York University, without the family’s consent. These program additions would guarantee the release of Mr. Wei’s Canadian student visa.

Ms. Park enlisted my help to talk with Mr. Lao and the parents to persuade them to follow her plan. I agreed to help Ms. Park due to my hezuo relationship with her and in order to help save Mr. Wei’s application. I had to tell the father directly about several problems that were not communicated to them. First, Mr. Wei needed to submit a minimum a two-page portfolio of drawings or artwork as part of the requirement for his Sheridan design school application. Since he had not done so, the only recourse was to consider Fanshawe or Humber, which did not require any portfolio submission. However, the parents were reluctant to agree to their son attending a diploma program other than York University. Second, I also had to tell the father that Mr. Wei was only enrolled for the YUELI, not for the design program at York, and that in order for the visa application to succeed they needed a Letter of Offer from either Fanshawe or
Humber diploma program. In order to obtain this letter, however, it would be necessary
to not only choose one of those two schools, but also to pay a portion of the tuition fees.
Only then could SEA-EAD receive a COE and submit the additional document to the
consular office. Third, once the parents agreed to these terms, I had to break the news
that we needed to defer the start date for the YUELI program for at least six months to
match the start of term of Fanshawe or Humber. This was tricky since the current
YUELI entry date had been confirmed and paid for.

The situation was critical. The actual online msn messages with Ms. Park communicated
her panic and frustration on this case.

Ms. Park: “Now I ask the YUELI the possibility to delay the next term starting October
26,...so, let us FIRST wait for their answer, and THEN you persuade Wei…”
Ms. Park: “Pls. consult this matter with the Headmaster, YOU and LAO…”
Ms. Park: “as we already paid the deposit starting Aug. 31...I do not know how school
acts this matter…
Ms. Park: “Several times I said Lao of WEI’s unqualified for York Univ (design program-
BA-jointed with Sheridan) BUT he urged…and Sheridan’s mis DHL problems
happening’s…huh.”
Ms. Park: “headache-“
Ms. Park: “now I hope YUELI allows us to October term without any condition –
reduct (reduce) any deposit etc…”

Mr. Lao conceded to Ms. Park’s plan after several weeks. He admitted that the YUELI
application offer was indeed not enough to obtain a Canadian visa. He talked with Ms.
Park about the diploma courses, chose Fanshawe College, and proceeded to convince the parents that it was still a good school and they needed it for visa purposes. The family eventually listened to him and Ms. Park was able to extend the YUELI entry period to October 2009. This carnival of complex exchanges among agents was not unusual; it was a regular occurrence during school applications and document submissions. This case was simply more dramatic than most. The needless complexity shown here reflected the poor quality of the working relationship between Mr. Lao and Ms. Park.

After the document submissions, the release of the COE or Letter of Offer document from the education provider served as the first celebratory landmark for the customer and agent, regardless of which official or unofficial channels the education agent chose. This document was crucial on several levels. One, it confirmed the official enrollment of the candidate, who was now a bonafide student. Two, it was allowed the application to proceed to the visa application. Three, this document named the agency that officially represented the client. This person or entity secured exclusive rights to communicate directly with the education provider, and more importantly, receive the commission from the education provider. Once this designation had been issued, no changes can be made. This recognition was permanent and any revisions were limited only to extenuating circumstances such as proof of fraud.

3.D. Visa Application: High Risk with Unknown Brokers

Two types of application process were in place at SEA-EAD for visa applications. One was the typical autonomous processing of all steps by a single agent. Mr. Lao filed all the steps in the applications for the US and Canadian markets himself. The second was to delegate particular processes to various personnel. This was what occurred when Mei Lin
left SEA-EAD. Headmaster Qing hired Mr. Bei, an English major, to take her place. But since I was there for support, tasks were separated. I handled the student applications while Mr. Bei took care of the visa process.

Mr. Bei, in the course of our cooperation, explained the visa application process. The two key documents needed were a bank certificate and identification papers of the family unit in order to file an application. Ideally, the collation of the documents should have commenced simultaneously with the start of the school application so that both processes could finish close to the same time. This would create little to no delay in the visa application. Mr. Bei primarily computed the required amount for a bank certificate based on a candidate’s country or city of destination, course tuition, and school. He explained to the families that the bank certificate proved to consular authorities that there were sufficient funds to cover the education and living expenses of the student. He advised clients headed for Australia to deposit an equivalent of up to twenty-four months of living allowance and a year’s tuition in a time deposit with a minimum bond period of three months to facilitate visa approval. The required bond period, ideally in the candidate’s name, varied depending on the immigration rules of the country of destination. For instance, at that time, the minimum was three months for Australia and as long as six months to a year for the US.

Next, the family dossier required the most time and commitment to fulfill. This was because identification papers for the parents, their certification of employment and salary, and other proof of income or assets, such as home or business ownership, were considered by some clients to be sensitive information. These additional documents verified the source of money and financial capability of the candidate/family to fund
their child’s education. In one instance, a client named Sarah, who applied to a school in Canada, refused to divulge in her visa application that her parents were part owners of a factory alongside her relatives. According to her, the parents did not want this information to be known. The Canadian consular authorities turned her application down, despite adequate school funding and sizable assets. The visa consular offices enforced strict compliance rules to ensure that financial sources could be verified.

Once the necessary documents were collated, Mr. Bei then translated them. He then visited the notary public near SEA-EAD to have the translations stamped, and he mailed them to the consular office. The return of the passport with a visa stamp was the second and final celebratory landmark by the agent and client. Any further travel arrangements can be made by the agent or the client.

This straightforward account did not always occur, since the visa application process was vulnerable to other third-party brokers. For instance, the pre-visa paper application process for Australia was prone to outsourcing by a hezuo tie to other hezuo partners and their hezuo partners, unknown to the primary partner. These unknown and unnamed personnel chain increased the risk that documents may be lost and payments stolen. At the time of research, all Chinese applications to Australia had to undergo a paper-based pre-visa assessment (PVA) that was reviewed by the Adelaide Processing Centre.\textsuperscript{14} Once documents were submitted, there was no way for clients or agents to obtain information about the status of the application. They simply had to wait for the final result: rejection or continuation to the visa processing stage. At the time of the research, this opaque application structure provided an incentive for profiteers to take

\textsuperscript{14} The process had since been streamlined eliminating all paper-based applications and country-specific distinctions.
advantage of this flaw in the system. Profiteers received a share from the inflated payments of clients to facilitate these applications in Australia and follow up from there. Few clients were clearly aware that all applications from China to Australia were sent to a verification processing centre in Adelaide with no tracking number. Moreover, clients did not know that consular payment procedures only recognized checks or postal money order sent to the Adelaide address as proof of payment or application.

This pre-visa verification process posed great risks to agents, companies, and customers. Agents could use their own hezuo ties with known and unknown personnel to file and pay for this PVA application. In one case, Mei Lin approached Cherry, her contact in China, for help with Ms. Yiling’s visa application since she was not fluent in English. In turn, Cherry enlisted her own hezuo ties with brokers in Australia, who supposedly knew the system, to submit Ms. Yiling’s visa application, but these ties remained unknown to Mei Lin. The compartmentalization of information and specialization of tasks in the migration industry made it a highly profitable enterprise. Clients were asked to pay cash through unverified secondary bank accounts or transfer money to unnamed third-party in the agent’s network to pay for these services. These third-party ties of Cherry in Australia placed Mei Lin at greater risk and it eventually unraveled their financial scheme in the following paragraphs.

Ms. Yiling’s case exposed the inherent flaws in the Australian pre-visa processing system for Chinese nationals. Ms. Yiling was applying to study nursing at Flinders University. Her visa release was taking too long while her study start date was fast approaching. Her entire study application threatened to fail. Ms. Yiling stormed into the SEA-EAD office demanding an update on her visa release, as Mei Lin had repeatedly assured her that it
was imminent. Ms. Yiling told us that she had made a cash payment of 450 AUD dollars (260 EUR) directly to Mei Lin to process the visa. The only proof that Ms. Yiling had of her payment to the visa application was a wire transfer receipt issued to the “Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs” (DIMIA) in Australia last May 5, 2009. But during my internship, the department no longer used the DIMIA name. Instead, they were known as the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC).\(^\text{15}\)

It became apparent to us at EAD that a fraud had taken place. When Ms. Yiling contacted Mei Lin, her story was that she sent “the money and documents to her friend who lived in Australia who filed it for her…” No bank address or beneficiary name was indicated in the transfer slip to help confirm anything. The only way for me to verify was to call the DIAC Offshore Processing Centre directly in Adelaide. The absence of any reference number and the privacy law in operation made this inquiry difficult. I knew that DIAC would refuse to answer any questions, especially if another agency was listed as the official representative of Ms. Yiling. This was compounded by the problem that Ms. Yiling never kept any personal records, not even her passport number, and completely left everything to Mei Lin. At that time, Mei Lin had already taken her leave of absence from the office.

I had to phrase my inquiry carefully to get around these limitations. I called the DIAC Adelaide and explained to Officer Danny, “My client Ms. Yiling paid for the PVA through wire transfer…” Danny interrupted me and was silent for awhile…” we do not have a bank account and I think your client may be a victim of….there is a lot of cases like this from China…” I quickly replied to his opening, “yes, potential fraud by one of

\(^{15}\) DIAC has since been renamed again as the Department of Immigration and Border Protection.
the agents in our office, so I hope you could help us out by just checking if an application was made and if you can give us a reference number …I know you can’t give me any names, but I just wanted to confirm if her application is there, and if you can give us a reference number…” Danny replied, “I am sorry I cannot give you any answer because you are not her official agent…” I countered with, “I know, but can you just check her name in the system and just say yes or no…you don’t have to tell me anything…” After repeated attempts to gain his cooperation, he answered with much caution and care, “no application was made or received (under this name).” I expected as much.

The immigration rules available online explicitly stipulated that they did not accept cash or direct bank transfers. They only accepted bank checks or postal money order. This was why there was no official bank account listed for DIAC or even for DIMIA. While we can easily accuse Mei Lin of conspiring with this friend to share the cash payment, it was also possible that she was also a victim of her “friend” Cherry’s hezuo ties in Australia, at great cost to her life and career in China. It was clear that Mei Lin undertook all the typical steps in the visa process for Ms. Yiling. Unfortunately, unknown secondary brokers failed her in the timely delivery of the visa for Ms. Yiling. Consequently, it raised suspicion that she might have profited from the visa application. As we shall read in detail in chapter six, Ms. Yiling’s visa was never filed. Mei Lin also suffered police arrest and personal humiliation. The Headmaster and the police were trying to identify and look for Cherry and if they could recover money and other client records. This risky

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16 All payments are now online via credit cards unless you are lodging an application within Australia. (https://www.border.gov.au/Trav/Visa/Fees/how-to-pay-for-an-application) Accessed August 26, 2015.
aspect in visa application had since been mitigated as Australian visa services switched to electronic applications.

The outline of the general process of education consulting demonstrated how hezuo ties were necessary, yet posed risks at every step of the way. The crux of education consulting was primarily the strategic withholding, sharing, and assembling of disjointed, concealed information, and knowledge from other agents. This was made even more complex when minute parts of the process were monetized such as document certification, document translation, or filing papers among numerous unnamed players who were looking to cash in the migration process. The application and consulting process demonstrated the risks that enterprises, agents, and clients faced when they surrendered their business and future to a hezuo relationship in an opaque information system. While risky, this structure repeatedly proved to be necessary to successfully place a student with a foreign education provider.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

This chapter detailed the dynamics of the node of information control in the network of education and migration intermediaries and brokers. I examined the ways the nodes expanded to gather information and sought unpaid support from other agents. At the same time, I looked at how these nodes contracted to restrict commission recipients, avoid transactional complexity, and evade accountability.

Hezuo cooperative ties were one kind of impersonal relations that used information control as the primary node of interaction. This type dominated among education agents
working in the Chinese foreign education and migration industries. Hezuo ties functioned efficiently in this unpredictable and flexible environment due to its three main qualities: instrumentality, contingency, and present-temporal characteristic. Indeed, like in Ms. Park’s case in the first section, the past needed to be concluded or cut in order for any current transaction to occur. This avoided building any close personal relations even for long-term continuous interactions with preferred agents like Ms. Park. The present-oriented perspective of this tie enabled both EAD and Ms. Park to be highly responsive to changes in client preferences and circumstances without the burden of any previous histories.

EAD agents, such as Mei Lin, were subject to the contradictions inherent in using hezuo. In my reconstruction of Mei Lin’s cases, her hezuo cooperation showed that she had successfully negotiated client applications, but she was later caught when an unreliable secondary level hezuo failed to deliver. In my own research, I found that it was necessary to engage with both legitimate and shadow players for any successful application. I demonstrated how sanctioned ties can be disadvantageous, while unsanctioned ties were more profitable and efficient. Both our decision-making pathways were not unusual or unique in education consulting.

Following Strathern’s model of the relational/knowledge network, I discussed in section two the expansion of hezuo ties in the EAD broker and intermediary network. I found that expansion coincided with extracting personnel benefits absent in the transient workplace such as training and support. Despite EAD’s financial loss with working with a second level intermediary like Ms. Mina, she provided mentorship, training, and current information in the industry. Her cost also entailed little work on EAD agents. The
expansion and cutting off of hezuo ties also coincided with assessing which link paid out the maximum commission. Ms. Park, though preferred by the Headmaster, cannot provide this. Indeed, Ms. Park’s involvement in other countries outside of the US and Canada severely undercut profit and entailed greater inefficiency. Therefore, unsanctioned hezuo with agents like Ms. Jessica were feasible due to their position as official representatives of the school in China. EAD had received full support, full intact commission, and service from her. These ties replaced firm support and training to personnel at little to no cost to EAD. These benefits masked the true cost of fraud risk for enterprises, personnel, and clients.

In the third section, I found that the contraction of hezuo ties in the intermediary network occurred during the periods of high risk in the application process. The four phases in the bureaucratic process of migration application constituted the greater proportion of office work and potential profit making by education agents and endangered all participants. Calculating the most profitable hezuo may disadvantage clients as they may be sent to smaller schools that awarded high commissions; SEA-EAD had posted a loss when Mei Lin sent Mr. He’s application to a second-tier agent to access his preferred program. Document procurement and visa applications were risky operations for various reasons such as client non-cooperation, fraud, and unauthorized brokers. All of which had occurred with Mei Lin and myself. The profit motive increased the temptation and risk among unsecured hezuo ties. The present orientation of impersonal hezuo ties made it difficult for cheated clients and firms to identify, prosecute, and recover commissions from the different players in the consulting process. The cost efficiency of transactions possessed the drawback of chronic fraud, absence of accountability, limited legal, and financial liability. This was not necessarily just a moral
issue in China as had been argued elsewhere (e.g., Kang 2014). Impersonal, non-affective hezuo ties exposed the contradictions inherent in a system that required little asset, personnel training, and rewarded risk takers with sizable commissions.

The examination of hezuo ties, one type of impersonal relations, revealed the porous and flexible form of a Chinese transient workplace like SEA-EAD. Moreover, it also demonstrated how these ties facilitated the swift movement of information, money, and people with few encumbrances of obligations and limited transaction histories. This analysis had been hampered by the reliance on the “guanxi explanation.” This chapter upended the commonly held assumption that ‘strong’ guanxi ties served to overcome systemic weakness (see Xin and Pearce 1997, Bian 2002, Yang 1994). By approaching work relations as guanxi relationships, scholars tended to ignore the role and significance of impersonal relations in Chinese SME transient workplaces today.
Chapter 5 Information Control: SEA-EAD Manager-Employee Impersonal Ties

This chapter shifts the discussion from inter-agent relations to the manager-employee work relations in SEA-EAD. I dispel the notion that SEA-EAD manager-employee ties are based on strong, guanxi ties or that guanxi ties address systemic problems. SEA-EAD manager-employee relations rely on impersonal, professional working relations using the nodes of information control to operate, thrive, and profit. Here, I examine how these nodes of information control constitute the social detachment dynamics between managers and employees at SEA-EAD. These dynamics are nested within the system of flexible operation.

Employees at SEA-EAD have understood this system of social detachment as a workaround called “flexible operation” (linghuo caozuo). Business scholars define this system as a management prerogative that freely interprets, adapts, and enacts various strategies or practices to the changing circumstances or to respond to a problem (Kalleberg 2003, 2001, see also Avison and Malaurent 2007, Malaurent and Avison 2015). They define these work culture and operations at flexible firms such as SEA-EAD as cost effective strategies that address the demands of the international and local migration industries, as well as the transient employment situation in China. However, EAD employees have also understood this flexible system as room for their own ideas, preferences, and strategies within the firm. This allows them greater autonomy to decide whether to work within the system or leave from the enterprise entirely. Therefore, this chapter shows how social detachment is imperative to accommodate both the manager’s
perspective for cost-effective solutions and the employees’ perspective to its implications for their own job and career mobility.

In order to understand this system, I have used the proposal of Strathern’s network theory to characterize the unit of SEA-EAD as a network linked by nodes of information control and knowledge practices. In this chapter, I track how information control and knowledge practices together become significant nodes to forge or cut off ties between the Headmaster and the employees to put forward their own individual goals.

This chapter uses the Headmaster’s reaction to the critical event of employee fraud by Mei Lin to uncover and highlight the ways in which information control occurs at SEA-EAD’s flexible operation. I first introduce the term “flexible operation” as the context in which control of information is made by the Headmaster and countered by EAD personnel. Then, I categorize six cases of employee responses to the Headmaster’s management workarounds into three sections. These range from ambiguous to explicit approaches to thwart the Headmaster’s control. The first section discusses Ms. Jia’s outright resignation. The second section examines Mr. Dian’s reluctant acceptance of his job re-assignment. The third section describes four cases that demonstrate the pursuit of employee individual ambitions in varying degrees. Altogether, these impersonal relations are necessary in a flexible operation. The implementation of a flexible operation requires impersonal ties between managers and employees in order to adjust to changes, safeguard information, develop knowledge, retain control, and obtain profit within the risky and volatile business of education consulting. These cases underline that superior-subordinate relations in Chinese transient employment SMEs are not necessarily guanxi ties.
1. Introducing SEA-EAD’s Flexible Operation

“…Don’t you know? This is a flexible operation…there will be no changing!”

Remark by an exasperated Mr. Shin, temporary department leader of SEA-EAD

The term “flexible operation” used by Mr. Shin, described the kind of organized chaos that a newcomer such as another German intern, Hans, observed when he joined EAD for a month. Mr. Shin, the temporary EAD leader who we will encounter later in this chapter, made the comment above in a moment of exasperation, when he failed to receive a reward or leverage for his attempts at creating order and stability after the employee fraud. While his comment that, “there will be no changing!” sounds antithetical to the idea of a flexible operation, he was referring to the Headmaster’s inability to change his views to accommodate employee suggestions for improvement.

In using the term “flexible operation,” Mr. Shin, was expressing dismay over the losses incurred in running a flexible operation. On the one hand, he was expressing his exasperation over the current management situation of chaos (luan) and waste (langfei) in the company that led to the employee fraud. On the other hand, Mr. Shin was referring to the missed opportunities to gain benefits by listening to employees. Mr. Shin remarked that the basis of this system was “fast thinking,” as he tapped his head multiple times as he spoke. These outcomes were antithetical to the advantages of having a flexible operation.

However, the Headmaster’s resistance uncovered his impersonal relations with employees as well as the important role of knowledge/profit control to the business. This ongoing tension between managers and employees was an example of what Kamoche et al. (2011) described as the diametrical opposition of knowledge constitution
within service-oriented flexible firms. They argued that employers viewed knowledge as an asset that can be controlled and extracted. In contrast, employees conceived of knowledge as career capital, the accumulation of which allowed them to pursue their own marketability as response to the uncertainty of their employment. Kamoche et. al. argued that this power dynamic around knowledge control was a central feature in employment relations in a flexible firm. Indeed, as we shall see later, Mr. Shin was advocating for greater commission sharing within the EAD structure.

I highlight this interaction because the control over knowledge is the node by which managers and employees negotiate their working relation, and ultimately, the maintenance or severance of company ties. The Mei Lin incident in the previous chapter must be seen as part of this struggle for information control and not just as a moral problem. In education consulting, the control of knowledge converts into financial profit for anyone who seizes the opportunity to cash in on the information. The underlying feature of the Chinese migration hierarchy is the use of impersonal and short term relations to extract information, keep information, and get the job done quickly while extracting the maximum profit possible.

It is within this context of information control that one should understand how the underpinning impersonal ties and knowledge are essential to EAD’s operations. When Mei Lin’s fraudulent actions were uncovered, Headmaster Qing took control of the situation by instigating impromptu meetings with the EAD staff to collect and consolidate information. These EAD department level meetings by the Headmaster confronted conditions that changed on a daily basis. In other words, a crisis that was produced through flexible impersonal relations had to be addressed through flexible
operating procedures. Hence, the Headmaster called meetings as often as he wished, at any time of the day, regardless of the amount of work that the staff had to do. But these meetings commonly involved the dissemination of micro-management directives, such as calling second level intermediaries, calling various schools, inquiring about the status of clients' applications, and following up on universities' release of Certificates of Enrollment (COEs). For the most part, these directives merely repeated work that was already being done by the staff. Meanwhile, specific instructions were given to employees individually, away from the group setting, to maintain information control. As a result, the system appeared chaotic and opaque, when it was actually used to guard the Headmaster’s need for total control of the situation.

The Headmaster’s office was the epitome of the kind of shifting, liminal, and concealed space that was necessary for information control and to discuss licit or illicit activities embedded in the industry. The activities carried out in this space possessed a liminal status that straddled both the social and professional activities of the Headmaster. These included the recruitment or resignations of new personnel, discussion of the Headmaster with supervisor staff about staff members, client complaints, the entertainment of visitors, and negotiation with external parties such as the police, who briefly visited to investigate Mei Lin’s case. The wide variety of activities that took place in and around this space instigated a great deal of anxiety, suspicion, and rumours among the employees. When EAD staff was summoned to the office, they worried about what the Headmaster wanted from them. They were particularly anxious, lest the Headmaster asked them to perform a task beyond their job stipulations. Employees dreaded these additional tasks that required more time and effort but provided little compensation. As the disgruntled employee Mr. Dian remarked, “I prefer money over dinner meals” when a late session
that stretched until nine o’clock p.m. was “compensated” with a dinner meal hosted by Mr. Ogawa, the Japanese Deputy Headmaster of the language school. The chasm between manager and employee relations was represented by the concealed activities that took place at the Headmaster’s office since this enforced suspicion among staff.

Next, I use the central figure of the Headmaster in the following three sections as the fulcrum to examine the node of knowledge control at EAD. His interactions with employees provide him a way to quickly respond to problems, but employees also thwart his full implementation and control since employees use the same tactics to enact self-development goals. The result is disruption of company goals and loyalty for individual self-development goals.

2. Ms. Jia Resigns (June 2009)

Headmaster Qing consolidated the first EAD work team one week after the Mei Lin fraud was uncovered. We, the staff, only learned about his directive on the day of our first meeting. The Headmaster added two new EAD members besides Mr. Lao and me: Ms. Jia, who was a new hire, and Mr. Dian, who had recently been transferred from the Information Technology (IT) department.

Ms. Jia was hired to replace Mei Lin and, unknown to her, to take over the problems of Mei Lin’s client list. Ms. Jia’s abrupt appearance in the meeting introduced her formally as part of the department. Since Mei Lin’s departure, four weeks previously, I had been managing Mei Lin’s client list, but when Ms. Jia took over this task I lost both position and work space.
It took a week for Ms. Jia to realize the full extent of work required to take on Mei Lin’s clients. This included, to her surprise, reconstructing Mei Lin’s records and appeasing her angry clients. To cope with the workload and its complexities, she deflected angry clients with a simple, “I don’t know,” as they came into the office to inquire about their applications. She was unruffled by clients’ urgent concerns and simply told them that the Headmaster was doing everything to get their personal records back from Mei Lin.

Slowly, Ms. Jia figured that it was too much trouble to work at EAD. On her second week, she remarked to me softly that it was “very disorganized” (hen luan) during the lunch break. For the next couple of days, she demonstrated doubts and hesitation about continuing work at the office. On her first few days at EAD, Ms. Jia had acknowledged to me that she had a personal relationship with the Headmaster, but slowly her acknowledgement changed to a disavowal of her relationship with him. She said instead, “he is a friend of her friend and I do not know him (directly).” This statement of personal disconnection forewarned me that she was deciding to sever ties and cutting her links to the Headmaster and the company.

Her deflection of client inquiries, social withdrawal from her co-workers, and her disavowal of relations with the Headmaster were indicators of dissatisfaction and imminent departure. Indeed, by her third week, Ms. Jia stopped taking lunches at SEA, took extended lunch breaks outside of the office premises, and left on most days before the end of the working day at five o’clock. Gradually these absences increased to half days. After several of these, she dropped out altogether to never return. Barely a month after she began, Ms. Jia sent a text message saying, “apologies, I won’t be going to school (SEA-EAD) anymore.” This was the extent of her farewell, a mobile goodbye. Ms. Jia resigned before becoming further involved at EAD.
3. Mr. Dian’s Reluctant Re-Assignment (June 2009)

One of the features of a flexible firm was to assign employees to perform multiple job roles or to reassign them from one department to another. Kalleberg (2001: 479-480) described this as numerical and functional flexibility initiated by management to maximize productivity or to limit the number of personnel in organizations to reduce costs. This management prerogative required impersonal relations between managers and employees in order to implement it swiftly.

At the onset of the crisis, staff was moved around departments when the Headmaster felt that the labour was needed more elsewhere. This was the reason behind the transfer of Mr. Dian, who was originally from the IT Department to an education consulting position. Mr. Dian repaired computer hardware and software for all the staff members of SEA. He had no previous background or experience as an education agent, but the Headmaster decided to move him because he believed that, “he doesn’t do anything” at the IT department. The Headmaster aimed to maximize Mr. Dian’s productivity, without asking Mr. Dian for consent or forewarning. When Mr. Dian was called in to join a meeting with EAD’s agents, he was baffled, although he had grown suspicious when he was called to the Headmaster’s office that morning. Mr. Dian exclaimed to me on our first meeting, “I don’t know anything!” He refused to be involved with the crisis and dreaded working outside his job description.

Mr. Dian was temporarily assigned to reconstruct student records and coordinate with Mei Lin’s clients regarding their school re-applications despite his explicit protests,
dismay, and anger. The Headmaster treated his behaviour with humour, smiled, and chuckled at him. The Headmaster ignored Mr. Dian's tantrums, dismissing them as similar to those of “a child” (haizi) who nevertheless, would be expected to follow instructions afterwards. Despite Mr. Dian’s outward frustration and inward disgruntlement, the Headmaster held firm in his belief that all employees were compelled to undertake any tasks assigned to them, in line with a clause in standard staff contracts. If he really did not want the job and confront the Headmaster directly, Mr. Dian's only other option at that time was to resign, which he did not do. His reluctance made him an extremely disgruntled EAD employee who constantly frowned, sighed, argued loudly with the Headmaster during meetings and expressed negativity and exasperation in all his tasks. He was terribly upset about this new job but said that he had “no choice” (mei banfa), he said that he could not simply resign now, but to go along with it for the moment.

4. Degrees of Employee Resistance and Control (June-September 2009)

This section discusses four cases in which the Headmaster’s temporary crisis team members display various forms of resistance and independence from his control. The cases include Mr. Lao, a permanent member of the EAD division; Deputy Headmaster Song, a supervisor at SEA; Mr. Smith, an English language teacher from SEA; and finally, Mr. Shin, a volunteer from the Korean Study Abroad department. All four cases showcase different ways in which employees attempt to maintain work ties by temporarily wielding control of specific skill sets and information. As their situations change, some employees choose to maintain ties while the others have opted to break from it and choose their own self-development goals.
4.A. Mr. Lao: Strategic Indifference (June – September 2009)

The Headmaster’s attempts to use the most senior member of the EAD, Mr. Lao, to manage and control the division were easily thwarted by him. The Headmaster was cautiously counting on him to “supervise” (guanli) the EAD in addition to his role as agent. However, his intention proved unfeasible, because Mr. Lao made himself unreliable. He had the unexplained habit of disappearing from the office for several hours every day, and was frequently absent or late for SEA and EAD meetings. No one ever seemed to know where he was or what he was doing. Most likely, Mr. Lao was undertaking agent work that benefitted him directly, and spent his time performing sales, meeting clients, and using his channels outside of the office to process paperwork. Such activities were typical in education consulting. But the Headmaster himself did not discount any possible wrongdoing and implied that Mr. Lao’s absences were quite suspicious, stating, “I don’t really know what he does…” When I asked if he knew what cases Mr. Lao were working on, the Headmaster did not know, and he could not prove any wrongdoing on the part of Mr. Lao. Indeed, he had little control and managerial oversight over his activities.

Mr. Lao’s monopoly on American and Canadian education information conferred him leverage. The Headmaster could not easily fire or reprimand him; rather, he was forced to tolerate his faults. Thus, the isolation of knowledge implicit in a flexible operation did not only benefit the Headmaster, but it also granted Mr. Lao a significant level of power.
4.B. Deputy Song: Reluctant Participant (June 2009)

Mr. Song, Deputy Headmaster of the organization, was re-assigned to assist the Headmaster in overseeing EAD. I was therefore surprised when the Headmaster assigned him lower level supervisory work that involved soothing customer outbursts and coordinating client paperwork. At first during the meetings, Mr. Song complied with the Headmaster's instructions to supervise the EAD. During the first few days, he appeased two disgruntled EAD customers while the Headmaster was away and avoided complaining customers. He had come to see that his main job was to calm customers and perfunctorily assign tasks (Ms. Huang, can you contact the school) or ask for papers (Ms. Huang, do you have a copy of the passport). It was not a task that he relished seeing his irritated look whenever the customers called and visited the office.

The Headmaster’s plan for him to take his place and become a coordinator was unfulfilled. While he performed minimal duties in the first few days, Deputy Song’s presence in the office became erratic. He was rarely around, and Mr. Dian and I could not rely on him for daily assistance. His constant absences did not ease our work load at EAD or address Mei Lin’s angry customers. Day by day, his presence diminished until he no longer joined our meetings after three weeks. I later learned that he had resigned and departed without giving a reason to the staff. After Ms. Jia’s example of social withdrawal, Mr. Song’s absences indicated that his departure was also imminent.

4.C. Mr. Smith: Active Self-Development (July - August 2009)
Mr. Smith was an American who taught English at the SEA and had lived in China for five years. He offered EAD clients English practice sessions for their visa interviews. I ranked him as high-status personnel at SEA because he possessed the physiological skin color valued in the world of English teaching in China – the white skin (see Pieke 2012, Henry 2013). As a foreign teacher, his status distinction at SEA was largely attributed to the gulf in compensation between himself and SEA’s local Chinese teachers. Mr. Smith’s 10,000 RMB (or approximately 1055 EUR) per month contract stipulated a maximum of one hundred work hours per month, or about twenty-five hours per week. According to him, the difference between the locals and the foreigners was that for every hour that exceeded this work period, foreign teachers can demand overtime payment. In contrast, local teachers were paid approximately 2,000 RMB (about 200 EUR) per month, or more or less depending on teaching experience, with no payment for overtime work.

As with Mr. Dian, the Headmaster believed that Mr. Smith had a lot of free time given that there were few students at that time. Mr. Smith’s teaching had been reduced to one session per week, for five students. However, Mr. Smith was still required to put in twenty-five hours of “work,” which he derided as having to physically stay in the office. Mr. Smith explained to me that the school wanted him to develop a textbook and a lesson plan for the students during this official “work” time. He believed that it was a ploy to replicate his teaching style, put their name on it, and call it their own. He therefore simply ignored the directive of the Headmaster and school coordinator, Mr. Luo, as he dutifully logged in a couple of hours each day and prepared his English exercises for his classes. After which, he would simply time out and leave. He called his every day routine as a tedious exercise as he had been doing it for years.
During the course of a regular EAD meeting, Mr. Smith was suddenly asked by the Headmaster to join in. He was puzzled about his sudden addition, but overall, he welcomed the change. This was his second year under contract at SEA and he was already bored. For EAD, this reallocation was valuable not only because it maximized the use of Mr. Smith’s time, but also because Mr. Smith’s stature as an American lent authenticity to EAD services. He was assigned the duties as an education agent for the U.S. and Canada specifically targeting younger Chinese students. Ultimately, the Headmaster aimed to surreptitiously undermine Mr. Lao’s monopoly of information in this region.

This decision by the Headmaster also incurred unforeseen advantages to the rest of the EAD employees. Particularly, it relieved Mr. Dian and me from learning the U.S. and Canadian regional educational and visa systems, in addition to fixing Mei Lin’s Australian cases. This was a welcome relief for those of us who had to address these inquiries whenever Mr. Lao was away. Indeed, this new arrangement also eased the department workload of the existing staff in general. Overall, Mr. Smith and the Headmaster appeared to be satisfied with this new informal arrangement.

As the days wore on, Mr. Smith relished his new role and worked on it diligently. He now spent more time doing consultancy work than his teaching. He took his new role seriously, attentively receiving calls, and meeting with potential clients. He also started studying the U.S. boarding school system for primary and high school students, and he created flyers to promote both the SEA and EAD units. We discussed poster designs to attract new students and clients. Mr. Smith was especially pleased with the consultancy work, since he now logged six to eight hours per day and charged the SEA for overtime.
While he did not fully disclose the exact amount he was paid, it came close to doubling his salary and was high enough for the Headmaster to become alarmed after three weeks. The Headmaster had misjudged Mr. Smith. He overlooked the possibility that Mr. Smith would assert his contractual rights. He thought that he could simply maximize Mr. Smith’s production by pushing him to work, and to develop new expertise without additional compensation. After all, Mr. Smith had readily agreed to this new job. This expensive Oversight led the Headmaster to end Mr. Smith’s new role. He reverted Mr. Smith’s working hours back to his usual twenty-five-hour work week. All of Mr. Smith’s acquired knowledge of U.S. and Canadian education systems was wasted, while his plans of marketing and promotion of overseas study was halted. This meant that the burden of his workload returned to Mr. Dian and me. The Headmaster’s plan to undermine Mr. Lao’s monopoly of American market knowledge failed, and productivity at the EAD also suffered.

This new development did not bode well for Mr. Smith. He retained both his roles, of SEA teacher and an EAD agent, despite his work hour reduction by the Headmaster. This placed him in a liminal position, since he continued to be called to attend EAD meetings, meet clients, and answer queries if he was in the office. This ambiguity led to his increasing dissatisfaction as the days and weeks went by. He refused to work two jobs as he saw this as “abuse” and “confusing.” He told me that he planned to confront the Headmaster about what his real job was with SEA since his contract was due for renewal in about a month. He remarked, “I am tired of this…I wanted to find out if I am going to be assigned to the teaching department or the study abroad division.” His decision for a direct confrontation did not appear to bode a positive outcome. Sure enough, Mr. Smith was disgusted about the outcome of his meeting with the Headmaster. He refused
to talk about the details, but he had few sympathetic adjectives for Headmaster Qing. From then on, Mr. Smith reverted to his full-time teaching position as stipulated in his teaching contract, with little involvement with EAD. Suffice it say that when his teaching contract ended, it was not renewed by the Headmaster.

**4.D. Mr. Shin: Active Self-Development (August - September 2009)**

Two weeks after the departure of Mr. Smith, the Headmaster hired a new employee, Mr. Bei, whom we met in the previous chapter, to replace Mei Lin’s position. This development coincided with another surprising turn wherein another employee, Mr. Shin from the Korea Study Abroad Department, volunteered to manage the EAD. This development was another significant case that exhibited a fluid work environment. Mr. Shin colluded with the Headmaster to help EAD at no extra cost, while he secretly pursued his own goals. In order for his plan to work, he first needed to consolidate his position as a leader. To do this, he reorganized the work flow at EAD and cultivated a reputation as a person who stood ready to help EAD’s employees and clients. During the peak of the Mei Lin crisis in mid-August, when EAD was struggling to untangle the mess that she had created, Mr. Shin took great pains to help soothe incensed customers. Mr. Shin sympathized with us, the beleaguered EAD personnel, who received the brunt of customer anger. On his own volition, he stood up in his cubicle in the Korea Study Abroad Department to intercept angry customers, blocked them from approaching EAD work cubicles and instead listened to their complaints himself. He appeased these clients by explaining the solutions that were being undertaken by EAD and the Headmaster. He filled the roles that should have been performed by Mr. Lao and Deputy Song.
Mr. Shin built his EAD leadership rights through asserting his conflict resolution skill. From his point of view, he believed that conflict resolution was simple (jian dan) and required minimal effort that would not interfere with his job as an agent in the two-person Korea Study Abroad unit. Mr. Shin voluntarily took on distressed clients and instructed us, “If anybody calls or ask about their records, call me and look for me.” Mr. Shin possessed personal characteristics that inspired clients to listen. He was tall, well-dressed, patient, a good listener, and presented a calm yet firm figure who could counter the assertiveness of furious clients. Ms. Yiling, one of the critical cases which I will discuss in the next chapter, stopped her hysterical and angry ranting to me, and complained to him directly. He then led her away from the office cubicles to discuss her grievances. Mr. Shin displayed important leadership qualities that included tackling problems, taking responsibility, and shielding the EAD’s staff from angry clients.

Education consulting was usually highly autonomous work, but for two weeks in late August, there was a sense of calm and unity among EAD staff that I had not once glimpsed in the two months that I had been working there. There was comparatively less animosity and anxiety, and more cooperation, between EAD staff members. “Things are going to be different around here,” Mr. Shin assured me as he leaned to whisper into my cubicle. Mr. Shin broke down the status quo of autonomous work and created a work flow of task differentiation between Mr. Bei, Mr. Dian, and I. This was not a formal arrangement, but one built on constant verbal communication. I was increasingly tasked by Mr. Shin to specialize in the role of coordinating with foreign institutions, to investigate who was listed as the agencies and agents in clients’ applications, and to study the commission structures of the education providers. “You continue work on the
Australian students and talk to schools abroad,” he advised me. Once a client’s application was accepted by an education provider, I passed the papers on to Mr. Bei who processed the visa applications. Mr. Shin instructed Mr. Bei, “You learn how we can file (Australia) visas online.” Mr. Shin drew upon this new division of labour to placate the customers, telling them things like, “Teacher Huang is calling the universities to ask about applications” or “Mr. Dian is working on your application.” These verbal instructions eased customers’ anxieties and clarified our individual roles in his new work flow. These task assignments allowed work to continue with minimal tension within EAD.

The Headmaster did not interfere or contest Mr. Shin’s directives, especially since he was receiving no additional compensation. Mr. Shin and the Headmaster had privately come to an understanding that Mr. Shin would help the EAD when he could. This relieved the Headmaster from the burden of micro-managing department-level activities. “He has no problems with it,” Mr. Shin remarked. Consequently, Mr. Shin became a buffer between us employees and reported directly with the Headmaster. He now played a supervisory role in which he mediated the Headmaster’s constant demands, questions, and transmitted instructions to us individually or collectively.

Once a stable and effective work flow had been established, Mr. Shin was adequately positioned to mobilize his own personal ambitions. As Mr. Shin learned about the system at EAD, he confirmed the potential for him to earn more money for himself, as well as others if at all possible. Mei Lin’s diversion of commission exposed the lucrative profit structure of the global study abroad system to him and the entire SEA. The rumours circulating suggested that Mei Lin had pilfered anywhere from 30,000 RMB (3,202 EUR)
to as much as 300,000 RMB (32,022 EUR) through the years. These rumours fanned the flames of further unconfirmed office gossip. An employee in the Japan Study Abroad Department claimed that she was not really getting married (as she had stated for her leave) but was going to settle down in Europe. A colleague in the IT department said that she had allegedly bought a car and flight tickets for Italy or France for her boyfriend and herself before she was arrested by the police. These rumours could not be confirmed, particularly since any topic on Mei Lin around the office was banned by the Headmaster and was treated as taboo. Even private conversations were guarded. Regardless of the veracity of these varied claims, the crucial result of this exposé was for employees to learn that the EAD was a profitable unit in which to work.

Mr. Shin’s now aggressively formulated a plan. He explained to me the current commission structure of the company: “In a year, if everyone garnered about two hundred students in all departments then each person can get 600 RMB (64 EUR)…it is too little! If we can get more students in our department maybe we can have our own bonus.” His plan’s feasibility appeared to increase when he learned that education providers such as the Carrick Institute of Australia, which had a branch in China, were offering twenty percent of the first year’s tuition as a commission fee for agents. Mr. Shin calculated these commissions to be worth around 13,000 RMB (1,388 EUR) from one client alone. He wanted a new incentive system for EAD that allowed personnel a share of the commissions from new recruits.

Mr. Shin planned to negotiate with the Headmaster for a portion of the commission fees. Finally, after several days of closed door meetings, he admitted defeat. Mr. Shin shared his frustration with me early one evening after the last meeting. He dejectedly told me
that, “…there is no hope or use because he is stingy!” He continued, “The Headmaster would not give us a portion of that commission in spite of our work.” Mr. Shin refused to share further details with me.

With the breakdown of negotiations, Mr. Shin began to be absent from the office. Over the course of the next two weeks, we saw our fragile EAD work flow process crumble with his absence. Group cooperation disappeared. The department reverted back to the status quo of a fragmented unit with work undertaken individually rather than collectively. On his last day, Mr. Shin spent a few hours in the office to remove his things. He informed me quietly that he was “resigning (弃职)…the Headmaster did not approve of my salary increase or position promotion.” He apologized to me and he never came back. The ambition and personal initiative of Mr. Shin came at a steep gamble that cost him his job and EAD productivity.

These employee actions and responses, as an outcome of impersonal manager-employee relations and control of knowledge, contributed to an unstable and uncertain work environment. However, this unstable environment did not necessarily hinder the resolution of the problems stemming from Mei Lin’s fraud. It was a slow, stressful, and inefficient process for the staff and client to address the crisis. Nonetheless, it fit the cost-efficient requirement of a flexible SME like SEA-EAD. These temporary workarounds may very well quickly adapt to crises. But their marginally acceptable solutions contributed to the periodic appearance of fraud and chronic inefficiency at the workplace.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

The study of Chinese transient employment SMEs, such as an education consulting firm like SEA-EAD, provided an opportunity to examine the social detachment dynamic of management and employee relations in an era of work and career flexibility. The manager-employee relation, an unequal and hierarchical relationship, had been a significant component of the proponents for the guanxi explanation. Business management scholars had identified this relationship as rooted in the Chinese Confucian-based value system. For instance, Hofstede and Bond (1988) cited unequal relations as the core of collectivist values in which deference and respect were accorded between individuals in an unequal relationship. When applied to the workplace, manager-employee relations were akin to a ruler-subject or father-son type of relation. This implicit assumption led other business management scholars to assume that guanxi relations existed between managers-employees (see Redding 1993, 1996, Chou et al. 2014, Chin 2014, Qiu 2014, Han et al. 2012). However, this assumption had not been helpful to understand SEA-EAD manager-employee detachment.

A scholarly focus on the assumption of guanxi ties between manager and employees inhibited our ability to understand how the social detachment are permanent features in various industries where low status office work, job hopping, and short-term employment make guanxi ties unnecessary and cumbersome for all parties to maintain and the firm to operate in. By focusing on ties of information control, this chapter dispelled the notion that guanxi ties can be assumed to exist between Chinese managers and their employees. I had examined impersonal professional ties between managers and employees on their own terms, without relying on the ‘guanxi explanation.’ Using
Strathern’s network theory, SEA-EAD can be understood as a network of manager-employee relations tenuously linked to each other by information control practices in a volatile local work environment.

The Mei Lin crisis had exposed this network’s social detachment dynamics through the practices of flexible operation. This was a system in which managers like the Headmaster freely adjusted tasks and personnel according to the changing circumstances with minimal costs. A flexible operation was contingent to the Headmaster’s implementation of social detachment practices to maximize labour costs and profit. However, this explanation did not account for an employees’ perspective. EAD employees understood this flexible operation as a system in which their own individual interests and ideas counted to improve work flow and job conditions. Therefore, a flexible operation was built on a system of social detachment that demonstrated the tension between a business owner’s need to maximize costs and profit and an employees’ need to improve his job and career prospects.

There were several ways in which social detachment was exhibited. Those that had little attachment or leverage such as new hire Ms. Jia and Deputy Song simply resigned, or grudgingly accepted re-assignment for several months such as Mr. Dian. Those who possessed greater knowledge and other skill sets employees engaged in negotiation and active strategies that favoured their interests. Mr. Lao covertly avoided added responsibilities; Mr. Smith demanded double compensation for double work; Mr. Shin volunteered to help in order to propose a new profit sharing scheme, but eventually resigned after his proposal was rejected by the Headmaster. These examples show how social detachment practices produce an unstable workflow and work environment.
Since SEA-EAD thrived with social detachment practices, the nature of time in a flexible operation is inherently present-oriented. A flexible operation then had little impact to preventing and solving Mei Lin’s fraud case except for limited troubleshooting solutions. The provisional work team of EAD only addressed immediate concerns and achieved short-term goals. It offered little long-term vision or goals for the EAD unit. The flexible operation ensured that no lasting system or protocol can be firmly established at the department level to quell and prevent such fraud from recurring in the future. Hence, not only was the international system fraught with risk, the flexible operations within the intermediary enterprises reproduced these risks. The interplay between social detachment and information control at the local level in China contributed to the systemic fraud risk in the entire study abroad industry.
Chapter 6: Power Difference: Customer Conflict Resolution at SEA-EAD

This chapter discusses the node of power difference that constitute the second type of workplace social detachment practices between agents and customers. The incident of Mei Lin’s fraud has broken the commercial contract of trust, and in the process, destabilized a power-neutral dynamic, between SEA-EAD and the clients. To restore the power-neutral relationship, customers engage in affect-based conflict resolution practices. The empty rhetoric of zuo pengyou (being friends) and the displays of emotional outbursts by clients are not attempts to establish personal relations with their agent. Rather, these are strategies to create effective, trustworthy, commercial transactions built around ideal, power-neutral, professional, impersonal relations.

The study of customer relations at EAD offers a unique insight into how ties are transformed into impersonal ones by using personal-like idioms through ritual-like practices. Impersonal relations are not only temporary or fleeting interactions as we have seen in the last two chapters, but these have corresponding ritual scenarios that may confuse observers as turning into personal relations. The appearance of rhetorical practices of reciprocity during conflict situations are reinterpretations of social interactions in the unpredictable consumer market of studying abroad. Such dramaturgical displays of consumer protests reflect consumer anxiety and act as forms of control in highly insecure and risky transactions in the migration industry. Unlike the creation of strong, personal ties commonly attributed to ritual-type practices, these strive to create power-neutral, professional working relations.
One of my key findings is that this process of social detachment, or the cutting off of any personal links, works to diminish power differences between customer and employee. Power hierarchies hinder swift transactions and mobility of customers. Xiang (2012, 2013) argues that agents are generally in positions of power and control. Indeed, Mei Lin’s fraud is an uncomfortable confirmation of this. However, the customer resolution performances aim to transform these unequal relations into power-neutral, impersonal, professional working relationships. Impersonal relations are cost and task efficient because social detachment accrue low power differences between two parties.

This chapter focuses on how customers restore power-neutral commercial transactions after a crisis. In the aftermath of the Mei Lin affair at SEA-EAD, I begin the analysis of the conflict resolution process with a brief background on the nature of social detachment and its relationship to power between customer and agent in the first section. This defies the typical deference-authority framework commonly attributed to sales work especially in China. The ethnographies on Chinese service occupations, such as in the hospitality business (Otis 2008a, 2008b), retail industry (Hanser 2007a), and the insurance industry (Chan 2007, Shen 2009) for instance, show how great emotional demands are extracted from employees that result in customer-employee inequities. I argue here that, like manager-employee relationships, SEA-EAD impersonal ties have little power difference or possess a more distributed form of power between two parties. Mei Lin’s fraud upends this dynamic and creates an asymmetrical power relationship, that hinders customer mobility and swift agent commission transfers.

The second section discusses how ritual performances re-establish power-neutral impersonal relations. I reconstruct three phases of performative acts by customers to
redress injustice, to compel service delivery, and restore professional, impersonal
customer-agent relationship. The first stage is the customers’ emotional outbursts (naozhi).
Here, clients overtly wield their power by displaying emotional protests – from verbal
threats to threats of public exposure. Stage two consists of the management response of
deflection and avoidance of confrontation in response to customer reactions. Both
customers and employees/management move between these two stages in varying
intensity and duration, depending on specific circumstances. During this period, one
party gains leverage over the other, and this shifts the power relations asymmetrically to
the benefit of either party. Once the emotions have diminished and a solution proposed
or accepted, then negotiations proceed to the third stage of resolution. The ideal goal is
to reach a power equivalence wherein the impersonal relations of commercial exchange
between customer-agent should ensue. This target may, of course, not always be reached.

In this chapter, I draw upon my role as an agent to talk about both interactions between
agent and customers in order to safeguard my colleagues’ employment security and
prevent any social fallout for them. The observations and interactions have been
summarized and reconstructed from six client cases – Sarah, Ms. Yan and her mother
(Mother Yan), Lina, Mr. Wen, Mr. Zhang, and Yiling and her father who are affected by
six to twelve months delays in their dates of entry and departure for Australia.

1. Power Relations in Education Consulting

One of the advantages of relations based on social detachment is the lack of substantial
power difference between involved parties. Migration brokerage or/and migration
networks are often described as being based on trust from personal networks (Tilly 2007,
Boyd and Nowak 2012), but in education consulting, they are not. Agents possess merely
tentative mutually advantageous commercial trust with other agents to deliver an expected promise. SEA-EAD customers assume that agents possess all the power, and to some extent in the process they do, but they are not entirely correct. Agents are vulnerable to fraud themselves and have little control over service delivery and transactions from other agents. As a result, customer fraud upends the power-neutral feature of impersonal relations and now makes power asymmetry a central dynamic. One cost is the emotional and financial fallout that occur after an instance of fraud. Previously, we had seen in Chapter Four how impersonal relations increased the risk for fraud despite their potential for efficiency. Mei Lin’s actions lay bare the contradictions underneath the customer-agent relations. That is, the modicum of trust in a personal-like relationship has now been shattered. Furthermore, Mei Lin’s activities also do not exemplify the efficiency of impersonal, transactional, professional relations. This double revelation exposes the underlying significance of power, or its lack, in impersonal relations.

There are two forms of power difference that results from the fraud. One is the shift to the agent the advantage of information and full payment receipt without service delivery. I have discussed this extensively in Chapter Four. Here, I want to focus on the response of customers by engaging in ritual-like practices to restore transactional trust and social detachment ruptured by the fraud (Van Gennep 1960). The liminal properties of ritual performances allow customers to release emotions, tensions, and alternately shift power back to them (ibid.). Towards the end of the process, these practices diminish any power difference between agent and customer. Ideally, the result should be the return to impersonal relations. Second, the degree of emotion work to respond to the customer, unnecessary in impersonal relations, now become obligatory for agents. These two
parties negotiate their power differences through emotion work.

Occupations that practice social detachment, such as education consulting, demonstrate the uneven demands of emotions in service delivery. This is a type of sales work that do not clearly fit within the deference-authority dichotomy typical in customer encounters described using the emotional labour framework. Emotional labour refers to the commodification of emotions and its exchange value in the performance of work, especially in customer face to face interactions (see Grandey and Gabriel 2015: 324, following Hoschild 1983, 1979). Part of this literature is concerned with how interactions with customers become negative asymmetrical power relations due to demands in emotional regulation. This is evident with emotional exhaustion and stress seen in organisational research (e.g., Grande et. al. 2015, Krannitz et. al. 2015, and Wagner et. al. 2014) as well as in ethnographic research on service workers (e.g., Kang 2010, Buch 2014, 2013, EL-Annan 2014).

While education consulting relies on less emotional or affect-based interactions for efficiency, it requires an initial perception of personal-like interactions. Mei Lin initially established friendly relations with her clients, but these evolved into generally mundane impersonal and goal-based interactions with little incentive to build a lasting personal relationship. Two clients in particular, Sarah and Ms. Yan’s mother (or Mother Yan), both attested to how Mei Lin’s bright demeanor tapered off in the middle of the application process, and how her contact with them decreased until finally they did not hear from her anymore. Furthermore, Mother Yan had not heard from Mei Lin for a year. Neither Sarah nor Mother Yan had expected that Mei Lin would betray them like this. Here lies the crux; customers knew the volatility and risk in the consulting business.
yet continued to invest trust in and expect reliable commercial trust from their agents.

However, one emotional cost during this power shift is the heightened demand by customers of personal service delivery from the agent. As we can see in the next section, this process of unequal power and emotional labour creates a toll on all SEA and EAD employees. Similar to the impersonal transactions of everyday, the end goal of the ritual process is not the establishment of communitas of the group (Turner 1969), but to reduce any emotional and personal demands inherent in professional relations. These practices cannot be accounted for by the ‘guanxi explanation.’

These public performances of dramaturgical scripts outside of the enterprise become important for scholars to understand Chinese conflict resolution practices in the office. For example, in his examination of student protests, C.J.J. Chen (2009) find that student protests are largely against the abuse of the for-profit status of the university. Students are not against the profit-making model of education but extreme greed, especially on issues that affect them directly and visibly, such as sudden food price increases at the canteen or a lack of degree credit compatibility with other universities. Students’ emotional protests are performances that aim to restore ‘fair’ commercial exchange between customers and service providers. In the bureaucratic system, citizen petitioning, and protest bargaining are ways to restore the role of the state as an equitable institution with its citizens. Lee and Zhang (2013) describe how the petitioner-citizen display emotions as a way to negotiate or reverse power and authority of the state (represented by bureaucrats). They observe that this temporary power of the petitioners worries bureaucrats who need to continually manage and control citizens in order to retain its authority.
These examples bear similarity to the objective of addressing grievances using ritual-like performances of dramaturgical scripts in SEA-EAD. By following the suggestion of Strathern’s actor-network theory, I view these scripts as a process of cutting off of personal relations and rebuilding social detachment in ritual form. However, the ritual process here is unlike the instrumental or goal-oriented outcome of communitas in Turner’s study (1979); rather, it represents the “emergent and responsive qualities of ritual” (Herrmans 2015: 83, 85). This means that there is an element of unpredictability of how events will unfold and how outcomes do not necessarily lead to success towards a specific goal (ibid.). This type of ritual practice derives its potency not from predictability but from the possibility that an ideal outcome could be achieved (ibid.: 85-87). In this case, by initiating conflict resolution practices, a professional impersonal relationship can hopefully be restored. The following crisis mitigation practices demonstrate how unpredictable the outcomes are. The different degrees of impersonal and professional customer-employee interactions require varying degrees of emotional labour. In the next section, I discuss how power is renegotiated between agent and customer.

2. Conflict and the Return to Impersonal Relations

For most customers, choosing SEA-EAD as their agent was a matter of function and serendipity. Yiling’s father, Mr. Han, applied to SEA-EAD because the office was near his office, and he befriended the Headmaster after enlistment. However, it was more common for customers to find SEA-EAD online. For instance, Lina, a twenty-seven-year-old nurse who wanted to pursue nursing in Australia, first discovered SEA-EAD
while browsing the Internet. She judged them to be a reputable and convenient business because of its good location in the city. After her initial conversation with Mei Lin, she felt reassured about her decision. As it turned out, however, there was little assurance of service delivery for these customers, even if they had judged conditions to be safe. As it will become clear in the next section, emotional costs for both customers and agents in education consulting differ from other documented types of service occupations.

For analytical purposes, I categorize the conflict resolution process into three cyclical stages. The first phase includes various types of emotional displays by customers, including violent outbursts. The second phase shows how management responds by withdrawing any interaction or engagement with customers at this emotional stage. Finally, when customers calm down, a resolution can be negotiated with varying results on whether impersonal relations can be truly achieved.

2.A. Stage 1: Customer Outbursts

Sarah was the first customer who initiated me into what staff members called “kicking up a fuss” (naoshi) or “making trouble” (zhaoshi). Such emotional outbursts commonly involved verbal threats, which might be accompanied with some instances of physical violence such as destroying furniture and other property. However, it was the potential to inflict damage rather than actual damage that puts customer’s plight into focus for firms like SEA.

Sarah began a cascade of customer complaints after the second week of Mei Lin’s absence. She stormed into the office mid-morning shouting, cursing, and hand banging on the side of my cubicle, and pointing at me. She confronted and threatened me because I was sitting at Mei Lin’s desk. I had not met her previously and did not know
her or of her case. I was shocked, terrified, and confused about this unknown person who suddenly entered the office uttering words of abuse.

This display of customer anger occurred within a spectrum. In most cases, clients came into the office with friends or family members to back them up and enforce their position. Lina brought her father and her husband with her. Mr. Ogawa’s translator, Mr. Xiao, explained to me the purpose of these accompanying friends after another separate incident of conflict at the office. He implied that the purpose of the friend was to watch, manage, and remove the instigator when possible from the situation. This situation was similar with clients who came into the office accompanied by their family or friends. Despite her overt displays of aggressive behaviour, Lina refrained from direct physical violence towards staff members while her family just waited beside her. This performative aspect of customer anger was a part of the social knowledge of conflict resolution in education consulting, but the intensity of these episodes surprised me.

Meanwhile, Sarah, accompanied by her friends, cursed and shouted, “Shit! Liars! Why are my papers not here? I already submitted it to her (Mei Lin)!” I was shaking and nervous inside. I responded by being honest about the situation, “I checked with Eynesbury and they do not have your name…no application was made…but I am filing one for you immediately!” In exasperation, she replied, “Fuck, how can this happen? I should be leaving already by this time!”

Sarah’s display triggered an appropriate management response. It attracted the attention of Mr. Luo, SEA academic coordinator, who kept regular hours at the office. He intervened immediately and asked Sarah what was the matter. His immediate objective
was to divert a highly agitated client away from the office. Sarah demanded to talk with the Headmaster directly. Before this happened she was led away outside by the Deputy Headmaster, Mr. Song, who was at the office on that day.

At the other end of the spectrum, there were clients like Wen and Zhang, who did not become angry or hurled insults. The expression of despair was one strategy they used to compel service delivery. This involved locking me into an asymmetrical relationship defined by affective scripts of pity for distraught victims. Since they were students from outside of Qingdao City, they did not have their parents or other relatives available for support.

Care towards a despairing client may not appear to be overtly asymmetrical for agents, but the interaction was not equitable either. Care work required more effort and time from me and, in a business that necessitated swift decisions with minimal effort, used my time inefficiently and became a daily burden. When they first visited on June 22, 2009, they established their affective script by expressing how they had lost the chance to realize their dreams, exclaiming, “Oh my God! Why are there people like this? What will happen to us?” As their agent, I informed them that their situation was not desperate and did not require unnecessary emotional anguish. I told them that the only modification to their application was the English language school entry dates that can be done between two to three weeks. Their affective script of despair clashed with my attempted delivery of information and facts. However, my attempt resulted in little understanding and reassurance between us. It was as if they did not hear my words. With arms on their foreheads, they exclaimed, “Oh no! We will never make it (to the new proposed entry date in August 2009)!” This made it clear to me that a customer expected a counter-
response in which an agent acknowledged that they heard them and were working on a solution. Mr. Shin displayed such a counter-response when he simply told customers, “I heard you speak; now you listen to me.” At this stage, when customers were emotional, social rejoinders had little need to incorporate actual facts but merely administered care labour.

Besides anger or despair, another form of complaint was the impartial, straightforward approach. This was the form that Mother Yan used to seek a full refund of the 10,000 RMB (1037 EU) placement fee for her daughter to enter a 2009 UK Master’s programme in the spring term. We learned about Ms. Yan’s case in the fourth chapter, in which Mei Lin failed to secure an application for the candidate. Unlike many other clients, Mother Yan came in to speak with us in a calm and fuss-free fashion. Unfortunately, the practice of crisis deflection response at the office resulted in her being transferred from the receptionist to Mr. Lao, who in turn referred her to me. Mother Yan repeated her complaint again to me: “It has been a year already since our application and nothing came out of it…we are not interested anymore for next year and we want a refund.” She knew that the schools had already started their term. “Yan got a Master’s scholarship at Xiamen University. We were waiting for so long. She is already happy there. She is not interested in moving abroad anymore.” It was a direct approach that could have been easily resolved by management. Unfortunately, her intention to speak directly to management was met with conflict deflection by the Headmaster. Mother Yan’s case was another example in which two different dramaturgical scripts used by customers and the management clashed. As we shall see soon, this led her to switch to a more radical form of protest.
These various emotional outbursts from customers signaled the start of the transformation of customer-client relationship. In the next section, I discuss the second stage in which management respond to customer complaints.

2.B. Stage 2: Upper Management Tactics: Disappearance and Deflection

Sarah’s visit provided an initial template for me to understand management’s response to conflict. In stage one, the customer temporarily wielded control in their relationship with the agent. At this stage, the EAD agent and the other SEA staff merged as one unit and responded as a collective to complaints.

There were three types of tactics employed by the group or company during a consumer complaint. For the first level defense, office employees and agents tended to deny any knowledge of the case or to pass the aggrieved party on to someone else. We saw this previously in Mother Yan’s office encounter with our office. The level of defense increased when clients did not get their way and their outbursts escalated. When this happened, managers intervened by preventing the furious client from entering the premises altogether. “Management” in this case included both SEA and study abroad department supervisors. These were Mr. Luo (the school academic coordinator), Mr. Ogawa (the Japanese Deputy Headmaster), Mr. Xiao (Mr. Ogawa’s primary translator, who also headed the Japanese Study Abroad Department), and, if he was present, Mr.
Song (the Deputy Headmaster). Their role was to be alert and observant of the developing situation, braced themselves for the onslaught of client aggression, and acted accordingly. They either waited or observed until the emotions tapered off, or diffused the anger and placated the complainant (although without necessarily offering any solutions).

On her first visit, Sarah was able to enter the office and headed straight for the EAD cubicles inside the office. Once the trouble erupted, a curious thing occurred: the rest of the staff nonchalantly ignored the commotion. They did nothing to intervene to appease Sarah or to calm her down. Quite simply, they went back to work (or appeared to work). This was an example of low-level employee deflection. When Mr. Luo intervened to appease Sarah, Mr. Ogawa also came out of the SEA office to watch the commotion. He strictly prohibited me from directly engaging with Sarah or watching the conflict. With the flick of his palm, he motioned for me to remain seated and not to look at them. It was apparent that the appropriate response was to remain silently cowed at my desk and ignore her, just like the rest of the employees. It was important to act as if the outbursts were not important and to leave them unacknowledged. Mr. Xiao, Mr. Ogawa’s translator, told me that, “this is inconsequential (meishi).” Like Mr. Ogawa, he also admonished me to look away, saying, “just stay back and go back to your work.” This tactic did not necessarily abate the feeling of constant anxiety and low spirits that permeated our shared office space in the succeeding weeks.

The managers placed a more assertive deflection of Mei Lin’s clients. By Sarah’s fifth visit, her complaints escalated from shouting to threats of violence, even the
Headmaster’s driver and the SEA canteen cook assisted in monitoring the grounds, blocked the entrance to the building, and prevented her and anyone who accompanied her from entering SEA. They isolated her actions outside of the office premises. On her fifth day of protest, Sarah tossed some of SEA’s outdoor plastic furniture in the courtyard, in full view of her male friend and office personnel. These displays were usually harmless, and her friend and the staff did their best to ensure that she did not potentially hurt herself or the others. In theory, at least, Sarah and Mei Lin’s other disgruntled customers did not come to fight with any of SEA’s employees. The agitated clients characterized Mei Lin as being a “bad person.” Nonetheless, Mei Lin was not the sole target of customers’ aggression. Anger and violent displays were key communication scripts directed at any key decision maker who could potentially propose a resolution and/or offer a dialogue. Customers sought to engage with the highest ranking authority, the Headmaster, to obtain answers. However, during this tense period, Headmaster Qing remained conspicuously absent and avoided any direct confrontation altogether.

Mother Yan demonstrated how outbursts were really performances that shifted depending on the customer’s perception of case resolution. She first demanded calmly to see the Headmaster to no avail. After successive failed visits, she started to become angry, escalated her threats, and raised her voice to me and the rest of the SEA staff, just like all the other complaining customers. Her demeanor turned to rage, unconsciously imitating that of the other clients, as she vied for attention and audience with the Headmaster. During a period of two weeks, she repeatedly stormed inside the office and demanded to see him. Finally, she resorted to a unique approach. She threatened the receptionists that she would call the local television network (QTV) to report on the Headmaster and school if a meeting did not take place. Consumer complaints aired on television has
become an important rights-based reaction to the lack of trust in the market, a form of Chinese consumer/media citizenship (see Yang 2013) that has become mediation journalism (see Yu 2009, Lull 2013: 88-89). As we shall see in the next section, such mediation produce mixed results.

3.C. Stage 3: Emotional Cooling Down, Truth Verification, & Resolution

Stage three involved negotiation between both parties. Once the emotions had been expressed through the course of several days or weeks, the individual’s reactions cooled down (xinping qihe) and practical information can be relayed by management. The affective script of outbursts and management deflection now moved to potential resolution.

This stage presented the possibility of a new form of communication process that included the verification of information. I called this “truth verification” to bring attention to how facts were constructed and understood in cases of falsehoods or doubt. I followed Blum’s (2005: 291) definition that, “truth signifies a correspondence between language and a state of affairs.” At SEA-EAD, the truth verification process usually involved the client consolidating various facts from contending parties which then made them agreeable to proposed solutions. Such a process must be understood as contingent to circumstances in which only fragments of information were accessible, and which were parsed according to one’s role and position in the organization (see Blum 2005: 293
The unpredictability of the outcome of negotiations can be seen in Mother Yan’s case. In the second week of her visits, she indeed brought a television crew with her to the office on a Thursday afternoon to demand a meeting with the Headmaster. The television team barged inside and started to shoot some footage inside the office. When they confirmed that the Headmaster was away, they threatened to return. SEA’s receptionist later recounted that crew told her, “If the office does not produce the Headmaster, we will report you about the cheating that is going on here.” Their presence was a surprising development because no one had taken Mother Yan’s threats seriously.

The result of such a dramatic action was that the Headmaster was forced to meet up with Mother Yan behind the closed doors of his office. The Headmaster wanted to contain the issue and any public broadcast of the case. But Mother Yan was adamant that the negotiations be held in front of the television. With this stalemate, the Headmaster proceeded to work out a plan. As I narrated in chapter four, he assigned me to coordinate with Ms. Park to secure new applications to three UK schools that would serve as proof that EAD had indeed undertaken work for the client. “They can go to the UK and if they do not like the date, then it is up to them,” he remarked after we secured the applications.

After two weeks, a confrontation was held with the QTV journalist acting as mediator between the Headmaster and Mother Yan in another venue. The Headmaster proudly recounted the result in an EAD meeting. According to him, the journalist asked him if he
would be agreeable to consider a refund if there was a written request. The Headmaster said, “Yes, I am willing to.” The television presenter turned to the mother, “are you willing to write down your request and submit it?” The mother answered that she would do it. It appeared that the burden of the resolution rested on the client stating her case for actual grounds to return the fee or part of it. The oral arguments by both parties, while strong, reverted to the requirement for textual proof since the journalist could not necessarily compel any actual financial refund.

Instead of a victory for Mother Yan, it was Headmaster Qing who was proud of the resolution of the televised mediation as part of a short news segment. He remarked, “My position looked good. It turned out better for the company!” He insisted that no refund could be made because of the “service” that we had just recently undertaken in submitting applications to the preferred universities of the client. The Headmaster was jovial and laughing about his tactics, without any compunction whatsoever. “The television spot gave us more publicity too!” I never learned what the final outcome of the case was, but it would be safe to assume that no refund was made or pursued by Mother Yan.

The Mei Lin incident at EAD was, for Mother Yan, a primary example of the precarious nature of Chinese transactions. She disclosed to me that, “once you pay your money, forget about seeing it again…the office won’t care anymore about you.” This was her view of most Chinese businesses; she assumed that businesses were out to fleece her off her money. This was indicative of a general mistrust by consumers of the local economic marketplace. Mother Yan’s normal recourse was to initiate a pseudo-personal relationship of “being friends” (zuo pengyou) with me in order to sustain interest in her
daughter’s case. But, as we can see, the use of pseudo personal relations, emotional outbursts, or third-party mediation does not necessarily end with a power-neutral, equitable transaction.

However, the unsuccessful resolution or asymmetrical outcome that favoured SEA-EAD and not the customer did not occur in all cases. Lina and Yiling both continued with their applications unlike Mother Yan. Therefore, Lina and Yiling both had opportunities for a successful resolution and to achieve a symmetrical power-neutral outcome. The step to achieve this outcome was to move towards the next stage of truth verification.

The problems that Lina faced with her application came to our attention one day when she came into the office demanding her visa. Lina was a twenty-seven-year-old nurse, married, and invested a lot of time and effort in studying English. She had worked with Mei Lin to apply to Flinders University in Australia, but like other clients, Mei Lin had ceased contact with her at the crucial moment of her and her husband’s visa application. Lina’s initial outburst of anger and hurtful words were swiftly transformed into cooperation and submission, to the extent that her husband stopped accompanying her to the office daily. She weighed competing statements from Mei Lin, who had assured her through the phone that, “everything was alright,” against my argument that no application had ever been made by Mei Lin. She had to consider that Mei Lin had not shown her proof of acceptance for her education package for Eynesbury (an English language school) and Flinders University (a higher education institution with a nursing program). Lina waited for three weeks before she accepted the fact that she might be waiting indefinitely for a school application and a visa that would never arrive. She gradually began to cooperate by re-submitting documents for her study package. Lina
downshifted from a position in which she had leverage, to one in which I re-acquired influence and situational control.

A different communication pattern re-emerged in which emotional outbursts turned into an impersonal, commercial relationship. This stemmed from the re-establishment of the contractual trust between customer and agent. The formerly violent confrontation was forgotten as Lina’s case progressed. At first, she resented her new September 2009 entry date, a two-month delay from her original departure. But once Lina began to understand how much work her future academic studies involved, she acquired a student mindset. She shifted her focus towards her future school work, leaving the school application and visa approval to me. The more she studied, the more convinced she became that her three-month English language preparation proved inadequate for her to successfully pursue her nursing degree. In the end, then, she fully supported moving her undergraduate degree admission for the following year, 2010, to add more time for language learning. This full acceptance now turned the agent relationship into a friendly one, with “thank you” acknowledgements and smiles on a daily basis. This was not necessarily a friendship, but an equitable relationship where power difference was erased and replaced by the expected roles of agent-customer.

Yiling’s case played out somewhat differently. The truth work it involved did not necessarily end in equitable power relations. Yiling used an emotional script of care work and dependency to extract service delivery. This asymmetrical relation between customer-agent was built by the father-daughter tandem, Father Yiling and Yiling. This type of care work was the opposite of the goals of highly impersonal relations, in which service was delivered with minimal personal cost and involvement. Yiling’s family
demanded we pay attention to their every need and desire. This required greater emotional effort and time from the Headmaster and me, even after the visa process was completed.

In Chapter Four, we saw how Yiling and her family stormed into the EAD, furious about the visa fraud. Their mixed anger and hope for a visa release led Yiling to stay in the first stage of emotional denial for a month. During this period, the fact verification process was prolonged. It involved her waiting for Mei Lin’s promises to materialize. At the same time, however, the family was repeatedly asking me to confirm with the Australian immigration department that they had received her application. This month-long process allowed Yiling to slowly accept the loss of her money, original documents, and passport. Behind-the-scenes investigation by the Headmaster, Mr. Dian, and Deputy Song revealed that Mei Lin had sent the documents to her freelance agent friend Cherry in Qingdao, who had, in turn, forwarded it to an unknown associate in Australia. Once this information was released to Yiling, her anger subsided and was replaced with cooperation.

Now that Yiling was cooperating, leverage shifted to the EAD. Yiling had to re-apply for copies of her transcripts, passport, and IELTS scores for submission to Eynesbury and Flinders University. Her new re-entry date for her study package was now slated for the spring term of 2010. Again, one of the indicators of the shift in the communication phase was Yiling’s perspective switch from that of an EAD customer to an overseas student. She was now anxious about her ability to achieve the necessary English level to enter the nursing program at Flinders University. It was here that care work was
demanded to comfort and encourage her. She was now nervous about her six-month English language program preparation prior to her nursing degree study. “Is it going to be difficult?” she asked me. Yiling had already spent two years in care work in the UK, so I assured her that, “you already have gone to England, so you can do this!” From this point on, Yiling had comfortably retreated to begin study preparations for her course. Instead, her father, Father Yiling, cultivated a dependent relationship with the Headmaster and me to secure a successful outcome.

This form of relational dependency, one that was built on obligatory ties of care work on top of service transactions, demanded greater emotional work from education agents than one built on impersonal commercial transactions. This type of inequitable transactional relationship instigated by Father Yiling was his way to exert control in this highly impersonal and unpredictable market. Given what had occurred, their transactional trust in the application process was low, and to prevent any future problems, Father Yiling made sure that this time he would visit the Headmaster and myself on a daily basis. Without fail, he almost always called in the morning and then again in the afternoon to speak with the Headmaster. If he wanted to speak with me, it would be to inform me that he was dropping in. It had almost become a daily ritual and rhythm for the receptionist to shout, “Teacher Huang, phone call, it is Father Yiling...” If I was not at my desk, I would receive a message to return his call immediately. The day would not go by without him demanding that I update him on any advances in the school or visa application process. The intensity of his daily contact affected the Headmaster, who promptly ordered me to speak with Father Yiling whenever he visited. These breaks took up a lot of the Headmaster’s time and he avoided any prolonged socialization.
This new arrangement could be described as a clash in the customer's and EAD’s dramaturgical scripts wherein the customer distrusted the system yet the EAD could now guarantee the easy processing of applications and the successful release of Yiling’s visa. Given the previous problems, it was understandable that Father Yiling was undertaking a lot of effort to gain a successful outcome, but we were confident that this work was no longer necessary. This emotional care work obligatory relationship persisted even after the visa was finally released. Surprisingly, unlike most other clients who preferred to make their own arrangements, Father Yiling was the only one who wanted EAD to arrange for everything. Mr. Bei bought Yiling’s airline tickets through the Headmaster’s official partner, while I arranged Yiling’s placement with the Eynesbury’s homestay program. This intensified Father Yiling’s presence. We went through airport pick-up details, the maps and location of the public transportation system, and the commuting distances between the school and her home.

This case of agent dependency persisted even after Yiling’s flight departure on September 26, 2009. As a parent, Father Yiling was highly anxious about his daughter being alone in Australia. He kept coming back to use the SEA office phone to call his daughter at her homestay. One morning, he asked me to talk to her foster mother and find out how Yiling was doing and to ask if she was around. I was able to speak with the foster mother, Vicky, who was an ethnic Vietnamese-Australian who offered space for two students. Initially, the father didn’t want or trust an Asian foster mother because he thought a “white person” would be more Australian and could integrate her effectively, and thus, a better foster parent. I talked with Vicky and she said that Yiling was doing
well and that everything was alright at the house. It was a good thing that the daughter was at home that morning. Father Yiling talked with her for about twenty minutes. Afterwards, Father Yiling recounted that, “the course was very difficult for her! She had been attending the English classes and looking for a new home near Flinders University.” Most of these add-on services were tolerated by the Headmaster and provided without extra charge. After a second successful phone call, he told me that Yiling had settled into a routine. Once this happened, Father Yiling gradually visited us less and less, until he never showed up again. Father Yiling’s case exhibited the fears and anxieties involved in the migration process, as well as his concerns for his daughter. This case is an example of how a customer extracts emotional labour by building emotional dependency and care work beyond simply redressing the fraud incident.

Unlike Yiling’s family, most customers simply required several tangible proofs in order to shift from truth verification stage to the trust stage. Wen and Zhang, English language classmates at SEA, needed to see their Certificate of Enrolment (COE) to relieve their anxiety and ease their demand for care work. Our relationships with them therefore came closer to impersonal transactions. Until the enrollment process was complete, minimal care work was expected. For instance, when Zhang’s COE was first released but Wen’s was not, Wen became worried and emotional, exclaiming, “That’s it, I will never get it! It is impossible now!” This was, of course, unfounded anxiety, which I explained to him after consulting with Eynesbury. Meg from Eynesbury surmised that two assessment officers separately reviewed their cases. The officer assigned to Zhang’s case had been unaware of the temporary hold order for the university allocation, so Zhang had been inadvertently admitted into the program while Wen had not. Understandably, this
explanation did not necessarily ease Wen’s emotional state. By now, however, I had enough experience to be confident that Wen’s COE would eventually be released. Sure enough, we almost jumped up with joy when we finally received Wen’s COE a week after Zhang’s. This cycle of trust validation and truth verification were repeated again as they continued with their visa application through Mr. Bei. However, their experience with Mr. Bei was mediated by technology. Their online visa applications were tracked, and they could check them anytime they wished. This sidestepped any demanding care work from Mr. Bei. Emotional care work therefore gradually shifted to impersonal commercial transactions once the visa was finally approved twenty days after filing the application.

These examples showed the varying duration and the types of emotional scripts that can be deployed in the process of truth verification. Lina’s trust of EAD returned swiftly, but in the rest of the cases (Yiling, Wen, and Zhang), constant verification became necessary until their applications were successfully completed. These conflict resolution processes revealed how emotional performances form part of the repertoire of trust-building in a highly uncertain consumer environment.

**Chapter 6: Conclusion**

This chapter examined another type of impersonal relations, this time, between an agent and the customer. I investigated how social detachment, or specifically the elimination of power difference, had been achieved in varying degrees of professional working relations through a ritual process of conflict resolution. The Mei Lin fraud incident provided an opportunity to scrutinize how this process of social detachment was created.
The resulting conflict resolution process showcased the shifting phases of asymmetrical power relations prior to resolution. In the first stage, the customer took control through the deployment of one or more dramaturgical script from a wide spectrum of options. These included the use of outbursts, such as threats like television exposure, instigating employee pity through desperation, protesting, and deploying the rhetoric of being friends to leverage control.

The second stage involved managers countering customer’s complaints with their own dramaturgical script. The initial stage of appeasement was characterized by deflection and the temporary disappearance of the Headmaster. These functioned as an opportunity in which the Headmaster can display leadership or maintain his advantage during a crisis. The duration of time that customers and management engaged in this protracted power battle varied on a case to case basis.

The third stage was when the asymmetrical power relationship was negotiated towards regaining trust and returning to reliable professional, power-neutral transactions. A key indicator that agents and customers were in this stage was when emotions had gradually subsided and they now engaged in truth verification practices using various sources. Information and facts now became useful and relevant. The outcome of this stage varied. During this last stage, customers may continue to exert control or return to the expected role of customer-agent. Yiling and Father Yiling for example, relied on a dependent asymmetrical type of relation with me in order to control their desired outcome. In contrast, customers like Lina, Zhang, and Wen relied on tangible proof to re-establish a working trust with me, thereby easing back the power differential in the transaction. In
these cases, customer-agent relationships reverted to the kind of relatively impersonal, commercial relationships that have existed prior to the discovery of Mei Lin’s scheme. These conflict resolution stages were a crucial social strategy available to customers in the uncertain and precarious market for studying abroad.

The study of the conflict resolution process demonstrated that social detachment between customer and agent borrowed social norms and included it as part of the ritual-like practices. These conflict resolution strategies or dramaturgical scripts were not indicators that agents and customers were repairing or re-animating personal guanxi relations. Instead, the use of the “being friends” rhetoric and other types of affective strategies were ways to cope with market uncertainties, enact control, and most importantly restore power-neutral relations and advance equitable commercial transactions that had been lost in fraudulent transactions. The examination of this process highlighted an important feature of impersonal relations, a distributed power or diffused power relation between two parties.

My findings show that the SEA-EAD customer-agent social detachment is significant for its lack of marked power difference. Education consulting bear different emotional costs compared to other service occupations as an outcome of social detachment. Social detachment entails reducing emotional labour to maintain cost-efficient transactions. Mei Lin’s fraud had disrupted this low power difference and relative transaction efficiency between SEA-EAD agent and its customers. However, this feature of social detachment and its risks are not explicit at the outset for customers. It had exposed two uncomfortable facets of SEA-EAD agent–customer relations. Education agents
appeared to wield control and customers thought that they possessed control over all the transactions. In fact, they did not. Furthermore, customers expected trustworthy, efficient, professional transactions from agents but also did not get it. This double betrayal resulted in power inequity that favoured the agent or firm. This is the paradox of social detachment wherein the expectation of swift and efficient transactions come with untold risks of multiple frauds that can occur across the network. As a response, customers had to make the power difference visible through dramaturgical displays. In the process, the customers restored the relations back into a more trustworthy, power-neutral arrangement that can facilitate reliable completion of their service contract.

The SEA-EAD agent-customer relationship was an example of a type of impersonal relations mediated by ritual-like practices to reduce power difference. Unlike the agent-to-agent or employee relationships that we were based on information control, agent-customer relations were bound by power or its relative absence. In the event of fraud, these ties of power became asymmetrical. In order to restore the relatively power-neutral characteristic of impersonal relations, customers enacted ritual-based conflict resolution practices. The results were uneven and did not necessarily restore full power-neutral transactions. Despite this, these ritual-like conflict resolution practices eliminated barriers to swift transactions and exercised control in an untrustworthy market.
Chapter 7: Individual Status: QLA Performances of Order and Hierarchy

This chapter presents the third type of impersonal relations based on competitive individual status distinction among office peers. In contrast to the consumer demand at SEA-EAD, QLA has few requests from their Japanese clients for Chinese trainees due to the global economic downturn. The lack of busy work at QLA shifts the nodes of impersonal relations from information and agent knowledge seen at SEA-EAD to competitive individual characteristics among peers at QLA. The result is that practices of obedience and order appear as QLA corporate culture.

QLA, a second-tier labour consulting and placement agency where I worked for three months, is similar to SEA-EAD in two main ways. First, its employees consider their employment as temporary until they can find something better. As with SEA-EAD, this is not particular to the migration industry, but is a result of the glut in college graduates in a competitive labour market with narrow choices of desirable workplaces. Second, QLA also operates in the volatile migration industry and therefore practices social detachment to enact flexible operations to adapt to international markets. While the markets of QLA, migrant labour, and SEA-EAD, student education-migration, may appear to be different, I link these two enterprises because they belong to the same hierarchy of structure within the Chinese migration industry. QLA relies on third-tier recruitment firms, like SEA-EAD, to supply them with Chinese customers and SEA-EAD relies on second-tier client-linking firms, like QLA, for access to foreign clients and
the international market. Together, they form a symbiotic inter-firm relationship within the same industry.

However, QLA differs markedly from SEA-EAD in that it exhibits relative order and hierarchy in the workplace, despite its precarious position within the fluctuating study abroad conditions. Their relative positions, to some extent, impact the work culture within the two firms. Unlike SEA-EAD, which appears to be constantly in chaos, QLA’s workplace is relatively harmonious, and at first impression, resembles to some extent a patriarchal workplace commonly described in guanxi studies. This can be attributed in part to QLA’s market position as a second level enterprise that focuses on acquiring employer/clients. Without the burden of recruitment and direct customer/candidate interactions, QLA office hours exhibit practices of order, employee obedience, and managerial authority. Despite these appearances, QLA remains a flexible firm and indeed, the appearance of order is at least partially a result of the global economic slowdown and the subsequent economic recession of Japan, the key market for labour export of QLA. In the absence of actual work, performances of work become work. These collective routines and individual dispositions stabilize workplaces (Becker 2004: 654-661, Becker and Zirpoli 2008), yet these practices of order may mislead us to accept this as evidence for long-term company solidarity or unity.

Instead, I argue that these practices constitute a type of social detachment built around ritual-based individual competition. Once we acknowledge that Chinese small family firms are flexible workplaces, ritual practices can be re-contextualized as neither fulfilling a long-term firm commitment nor establishing personal relations (in contrast see Islam and Zyphur 2009). The QLA chapter demonstrates how the negotiation of power
between colleagues and managers build order and predictability without hampering individual autonomy. In the absence of many clients, individual status distinction replaces information control as the primary node of impersonal relations at the office.

This competition among employees for individual distinction manifests itself in two ritual practices at QLA. One is to conform to the status quo of office hierarchy during work hours. Another is to reverse the office hierarchy and assert one’s autonomy outside work hours. Chapters Seven and Eight on QLA must be read together to understand how the dynamics and tensions between order and its reversals occur.

This chapter focuses on three different forms of office conformity as a result of employee obedience. One is the morning routine of cleaning the office by employees. This liminal event reveals the inherent expectations of senior office staff towards regular staff members and vice-versa. The second section describes work at an individual level as an example of what can be performed in a situation where few clients visit the office. Lastly, I illustrate the public performance of managerial authority and employee obedience through describing a meeting. These performances appear to respect authority and hierarchy, but they are not necessarily indicators of building or maintaining guanxi relations (contrast this with Fu et. al. 2006). Evasdottir (2005) calls these performances as examples of obedient autonomy to indicate that employee independence comes at a price of conformity or deference in a restrictive system. QLA work performances foster professional relations, a kind of social detachment that accrues benefits among employees who have minimal long-term commitment to the enterprise or with its owners. The nature of order and hierarchy at QLA challenges our understanding of work.
relations, in particular the use of the “guanxi explanation” to describe family-operated SMEs.

Introducing QLA Everyday Order and Hierarchy

EuroEx, the internship mediator that I used to match me with companies for my fieldwork, warned foreign interns at the onset that Chinese companies were unfamiliar with the roles and expectations of an “internship.” This was to lower interns’ expectations and counteract their numerous complaints that there was “nothing to do” at the offices. At the time, Chinese workplaces in their roster were ambivalent about the position and role of foreign interns in their work operations. QLA was one of them, as was SEA-EAD. This was a risk for foreign interns, who paid for the privilege of gaining experience and learning new skills in Chinese firms. My initial impression, indeed, was that there really was nothing to do at QLA. Cecile, a French intern who came after me at QLA, also complained that there was no work for her to do. Both of us had shared this opinion. Was there really nothing to do? What does ‘nothing to do’ look like in such a workplace?

The following sections describe the work of “doing nothing.” Contrary to the common foreign intern assertion that no work occurred at QLA, this section examined the performance of work as work. Since office work was largely concealed in individual work stations, I used my own work assignment to disclose an atomist work day. I supplemented this with a discussion of two main activities of cleaning and meetings as observations of QLA work performances. Employees used work performances to fulfil
their contractual obligations under the authority and direction of the business owners/manager. Altogether, these performances constituted QLA work.

1. Shoushi as Employee Group Unity

Every morning at QLA, all of the staff was expected to spend twenty to thirty minutes cleaning (shoushi). This exercise demonstrated how social order was conceived among peers. The discourse of office cleanliness was something that Mr. and Mrs. Ying believed gave them a distinctive identity, as well as projecting an image that QLA was an “international” and “Japanese” firm with a different set of practices to local Chinese businessmen and enterprises. The couple was Chinese, but combined, had lived in Japan for more than ten years, in which time they came to adopt Japanese office practices, such as cleanliness. Mr. and Mrs. Ying wanted to enforce a model of cleanliness that stretched from their home to the work environment. Part of the work life at QLA therefore included the creation of a habit of, and preference for, cleanliness. This value helped to foster unity among the business owners and its employees. But this practice cannot be fully attributed to an idealized Japanese habit alone. There was an absence of a dedicated cleaning crew, which was also the case with the three other Chinese offices on that floor. The result was that all employees in the four offices on our floor started their work day by cleaning. Despite the fact that the cleaning ritual was shared by other Chinese companies, the preference for cleanliness had been inculcated within QLA employees as a distinct group and company identifier.

The first unspoken rule in becoming a QLA employee was to learn your own position
within the peer cleaning hierarchy (Van Gennep 1960). Cleaning was a lively and informal team effort in which pre-arranged duties were distributed among the six staff members according to office rank and gender. The order was pre-defined by the unspoken role expectation that those in the higher position engaged in the more strenuous activities. There seemed to be competition among which employees did the heaviest labour. This was an example of how this liminal period reversed and enforced office hierarchy. This meant that Ben, as ‘top’ of the office peer hierarchy, voluntarily accrued the heaviest work, which included vacuuming the entire office or carrying pails of water. As the son of Mrs. Ying from a previous marriage, Ben discharged decisions in the office in the absence of his parents. He alternated the strenuous task of vacuuming the entire office with Helen, his fiancée and the executive assistant of Mrs. Ying, the office manager. Mrs. Ying occupied the second highest position in the office and in the peer hierarchy. In the absence of Mrs. Ying, Helen was the authority on office protocol, such as lunch breaks and afternoon dismissals. She constantly refused to let me, or the others take turns to do the vacuuming. The only time that we were able to do it was if one of us arrived earlier, or if she was absent, or if the appliance was forcibly taken from her. In the realm of work, those who were in positions of leadership tended to do the unpleasant and arduous tasks in cleaning, thereby accruing humility, erasing hierarchical difference, and setting an example.

Since peer leaders Ben and Helen were doing the heavier tasks, the rest of us in the lower staff hierarchy only had to do the lightest work of emptying all the waste bins and wiping and drying the shared work station surfaces, focusing on the computers and

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While performances of masculinity have been generally relaxed in China, males are still expected to do heavy labour. This is what Jankowiak and Li (2014) define as the wén/wū continuum, or the features of confidence, decisiveness, politeness, cool demeanour, and respect for women, which now constitute current Chinese masculinity.
keyboards. Mark alternated with Ben to do the heavy task of filling, carrying, and discharging buckets of water for this task. The pantry and microwave area were checked by Belle, the company bookkeeper, or Stephanie, the database compiler, to ensure that utensils and food items were kept in order, cleaned, and stored properly. Both Belle and Stephanie were married, and since Stephanie was heavy into her sixth month of pregnancy, she was exempted from any strenuous lifting or other activities that involved physical exertion. Sandra and I cleaned our respective work desks, computer keyboards, and monitors. Like Ben and Helen, Sandra also worked in sales and client relations.

This division of labour according to role expectations of leaders and staff members produced peer order, stability, and predictability during the time that the cleaning exercise lasted. Cleaning was not considered burdensome; rather, it allowed for a period of relaxed chatter and banter among the employees. Helen loved to talk and sing in a baby voice while she was cleaning. Laughter ensued over her singing using her baby voice. Conversations ranged from mundane topics such as television shows or fashion to recent online purchases. It was a welcome period of relaxation and conviviality prior to the restrictive confines of the day’s actual work, which would begin with the arrival of Mr. and Mrs. Ying.

2. Shangban Le: Individual Work Performance

After cleaning, the distinct absence of sound in the office was a clear marker of what constituted “working.” The term shangban le or “to start work” or “be at the office” referred to the mindset of being in a state of work and the physical locality of the self at
the place of work, particularly sitting by the desk at the office. On my first week, I made a mistake and learned that the performance of work constituted work. I attempted to listen to music on the computer with earphones to ease the interminable silence. But I quickly received stern looks from Mark, my mentor, and the others. I realized that I had been mistaken in assuming that the maintenance of physical silence in the office was paramount. Rather, my earphones clashed with the performance of being an employee. To Mark, my mistake was especially horrifying because I made it when Mr. and Mrs. Ying were already in the office. He said that this was not done in the office, even if I was actually working. He said that no one did this. Indeed, little physical interaction or noise occurred in the office during the morning and afternoon work blocks. Only minor interruptions were acceptable, such as limited personal mobile calls, snacks, or bathroom breaks. This phase of discipline consisted of silence, physical immobility, and a focus on the individual computer work station.

As a second level enterprise in the chain of migration hierarchy, much of the client and sales work was concealed and limited to individual workstations and assignments. Consequently, the periods between nine to twelve o’clock and one to five o’clock were highly atomist, with limited interactions between managers and/or employees. However, since we did not have a lot of clients or activities to fill up an entire day, for the most part we were simply “performing” work. Belle, the bookkeeper explained: “I only work a couple of hours a day but I must stay in the office.” I informally tracked her daily schedule at 15-minute intervals for a week to verify her claim (see Appendix 3). There were several reasons why I was able to do this. First, I was able to observe her desk unobtrusively since she sat across from me. Second, she was the only one who openly discussed the actual nature of her work, and her comments helped me to construct a
chart of her daily activities. Her daily chart showed that she filled up her time on the Chinese chat and news portal QQ. Belle mostly chatted with her friends who were working in other offices. Mostly, she told me they don’t really talk about work, but about their families. Through charting Belle’s activities and watching the other staff members, I learned that the performance of work counted as much as actual work. This made asking staff “what do you do in your work?” or “what do you do throughout the day?” unsatisfactory, as the staff answered generically that they “learn by practicing or reviewing (lianxi).” These performances were made possible by the fact that the actual work at QLA was concealed and hard to quantify especially during the economic downturn. At this level in the migrant industry hierarchy, (and as was the case with SEA-EAD) actual work, indeed, required learning the market, the institutions, the immigration rules, and the economic and social climate, especially for Chinese nationals. Hence, the term “study” (xuexi) was commonly referred to by staff to describe their search for new clients and markets during this period of little work. It required reading through Chinese news, Japanese news, and immigration issues. This general description of work reflected the difficulty in capturing mundane everyday activities.

As an example of what xuexi required, I used my internship assignment to penetrate the Australian labour market. At the time of research beginning in March 2008, there was a Memorandum of Agreement (MOU) between Australia and China on increased cooperation for skilled temporary work migration under the 457 visa with the explicit provision that no recruitment fees should be charged for workers.\(^\text{18}\) Firms who charged fees may be reported to the DIAC (Department of Immigration and Citizenship which has since been renamed to the Department of Immigration and Border Protection) and

\(^{18}\) The link under the minister.immi.gov.au press release had since been deleted.
purged from the list as a way to combat illegal recruitment (David 2010: 53). However, the MOU with China was toothless under the 457 skilled temporary work visa rules due to intense competition for skilled placements at an international level. As an example, Chinese IT workers like those found in the QLA database, faced stiff competition and strict language fluency requirement alongside other foreign skilled workers (DIBP 2016b). Moreover, recruits had to have a verified business sponsorship to work in Australia (ibid.). Without any revision to the immigration laws, average Chinese skilled workers cannot be profitably targeted by firms such as QLA.

Despite my discovery of this barrier for QLA, Mrs. Ying insisted that I continue to investigate it further and find loopholes. The work of xuexi required the employee to go through the motion when ordered. Similar to the SEA-EAD consulting work, I needed to make preliminary inquiries to gain information in the market. In the process, one can see how impersonal relations were built. For instance, it was necessary for Mark and me to make contact with TAD, one of Australia’s largest technical and commercial personnel recruiters, in order to compare our QLA qualifications roster with the international candidates in their database. I sent the CV of the three of our top candidates to them for a preliminary evaluation. However, only one candidate was able to provisionally pass their criteria, due to his English fluency. As guidelines, TAD was looking for an IT worker with a minimum English IELTS score of 5 and at least five years’ experience. The rest of our candidates were new graduates or who had just begun their career. This made QLA placement of IT workers uncompetitive with other countries for the skilled market in Australia. The legal aspect and the QLA’s competitiveness were part of an internal report that Mark and I jointly wrote about the non-viability of QLA engineers in the Australian market.
The outcome of this recommendation did not deter Mrs. Ying. Instead, she directed me to focus on looking for informal agricultural work for Chinese unskilled workers. This instruction was difficult and unethical but was part of my work. Foreign guest workers without appropriate visa entry classifications (such as those working under tourist schemes) were legally classified as “labour trafficking” and labour exporting or mediation activities as “smuggling of migrants” under Australian laws (David 2010: xi). Foreign seasonal workers in Australia were restricted, with the exception of holiday work schemes from Commonwealth countries or other countries with which Australia had reciprocal work arrangements (DIBP 2016a). It was only in August 2008 that the Australian government began to pilot a three-year overseas seasonal worker entry programme. It was patterned after the New Zealand model; therefore, it exclusively sourced temporary labour from four Pacific Islander countries: Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, Tonga, and Vanuatu (Bell et. al. 2011: 4). The duration of this program was restricted to a short four-month period to a maximum of six months (ibid.). Chinese nationals who participated in seasonal work in the agricultural sector in Australia were undocumented/unreported migrants, international students, or workers whose cases had been reported to the Workplace Ombudsman (ibid. 2011: 23, 43). However, Mark and I reported to Mrs. Ying a now-discontinued occupational training visa (subclass 442) that could potentially be a pathway as the requirements were simply an employer-nominated position for ten up to a maximum of fifty hours a week. The visa requirements were simple. A candidate had to be within the age range of 18-35 years old, and did not require English fluency, work experience, or an education certificate. These rules had since been overhauled and the visa subclass 442 was now subsumed under the training
and research visa subclass 402 which heavily vetted employers and sponsors (DIBP 2016c). In other words, Chinese low-skilled workers would have to be facilitated illegally, or as Mark says, we were exhorted to “find a way.”

Despite these explicit restrictions, Mrs. Ying continued to perceive the recruitment of Chinese agricultural labourers for Australia to be lucrative. According to projections by the program evaluation, seasonal workers were estimated to earn around 800 AUD gross (about 5,000 RMB or approximately 560 EUR) for a forty-hour work week (Reed et. al. 2011: 50). Theoretically, QLA could potentially earn from placement fees, monthly maintenance fees, and a commission of at least one percent from every worker recruited depending on the company. Mrs. Ying was comparing this with QLA’s experience with sending labour migrants to Japan. However, Japan had created a structure for “training interns” to enter and work in the country easily. In chapter two, I have outlined the profit structure and the process of preparation of entry into Japan. While Japan formally enforced the ban on foreign semi- and low-skilled workers into their country, there remained a “side door” or loophole in which these workers were transformed into “trainees” and “technical interns” in order to work in the 3K jobs of kitsui (demanding), kitanai (dirty), and kikenna (dangerous) (Friman 2002, Abella 2009, Kondo 2002: 429-430). This policy contradiction coupled with the high demand for workers had allowed QLA to send workers profitably and Chinese trainees to earn money. In Australia, however, there were few formal schemes for foreign workers to undertake low-skilled labour except for the working holiday scheme for select foreign nationals. However, as part of my role as an intern/employee, I had to simply follow Mrs. Ying’s instructions.

During the months of my internship, I earnestly contacted some regional government
offices for information and policies on agricultural work. However, these written and telephone inquiries remained unanswered. Similar to SEA-EAD, xuexi was similar to the highly autonomous work of education consulting, with minimal team work, and managerial assistance. It required establishing impersonal hezuo relations and traversing great risk that bordered on illegality. The position of QLA as client-seeker in the labour export market had contributed to its more orderly office structure. In the following section, I examine another public performance of order - the conduct of meetings at QLA.

3. Performing Employee Obedience under Managerial Authority

The QLA manager-employee dynamic operated at a higher level of power differential and asymmetry compared with peer relations between employees. Regardless, QLA employees were obedient under managerial authority. Their eight-hour work performances, especially when little actual work was available, ensured that work relations were impersonal and contractual even in family-run SMEs. These work performances also served to establish order and predictability at the QLA office.

The ethnographic accounts of hierarchical work relationships argued that role expectations at work later allowed actors to maneuver into a favourable position to achieve their own individual goals. Such an arrangement continues to be relevant in state-run or bureaucratic institutions today (see Evasdottir 2004, Varrall 2013). For instance, these unequal, hierarchical, and contractual relationships between teacher-student (Evasdottir 2004) and among student peers (Varrall 2013) provided social and professional benefits for all parties. Evasdottir (2004) argued that it was only through the
production of order and role performance at work that individuals exercised autonomy in their careers. Hence, the promise of benefits from predictability and order compelled the performance of employee obedience to gain personal resources. For Varrall (2013), following a socially accepted view on China’s political position and nationalism served to secure graduation and the future reputation of a student, regardless of their actual personal feelings. The job tenure and relative stability in these types of institutions meant that flexible practices operated similarly yet were different for transient employment firms.

However, the benefits and predictability of the superior-subordinate roles were undermined in flexible firms in the migration industry. Like SEA-EAD, QLA factors such as low wages, low status, and minimal possibility of job promotion resulted in high employee turnover and a short-term outlook among staff. These conditions destabilized any possibilities of strong, long-term relations between managers and employees. The reduction of the long-term, social component of this relation created a separation or distancing between employees’ personal lives and work lives.

Figure 4: Diagram of QLA Office Space (not to scale)
The most visible engagements between managers and employees took place during company meetings. This was the central stage of work performance wherein the one-sided interactions, akin to teaching in a classroom, reproduced managerial authority, and employee obedience. Such performances by managers reproduced how teachers instructed students in a classroom. Generally, it consisted of Mr. Ying speaking for at least half an hour while the employees listened (see Figure 2).

It was no coincidence that Mr. and Mrs. Ying were called ‘teachers’ in the office. This persona had been deliberately cultivated by Mr. Ying, not just because of his former
occupation as a teacher, but also due to his belief that his purpose was to teach his employees, “…because, in spite of their education, they have low quality (di suzhi)” (see also Ong 2006). This monopoly of interactional direction from the manager to employees reproduces the asymmetrical power relations between them. Mr. Ying believed that it was part of his duty to teach them, given that he was someone who had international experience.

Figure 5: Seating Arrangement During Meetings (I was excluded)

As in a classroom, meetings involved a one-way flow of information in which Mr. Ying delivered instructions and an information-filled monologue to the group. The content of the meetings were recurring themes, such as citations of selected worldwide data on the labour industry from the newspapers, the aging demographic of Japan, and the need for Chinese labour abroad. Mr. Ying began by sharing his knowledge with employees, often reading aloud from newspapers. At the time of research in March 2009, Mr. Ying stated that his primary role was to motivate the staff during the global downturn of the economy that had affected Japan, “…nuli gongzuo (work hard)! We have little work now
but we must persevere, if you don’t know [a task] just don’t say ‘I can’t do it,’ learn by studying (lianxi)!”

After this, he then repeated facts from newspapers about countries with aging or population problems that were potential destination targets for China’s talent: “Canada as the destination for 55,000 workers, Philippines sends 33,000 workers out to the world…” These figures were supposed to motivate Ben, Helen, Sandra and me to look for recipient countries for Chinese labour, and contacts to facilitate the migration process. From the beginning, Mrs. Ying pointed her sights to agricultural work in Canada and Australia. She exhorted, “find more positions for semi-skilled workers rather than engineers!” This directive required each of us to scour for new opportunities online. But there was little team work or knowledge-sharing among us. My assignment was to look for ways to bring in Chinese workers into Australia. The objective was to look for a demand in the market and motivate the employees to find employment or placement opportunities for Chinese workers.

It was not only Mr. Ying who spoke at meetings, but also Mrs. Ying, the office manager, who gave specific instructions regarding everyday office operations. For instance, she discussed specific plans for an upcoming recruitment visit of Japanese clients for a talent test. “(We) will accompany them here (to the office)…then we shall visit the vocational school (where QLA has recruitment partnerships with)…” This visit was partly an information tour to show potential clients where and how the recruitment process occurred. But the most common issues that were raised regarded clients’ refunds and fees. These directives included things like:
Mrs. Ying (to everyone): “Tell the talent applicants who will attend the upcoming selection test to deposit around 500 – 700 RMB (56-78 EUR), this is a way to compel full attendance from applicants, and if they don’t show up, they lose their money.”

An important aspect of QLA service was to present to visiting Japanese clients a wide pool for selection of potential candidates. It was also a way to maximize the rental payment for the testing area, in this case, sewing machine workstations, by QLA and its work partners. Hence, non-refundable fees were a way to motivate candidates to attend, cover costs, and ensure a full test hall. QLA needed to provide information and quality control to the clients and Mrs. Ying constantly exorted this to Stephanie:

Mrs. Ying (to Stephanie): “There are mistakes in bio data—ages and year…correct them.”

These weekly meetings were opportunities for reminders, but also to reprimand employees for failures in their performance. As part of our disciplinary regimen, Mr. and Mrs. Ying usually concluded the meetings with instructions about correct office behaviour, especially regarding phone etiquette:

Mr. Ying (to everyone): “…use a louder voice to call people…but there is a certain Japanese style (in speaking) that I wish we had here.” (On April 13, ten o’clock meeting)

Mr. Ying meant that he wanted the staff to acquire the tone of a professional that
combined acquiescence with assertiveness. This was in contrast to what Mr. and Mrs. Ying understood to be the careless way that Chinese people answered the phone. In their view, Chinese employees were too timid, but they also came across as rude or abrupt. They felt exasperated, but they doubted whether the staff could learn. Nevertheless, they received these lessons on a regular basis. For example:

Mrs. Ying (clearly upset): “…with telephone answering, don’t say, ‘I don’t know’ (wo bu zhidao) or put down the phone…Today, we start with answering the phone properly. Look at those who answer the telephone and you know their skill, I want you to learn, “Who are you? (Ni she shei?) From where are you? (Nali lai?) What is your business? (Shenme shiqing?)” (What do you need?) (May 12, 2009, ten forty meeting)

As the leaders of the organizations, Mr. and Mrs. Ying, provided the information, training, and supervision to their employees. The employees performed work as instructed, regardless of the outcome. The important thing was to obey instructions, fulfill expectations as subordinates and employees. These appearances and assertions of social and professional differences were accepted and expected as part of the hierarchy at work.

The conduct of meetings – the ensuing managerial authority and employee obedience – though different, in that it had the appearance of order, was also similar to SEA-EAD. Both companies relied on impersonal relations between manager and employees to enable work or appearances of work to continue. These professional relations varied from full employee obedience at QLA meetings to EAD’s employee reactions of passive
resistance, immediate resignation, or asserting one’s ambitions. In most instances, employees in both companies simply got on with their jobs as demanded by their work roles. These actions did not indicate any guanxi relations or long-term commitment with the company. Two months after I left the company, Mark followed suit. He had told me that the only reason that he worked there was to ensure his chance to go abroad. However, he could not wait anymore and listen to Mrs. Ying’s excuses to him about why he cannot be sent abroad. He had his dreams of opening his own business from this future income overseas and he had to find another way to save up on capital.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

This chapter discussed the nodes of individual status comprising social detachment practices. At SEA-EAD, agent information control formed the primary basis of inter-agent and manager-employee relations. At QLA, impersonal relations derived from individual status and office position as the pre-eminent feature of inter-office relations. This shift can largely be attributed to the drastic reduction of actual work in the office due to the global economic downturn which affected Japan. Since QLA depended on a robust Japanese economy, QLA’s business suffered during this period. The result was that less work and fewer practices of social detachment can be seen with other information brokers at QLA.

However, this did not mean that other types of social detachment practices were absent. This chapter and the QLA case offered a significant opportunity to investigate individual status distinction as another type of social detachment. These were largely circumscribed
around work roles and the performances of order and employee obedience. This can be seen in the daily morning ritual of cleaning by employees and the weekly group meetings. These work performances at QLA produced a tentative order using stable routines at a time when there was “nothing to do.” However, for transient employment firms like QLA, such social performances had limited impact on creating long-term ties. Instead, these practices served to cut off personal ties and replace them with impersonal professional working relations marked by employee obedience to managerial authority.

This chapter demonstrated that impersonal relations used routines to cut off personal links in order to socialize employees to social rules that favour detachment. Given the absence of client work, the key node of QLA impersonal relations relied on office routines that reproduced employee obedience and recognition of managerial authority. The everyday contrasts of authority and status differences were features of these ritual-like routines. During the cleaning period, this activity fostered unity and cooperation but also outlined difference among staff members. For the employees, cleaning was a relaxing break that allowed for informal chats, cooperation on a single task, and to make noise. Simultaneously, the status difference among the staff was defined by office position in which those at the top did the heaviest work. This incongruous match between cleaning task and office status legitimized the position of Ben and Helen as the authority figures among the group.

Meanwhile, these employee differences were less notable during office meetings when everyone was an employee, including the son Ben and future daughter-in-law Helen. The formal work hours erased any employee distinction under managerial authority. The acceptance of this hierarchy and status difference was part of the professional work
relationship requirement that governed managers and employees. These daily routines constituted impersonal relations among work colleagues at QLA.

In the absence of affect or long-term employment viability, I argue that this working relationship does not necessarily support the “guanxi explanation,” even if it appears to follow social rules that may indicate as such. Routines and ritual-like practices at the office mislead perception by focusing on moments of order, stability, and predictability, which are counter-intuitive for flexible and transient employment workplaces. To overcome this limitation, I consider the other spectrum of practices in the next chapter on individual employee motives for self-development and distinction within QLA that undermines this perspective.
Chapter 8: Individual Status: QLA Social Detachment through Eating Practices

This chapter closes the dissertation by placing the impetus for self-development and individual distinction within the context of impersonal relations. Previously, I described how QLA employees assented to managerial authority in chapter seven as part of their socialization and a way to adapt to minimal work. This chapter on the QLA workplace lunch and dining practices demonstrates how employees assert their self-development in a non-crisis situation at a transient employment firm. Food sharing and exchange practices at QLA reveal how employees deploy ritual practices to reverse power relations, exhibit social distance, and enhance individual status outside of office hours. This chapter builds up on a similar argument that food and exchange ritual practices constitute social detachment that characterizes impersonal relations.

My examination of food and exchange practices at QLA demonstrate how these serve to cut off personal ties and act as conduits to assert impersonal relations. Food ritual performances are not necessarily indicators of strong personal relations but reinterpretations of firm relations in a transitional, flexible workplace (for comparison, see Yang 2002). They expose the institutional structure of a transitional employment firm built around the fulfilment of a work contract with few social expectations. Chapter Eight raises similar caveats. I pointed to in Chapter Seven, that at QLA, ritual-like practices may be interpreted as a kind of guanxi relations; and that appearances of stability, including eating together, may be misconstrued as strong personal relations. This sense of order and predictability is, to a significant extent, a mask. Chinese small,
family-owned, and operated enterprises such as QLA are subject to destabilizing conditions from international and local factors of migration and employment demand like other bigger firms, and thus, prone to highly flexible and transient employment conditions. Indeed, food-based ritual practices in flexible firms establish social detachment. This chapter, therefore, strengthens my argument that broader scholarship on Chinese business and organisational research needs to go beyond the “guanxi explanation” and take into account social detachment and impersonal ties generated from food performances.

My aim in concluding the thesis with a discussion of the QLA lunch hour and an employee dinner is to also tie it with the SEA-EAD banquet I discussed in the introduction. Both commensal practices challenge our assumptions about one of the central elements of personal strong relations creation - food. This case, in particular, contributes depth to our understanding of how impersonal relations are established through ritual. One of its key features is the assertion of self-development in QLA food practices. The focus on the development of the self in the Chinese workplace has been used to demonstrate the transition of China from a socialist into a market economy (Hershatter 1986, Honig 1986, Ngai 2003, Yan 2006) but rarely used to assess firm relations and structure (but see Tomba 2009 and Evasdottir 2004).

This chapter is divided into three parts. I begin the first section with understanding how food and ritual practices, especially in the Chinese context, can be misinterpreted as demonstrating strong personal ties in the workplace. I will show how historically the lunch and meal times in the Chinese socialist workplace have not been about group unity. These practices impact work lunches today. Then, I proceed with two types of meal
times between colleagues and with managers. I discuss a dinner held outside of the office among employees in the second section. Contrary to the group unity we saw in the QLA cleaning period of the previous chapter, this time individual distinction becomes more explicit among QLA employees. During the course of the evening, employees shifted between asserting individual distinctions and group similarities. Sandra manages to establish her distinctive status, and this has an impact to the third section. In the third section, I expose the impersonal relations between manager and employees during the QLA lunch hour. Here, I discuss the various types of power and status reversals that enhance employee individual distinction and social distance. These reversals occur in two dramaturgical phases. The first stage consists of the refusal to exchange food with managers. In the second stage, the individual with the highest social position reverses managerial authority through conversational wit. The competitive victor from the employee dinner party, Sandra, performs this crucial role. Her persona is akin to a wily trickster, in which she transgresses norms and flaunts her intelligence playfully (Thomassen 2012: 694-697, Turner 1985: 235-237, 262-265, Carroll 1984) and a kind of “boundary bricoleur” in organizations that shift identities to differentiate herself from others depending on circumstances (see Ellis and Ybema 2010). The final stage is of course when the lunch hour terminates and the return to the status quo of the work period. Taken together, the lunch hour and the work period from the previous chapter both constitute impersonal relations at a transient employment workplace like QLA.

1. Brief Background on Food in the Chinese Workplace

In the Chinese social realm, food occupies a primary role in the remaking and establishment of ties through food production, eating, and dining. Strong relations and
personhood rely on the exchange and an extensive gift economy of which food and dining are key components (see Kipnis 1997, Yan 1996, Yang 1994). Food, then, is implicated in the power structures and hierarchical relations that appear within social groups. However, in the context of a flexible firm, the performance of food exchange etiquette and practices is not necessarily evidence of an existing strong personal relationship between managers and employees. Indeed, the opposite is true: these meals exhibit the impersonal relations existing between superiors and subordinates and serve to entrench it.

Historically, the transformation of eating and dining from the intimacy of the family into the functional eating or “forced commensality” (Watson 2011: 33) found in the public mess hall (shi tang) in the (danwei) or urban workplace unit (see Henderson and Cohen 1984) and its collectivized counterparts in the rural areas (see Watson 2011, Yan 1996) began during the socialist era. This type of “functional eating” (Farquhar 2002: 13-15) continued during the post-socialist period and more recently, food insecurity had become a metaphor for the uncertain employment status of workers in the highly flexible and uncertain globalized local work environment in China (see Myers and Chan 2011).

The functions of company meal times go beyond those that scholars have historically associated with dining such as the reproduction of institutions (see Dacin et. al. 2010, Di Domenico and Philips 2009). My account of the banquet in the introduction and the QLA dinner and lunch period in this chapter exhibited cases of social detachment during functional and performative eating. These food-related performances may be misunderstood because they mimic the reciprocal obligations and behaviour between people who uphold traditional hierarchical personal relations. Indeed, relations were
friendly, but as I will demonstrate, they tended to be individual-focused, organized around creating hierarchy reversals, individual status distinction, and autonomy. The liminal spaces in which these performative acts of eating took place overturned office hierarchy and highlighted the individual beyond the confines of employee identities. These ritualised performances of impersonal sociality demonstrated how social practices are repurposed in environments that were increasingly becoming professional, emphasizing the separation of social with work life.

Communal dining at QLA did not necessarily build or repair strong personal relations (in contrast, see Plester 2015, Parker 2008, Flores-Pereira et. al. 2008). Rather, it encouraged temporary collegiality that enabled employees to achieve work goals and to tolerate flexible and mundane work conditions. Employees also used this non-working period to assert their own individual autonomy and diffused the authority of the managers, rather than establish more personal or stronger ties. When practices of food exchange and food consumption, including the SEA banquet in the introduction, were performed within everyday contexts, the result was to reinforce impersonal relations rather than transform them. They revealed how employees rejected the kinds of overtures of obligations that can be obtained through food exchange, and how they asserted status distinction in an otherwise ordinary low status job. These food exchange and commensality performances demonstrated little assurance of organisational commitment or firm loyalty. This challenged a common understanding of contemporary corporate culture, demonstrating instead how ritual enforced individual autonomy and provided social integration that was only temporary.
2. QLA Dinner Party: Employee Individual Distinction

The QLA cleaning cooperation among employees contrasted with another peer hierarchy dynamic, namely the assertion of individual status and difference in a social situation outside of the workplace. Office-based roles built peer harmony, but these same roles had a limited function in a social setting. In this section, I establish how the negotiation of differences, status, and hierarchy among peers are conducted in a banquet setting. In contrast with the cleaning activity, events of commensality over food, such as banquets and the lunch hour, are culturally acceptable periods in which individual distinction can be actively pursued and office statuses reversed. This individual competition among peers highlights individuals’ skills and other status markers that are essential for self-development and career mobility in the labour market. This observation will become further evident later on in the chapter as we see employees interact with the managers.

At QLA, opportunities for individual distinction and status reversals existed simultaneously with commensality and communitas. Turner (1969) argued that individual status and its reversal in the ritual context functioned to promote social stability and eased stress for groups such as among the Ndembu in Africa. In the Chinese office context, communal dining relieved employees from the flattening of identities by office roles and statuses. Out-of-office dining allowed employees and managers to balance office and individual identities. This struggle for self-development and distinction by employees bore many similarities with the SEA-EAD flexible practices we saw in previous chapters. They were rooted in the need to anticipate a job change or readiness to move. In this scenario, the performance of individual qualities facilitated success in an uncertain work environment rather than a strict adherence to the kind of embedded
sociality exemplified by guanxi relations. Unlike the SEA-EAD example, QLA enjoyed a measure of conviviality among the group. However, my analysis showed that it would be a mistake to view this communitas as evidence for guanxi relations or long-term firm commitment. Stability lasted for the duration of the ritual and its periodic performance. QLA, while more structured and orderly than SEA-EAD, remained a part of the migration industry that profited from flexible practices.

Office roles provided context in the organization of the dinner banquet, but the expectations around them were limited by the social setting outside of the office. For instance, Mr. Ying decided to sponsor this banquet exclusively for QLA employees to double as my celebratory welcome into the company and Ben’s birthday celebration. It was expressly for QLA’s employees, explicitly excluding the bosses. Ben’s primary role was to act as a gracious host, shouldering the bill and ensuring that we got home safely. As employees, we were all beneficiaries of this occasional managerial generosity. Since it was an unofficial social event, employees were not required to attend. Hence, Belle and Stephanie, both married, declined to attend. The rest of the singletons – Ben, Helen, Sandra, Mark and I - accepted the invitation and looked forward to the gathering. A sub-clique consisting of Ben, Helen, and Sandra emerged during the planning for the event. Sandra and Helen chose Qingdao Hotpot Restaurant, located about fifteen kilometers away from QLA in the city centre, because it fitted their criteria for cleanliness, good food, and reasonable prices.

The choice of this bright, vibrant, and modern open plan dining room reflected the Westernized urban environment and the corresponding forms of relaxed sociality that operated in this space. Unlike traditional Chinese restaurants, which had separate and
private VIP rooms for banquets, this restaurant had low section partitions between
dining groups. This had the effect of relaxing expected normative rules, instead creating
dining intimacy among a small group of friends (for contrast see Mason 2013, Yang 1994
and Kipnis 1997).

Figure 6: Restaurant Seating Arrangement

The clique of Ben, Helen, and Sandra sat opposite Mark and me. Mark and I were
different from the rest of the clique. I was in a constantly liminal position as a temporary
foreign intern at the office. Meanwhile, Mark occupied a lower social and economic
status compared with the group who all belonged to at least a consumption-based
middle-class lifestyle group (see Zhang 2010, Li 2010, Chen and Goodman 2013). But
these differences were not a hindrance to the relaxed ambiance that permeated the dinner,
and which reflected the easy conviviality among the participants. However, this
conviviality and ease relied on the negotiation of individual similarities and differences
throughout the evening. Group solidarity and individual autonomy or distinction
constituted an out-of-office banquet. Both outcomes impacted office corporate culture.
As I will explain, the outcome of these performances details why this process of status
differentiation made Sandra, the sole victor at the end of the evening.

The assertion of individual difference occurred in a situation of group camaraderie and unity. Hotpot added an element of sociality in that everyone cooked in a common pot. Drinking beer that evening also facilitated a temporary bond as a group. These unifying themes served as backdrop to the individual personalities that emerged within the group. For instance, hotpot also emphasized an individual choice of what to eat or cook. Furthermore, each individual controlled their own alcohol consumption (see Mason 2013) rather than succumbing to external pressure, as seen in other instances of competitive drinking in China (see Szto 2013). Reaching a level of inebriation also helped everyone to express themselves and give their opinions on a wide range of topics of interest. Conversation, especially the control of content and timing of delivery, ensured that individual power and prestige could be gained, reversed, and established.

The criteria of individual competition were broadly assessed using suzhi. This appraisal of value of an individual’s quality of being consisted of several streams of ascribed and acquired features that impacted a person’s status. This had been argued by Chinese scholars such as Anagnost (2004, 1997), Jacka (2009), Sigley (2009), Kipnis (2006) as a state-specific social, moral, and economic program to re-educate Chinese citizens in order to acquire a capitalist and consumer mindset as China opened its economy (Hairong 2003b, Ngai 2003). Since then, the discourse of self-development had become necessary, ubiquitous, and characteristic of Chinese individual careers (Ong 2008, Hoffmann 2010, 2006, Fong 2011) and the work environment (Ong 2008).

The QLA banquet that evening revolved around asserting the categories of blood,
kinship, and life experiences. As a newcomer, I had to be explicitly assessed within the
group’s ranking system. For instance, intelligence (zhineng) was viewed by Sandra as
stemming from blood/parentage (xuetong) or genetic make-up combined with other life
experiences, such as education and work. Hence, the first stage in knowing a person was
to assess his or her biological make-up. This was similar to what happened at the start of
my internship, one of the first questions that Mr. Ying asked me was my ancestry. This
assessment was a typical process of understanding a person’s background.

During our dinner, Sandra explained that someone with mixed blood (hun xueer)
produced a child with greater intelligence. She earnestly believed that by virtue of my
mixed parentage, my intelligence was greater than hers. She proceeded to explain her
understanding of “innate intelligence.” She used herself as an example. She explained
that her parents were both from Shandong, and this rendered her at a disadvantage. In
contrast, she explained that if a couple from Shandong and Fujian provinces married and
had a child, the child would likely have a higher intelligence level than she. Furthermore,
she continued, greater cultural distance, such as coming from a different country, was
even better. This difference she said contributed to a child’s development. From her
definition, by blood alone, I had a significant advantage. However, I was to learn later
that this advantage was useless unless one actively asserted it within the group. Since I
did not participate in the “competition,” I quickly receded into the background and
became an observer of the group members (see Fine and Shulman (2009: 186) on this
phenomenon).

Another important factor of distinction that emerged within the group concerned
kinship. In response to the one-child policy, this generation had appropriated alternate
forms of siblingship. Sandra was proud of announcing her “sibling” ties with her cousins, to the group and proceeded to enumerate them. Unlike the others, Sandra was the only one who cited extended relations in foreign countries as forming part of her kinship group. She said that her “big brother” (gège) was in Montreal, Canada studying aeronautical engineering, while her other “big sister” (jiejie) was in Munich, Germany as she married a German national. There, her sister had a baby, and met Sandra once when she returned to China. Ben, Helen, and Mark did not have any relatives that lived in Europe or North America, only in different parts of China. In this particular round of the competition, Sandra actively differentiated herself in this category from among her colleagues.

Foreign language was another distinctive feature of individual suzhi. Ben, Helen, and Sandra spoke Japanese, but only Mark spoke English. This gave him a point of distinction, since English was considered to be a more global language and popular than Japanese. Indeed, Mark could speak English well enough that he had been assigned as my point of contact in the office. His English skills were a product of self-study that reflected his own motivation to improve himself and eventually to travel abroad. Some years previously, he had made a long journey from his rural hometown of Rizhao to the urban area of Qingdao to study at Qingdao Agricultural University. This enabled him to gain official residency in the city. In doing so, Mark demonstrated how individual quality suzhi can be attained and cultivated.

However, his advantage was blunted by Sandra’s Western cosmopolitan outlook. She immersed herself daily in the American popular culture through constantly watching

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19 This migration path of an educated yet struggling graduate is common among university graduates, like the rat tribe or ant tribe residents found in Beijing or Shanghai (see Han 2010).
American television series every evening. Her favourites included CSI Las Vegas, Boston Legal, and Chuck. Someday, she said, “I really want to see Boston!” Mark preferred Chinese movies as his form of relaxation. The advantage of Mark in language fluency had been somewhat blunted by Sandra’s immersion of Western (American) sensibility through these programs. A key difference was that Mark failed to assert this skill like Sandra.

This competition for individual status and distinction did not necessarily hamper group unity. As the evening wore on, with the increasing amount of beer consumed, the single topic that united the members was Chinese nationalism. This was where everyone contributed freely regardless of individual differences. “We are Chinese people so we love China,” declared Ben. Conversation and debates now centred upon defining the countries that they loved and did not love, a process of inclusion and exclusion. Ben expressed a general dislike of Japan, saying that it had emerged “because of the war…although some people like Japan, Japanese culture or language, most do not.” The group agreed that the Japanese royalty were a positive cultural symbol, but that the Japanese culture or language was not. Korea came in second as the group’s most disliked country. They considered Koreans to be generally dishonest. Helen explained, “(they) not paying the wages after getting Chinese workers to do job, and then suddenly leave them unpaid and run away…” They also agreed that Koreans were aloof, “like if you pass them on the street, they will not mind you or they are too by themselves,” said Helen. The third country they disliked intensely was France due to its perceived support of separatism of Tibet. “When Mao came in to free Tibet…French who had a relationship with old leaders in Tibet wanted to maintain the slavery system,” explained Sandra. The last country they mentioned was the United States, but without giving a specific reason.
The countries they liked included Pakistan “who helped a lot in Szechuan earthquake by giving a lot of aid” and various African countries “(who) like China and respect China,” said Sandra and Helen respectively. These reasons helped them unify as a group with a shared identity of being Chinese.

However, this tentative group unity around nationalism did not last for long. Sandra managed again to reverse the situation in her own favour by reverting the conversation that would showcase her shrewdness. She provoked the group with a question, “who is the most intelligent? Indian or Chinese?” Ben and Helen answered swiftly and unanimously that it was the Chinese. Sandra knew this was the immediate reaction of a typical Chinese, and she used this as leverage to display her knowledge and overturn their perception. With a grin, Sandra told the group that, according to the Forbes 100, the richest man in the world was an Indian. His success was proof that he was smart. She admonished the group, saying, “Just because we love China it doesn’t mean we always say we are the best…90% of them (Indians) use or can use technology or computer…” Ben and Helen quietly conceded, although Ben retorted, “they may be intelligent but we are sly.”

These competitive narratives were examples of practices of distinction among the group that temporarily overturned the hierarchy at the workplace. In a banquet setting, “office bosses” Ben and Helen did not necessarily occupy a higher status. In this space it was clear that Sandra was able to assert, distinguish, and establish her dominant social rank within the group, irrespective of designated work positions.
3. QLA Lunch Hour: Managerial Control and Individual Distinction

3.A. Stage 1: The Rejection and Acceptance of Food Exchange

Food is an important means for establishing social relations especially from unrelated individuals encountered in an urban workplace (Altman and Baruch 2010, Dacin et. al. 2010). Office lunches in China draw from powerful social symbolisms and practices surrounding Chinese food, commensality, and gift exchange. Un-relatedness and contractual relations can potentially transform into social obligations through repeated exchange practices (see Chan 2009).

The role of food in the globalized workplace and urban environment have changed in the production of sociality. Sharing food or communal eating can no longer be assumed to be a process of deepening ties; indeed, it can be exactly the opposite. Observers of office food exchanges may therefore misread these practices as evidence of guanxi ties between individuals. At QLA, lunch time eating and sharing radically reinterpret the social norms of gift and food exchange within and beyond the workplace setting. While socialization is not altogether absent, normative practices surrounding food at QLA expose individual autonomy and provide an avenue for the rejection of social connection as much as they forge temporary group unity. The QLA lunch hour offers a liminal space to reject managerial overtures of control, discourage social obligations towards managers, facilitate opportunities for individual status, while providing immediate tangible benefits for employees. The exchanges offer little indication of building long term guanxi relationship between managers and employees or sustaining any organisational commitment.
Although the role of food/gift exchange at QLA has taken on counterintuitive roles, the basis of these practices lay in normative practices of food and feasting in social contexts. Chinese gift-giving norms accrue prestige to the giver while the recipient lose stature. Yang (1994: 196) calls this “status antagonism” and she attributes it to the battle for “face” or the imposition of the moral will of the giver to the recipient. She continues that, in the process of exchange, the recipient of any gift become subject to the will of another. This is particularly salient with respect to food and commensality. Yang (1994: 197) explains that the food recipient succumbs to a “softening of the will.” She describes this by citing a Chinese aphorism, “eating from others, one’s mouth becomes soft. Taking from others, one’s hand becomes short” (“Chi ren zui ruan; na ren shou duan”) (ibid.). This means that once an individual becomes a gift recipient he will have a difficulty in criticizing the giver. Instead, he will be forced to say good things (shuo hao hua) and be easily persuaded (hao shuo hua) by the gift giver (ibid). This loss of power and prestige by being a food recipient is not unique but also shared in other cultures (see Kahn 1993, Foster 1999: 438 – 440, de Boeck 1994, Shack 1971, Sykes 1999).

The gift recipient must then mitigate this inequality and helplessness through the immediate return of a commensurate gift, whether it is a material good or non-material access to a service. The termination of any long term gift exchange or the symbolic refusal to engage in such a relationship is key to maintaining one’s autonomy. QLA employees socially rejected direct food exchange during lunch and thus avoided any social entanglement and obligation with managers. In this context, managers engaged in alternative forms of redistribution and exchange to enhance and maintain their status and position.
To illustrate this process, I discuss the two socially acceptable methods of food exchange and commensality in which managers and employees navigate within this impersonal workplace landscape. Employees establish the setting first by bringing their own lunchbox instead of relying on food lunches from the company. This separation and individuation of employees is countered by two managerial practices. One is the redistribution of food brought by managers and its acceptance by employees, a maneuver that managers accomplish through deploying a discourse of waste (langfei). Another is the indirect sharing of food in a neutral space to avoid accruing any direct individual obligations to a specific giver. These two methods of food exchange form a dynamic of rejection of social ties and limit exchange in the context of professional, contractual relations.

3.A.A. Employee Rejection Using the Discourse of Taste

Historically in China, the domain of food production, distribution, and consumption was a politicized process that involved the state apparatus (Croll 1986, 1982). Hunger and satiety were discourses that defined not just the welfare and wealth of the family but also of society (Zhang et al. 2011: 31–62, Farquhar and Zhang 2005). The achievement of food security was one of the challenges in the ascension of the Communist Party — as it aimed for total social, economic, and political transformation of Chinese society (Croll 1982, Zhang 2011: 2-3). One of the ways to achieve equitable redistribution of resources and efficiency in production was centralizing food consumption around the communal dining halls of an urban danwei, an organization that fused living-working arrangements (Bray 2005) and collectivized rural farm units (see Henderson and Cohen 1984, Farquhar
Urban and rural work life developed around the public mess hall (shi tang) at the workplace during the socialist period. From the 1950s onwards, food provision, however unevenly, was seen as part of an employee’s benefit and a business’ responsibility. Distributing food directly to employees put employers in positions of advantage and influence. Employers as food provider seized the social norm that placed them in a position of benevolence through direct food distribution to employees. This created a situation similar to what Watson (2011: 33) called “forced commensality.” He argued that during the socialist period, one of the objectives was to collectivize eating and control production life by regulating nutrition and time. This historical process had an impact on control over employees’ free time using the idiom of food. Today, some organizations like SEA and factories continue to offer lunch meals.

In both SEA and QLA, employees received a subsidy that covered meal cost which amounted to a maximum of five yuan (0.056 EUR) per day per employee for use in the company cafeteria or as cash allowance included in their paycheque. Mrs. Ying mentioned this when I asked where to buy lunch at the technology park on my first day at work. Mrs. Ying told me, “you don’t have to buy lunch…you didn’t know? I bring your lunch!” Since QLA was a small business, it did not have its own cafeteria. Instead, Mrs. Ying personally brought food to work cooked by her ayi (housekeeper) whom she had trained to cook a version of Japanese-Chinese cooking. The typical meal consisted of rice, vegetables combined with a little meat.

However, not everyone accepted the food distribution prepared by Mrs. Ying. Among the staff members, it was only Ben who received food. Since Ben remained unmarried, he still belonged to the same household as Mr. and Mrs. Ying so he received and ate their
food. I also relied on management for my own lunch, since I did not have access to a kitchen to prepare my own food. Helen occupied a unique position of belonging to two households, since she was Ben’s fiancée while remaining connected to her parents’ household. This liminal position meant that she brought her own lunchbox, which was made by her mother, but also acted as a bridge between employees and managers and became an important conduit for indirect food redistribution. Meanwhile, the rest of the staff – Sandra, Belle, Stephanie, Mark, and Helen – brought their own food to the office. This varying lunchbox dependency affected the dynamics of the lunch hour.

Food recipients were entangled into a form of dependency with the giver or redistributor of food items. This emphasized an asymmetrical power relationship in which the distributors, Mrs. Ying and Helen, enhanced their position of social power, and recipients temporarily lost theirs. One of the sources of loss of social power was the revelatory power in food exchange that exposed the recipients’ living condition. To demonstrate how this works in practice, I discuss my own experience and, in the next section, that of Mark. Both of us were constant recipients of food from the managers.

Food dependency had significant implications on an individual’s status. As a daily recipient of lunches, I easily lost control over my food choices and surrendered them to Mrs. Ying and their cook. My food fare was unpredictable, and I had to eat whatever was cooked, and whatever amount was served, withholding any personal preferences, whether I was given too little or too much food. This arrangement demonstrated to me the extent of my dependence on the food givers, the business owners. This food dependence also revealed to the group my own unusual living arrangements which did not allow me to cook my own meals. I had a home stay arrangement in which the use of
the kitchen was restricted. My lack of a basic family support structure was revealed by my lack of a lunchbox. On the other hand, food independence created a separation between the work space and employees’ personal life. This enforced the contractual professional working relationship between the managers and employees by isolating their personal and family life conditions from the workplace. By establishing lunchbox autonomy, employees discouraged a sentiment base to form during the lunch hour.

In contrast to previous food sharing practices, food consumption at QLA therefore became a medium through which employees asserted autonomy from continued managerial control outside of the work period. This declaration of independence and rejection of dependency used the discourse of taste, *weidao*. “Taste” was cited as everyone’s primary reason for bringing their own lunchbox. Sandra explained that, “I am used to the taste from my house.” Belle also agreed, “I just prefer the food from home.” These answers did not perturb Mrs. Ying, who explained that, “everyone has their own food preferences so it is much more convenient to have this arrangement.” Sandra further explained that in Mr. and Mrs. Ying’s house, “the *ayi* (housekeeper) cooks with a combination of Japanese and Chinese tastes.” This particular culinary mix was viewed as unpalatable by the group, who could not eat this kind of food every day. However, this distinguishing factor was a source of pride for Mrs. Ying rather than a rejection. She was proud that she successfully trained her Chinese ayi to cook Japanese food. However, these practical answers and the benefit of a small cash allowance did not completely explain food refusal. In an intimate environment, food distribution and acceptance incurred moral and social implications for employees. The extended family unit in a household were a source of pride for the employees, and bringing food to work was a way of demonstrating membership of such a household. Belle, who was married, cooked
her own food with the occasional help of her mother. For Sandra, who was unmarried, cooking was the role that her father undertook for the family. Parents and grandparents who lived with their adult working children were by default in charge of meal preparation (see Goh 2009).

3.A.B. Managers’ Counter-Discourse of Waste (Langfei)

The deployment of a discourse of waste to create an avenue for food sharing demonstrated how communal eating simultaneously provided opportunities for sociality and individual independence. The current social aspects of communal eating and food sharing at a transient employment workplace built upon Chinese normative practices with opportunities for individualization necessary for status distinction in a highly mobile and competitive work environment.

Employees’ practice of bringing individual lunchboxes did not signal the end of food exchange or the managers’ chance to exhibit their generosity. There were two other ways that allowed managers to circulate food to everyone without forcing employees to incur any cumbersome social obligations. These were the use of the discourse of waste (langfei) and indirect food exchange. First, I will focus on how managers use the discourse of food waste to relentlessly distribute and coerce employees into accepting food, whether as a direct share or as leftovers. These practical exhortations against waste were veiled attempts to distribute food directly.

Both managers and employees deployed the notion of “food waste” as an excuse to compel others to accept food. This can only be possible because Mrs. Ying and Helen
both brought double the amount of food that they would normally eat in their lunchboxes. In Mrs. Ying’s case, the housekeeper always packed four lunchboxes, brimming with food, for Ben, Mr. and Mrs. Ying, and one for me. The two men always got the bigger lunchboxes while Mrs. Ying and I got smaller boxes. Despite the reduced portion, Mrs. Ying always ate only half of the contents of her lunchbox. She reasoned that since she was on a diet she needed to eat smaller portions, and so she always gave the other half away. She remarked during almost every meal time that the amount of food was too much for her. She then disgorged the contents of her box to me as her first option as I was within reach, or to Mark as her second option, and finally to her son as her last option.

It was not just Mrs. Ying who instigated this kind of food redistribution. Rather, everyone participated in it. Mark’s position as second-in-line for food redistribution exposed the implications of food dependency among the broader group. We had already seen from the peer distinction process I described in the previous chapter that Mark was perceived by the others as coming from a low social status, and therefore, as occupying a disadvantaged position. His every day lunch fare at the office confirmed this perception, as Mark brought in plastic bags of traditional Northern fare snacks of dumplings and noodles from snack shops near his house. At first, I thought these were delicacies, but as time wore on, I realized that these were actually just cheap roadside food and in the hierarchy of food and social prestige a low one. This material positioning rendered him unable to access more or less equal status in their eyes during mealtimes (Wacquant 1993: 20-21). This display subjected him to a level of compassion from the group at the same time as it reinforced his low status. Mark succumbed to being targeted as a recipient of these gifts of food shares and leftovers alike from everyone through accepting others’
argument that food should not be wasted. At the same time, Mark benefitted from the exchange and saved face for himself and the giver.

Employees also participated as food distributors to the group. Similar to Mrs. Ying, Helen also consistently received a lunchbox with double portions of food from her mother. She offered to share her food to everyone after opening her box, but most of us politely declined, except for an occasional taste. More often than not, her extra food portions were generally allocated for Mark. “Here, Mark, have this, I can’t really finish this!” Mark always declined politely, saying, “this is enough” and pointed at his food. Helen prodded him to accept her food, arguing that it would be “wasted” if no one ate it. Mark then usually accepted Helen’s food, but in instances that he refused, Ben would almost always be the recipient of her leftovers. Belle and Sandra sometimes offered their lunch to everyone prior to eating. They did this when their lunch was a specialty in their respective households. But these displays of generosity was usually refused by everyone because one could easily see how small their portions were. In cases where Belle’s lunch box was full, she shared hers immediately with Mark. Mark became a principal recipient of all this largesse from everyone and ended up extremely full after every lunch.

Aside from uneaten portions, if Helen, Sandra, or Belle had substantial leftovers towards the end of the meal, then they passed them on to Mark. He would politely decline them at first, but on most occasions, he would subsequently accept them when clearly he only had a small serving of noodles or few pieces of dumplings for his lunch. Everyone considered it to be a waste if they all threw out their food. However, Mark sometimes deliberately declined offers despite having little food. “I don’t want to abuse their
generosity,” he remarked. But most times, he was jovial and happy to try new cooking and also to receive food.

The discourse of waste enabled food distribution and acceptance to occur in spite of lunchbox autonomy among the group. Principally, bringing one’s own lunch and participating in food distribution maintained the separation and independence of employees. However, status inequality contributed to a more emphatic lunch group and relaxed strict separation among the employees.

3.A.C. Countering Rejection with Indirect Food Sharing

All employees were subject to gifts and food exchange. Despite the focus on Mark and me, the rest of the employees were not totally free from receiving food from the managers. Food redistribution and acceptance occurred through indirect sharing via the neutral space at the centre of the table. Food placed here became disentangled from its owner and allowed recipients to enjoy it without succumbing to any moral or social obligations to the giver. This made the lunch hour a more equitable space for employees to interact with each other and with the managers. Anyone who wished to share anything simply moved food to the centre of the table.

This method of indirect sharing, while effectively blunting any direct control, also provided an alternative way for the managers to demonstrate generosity and display benevolence to all staff members. The refusal of lunch did not deter the exchange of snacks, such as fruit or dessert. These smaller treats were welcomed by everyone. Here, Helen and Mrs. Ying relished in bringing desserts and small items for everyone to enjoy
after the meal. Mrs. Ying would toss it towards the centre to share with everyone. These items would either be Japanese specialties, candies, or other special food items from their home. She encouraged everyone to “just try it” (shishi ba), even if the food item was unfamiliar to them. Helen also brought fruits every day. She peeled and sliced them herself to share with others or left them in at the centre as an open invitation for anyone to partake in.

These three strategies of food refusal and acceptance practices helped mealtimes to be pleasant encounters, since employees were free from managerial control while simultaneously maintaining exchange opportunities to foster temporary communitas among the group. This was an example of how ritual practices can be understood within the framework of impersonal sociality. The tension between autonomy and sociality remade corporate culture in transient employment firms like QLA.

3.B. Stage 2: Lunchtime Conversations and Social Power

Aside from food, lunchtime conversations were an acceptable means of reversing power between managers and employees. They should, therefore, be considered alongside food exchanges as strategy that both employees and managers used to strike a balance between sociality and individuality.

Since the lunch seating arrangement followed the meeting seating arrangement, there was a tendency for managerial authority to reproduce itself during lunchtime, especially their monopolization of conversation. However, as with employees’ food rejection, lunchtime conversations also played a major role in reversing the power and authority relations between managers and employees. The unidirectional flow during meetings became an instance of bi-directional flow of conversation during lunch. Here, the role of Sandra,
who held an elevated status among colleagues in the competitive employee dining event, played a significant role that directly outwitted the managers in conversation and in the process, countered total managerial authority. This section discusses these dynamics using three different excerpts of reconstructed conversations that exhibit a variety of process and outcomes, including an instance wherein managers cement their control of information.

3.B.A. Excerpt 1: Tipping Experiences – Sandra wins

My first example involved Sandra upending the status quo between manager and employees through elevating her individual status. Usually at the beginning of a typical lunchtime, Mr. Ying would initiate a topic of conversation. In one instance, he introduced the topic of tipping (xiao fei) in the context of his life experience in Japan. He explained that “tipping constitutes a large amount (of money) for service…but it’s a normal practice worldwide.” Mr. Ying argued that tipping encouraged good service in restaurants and other establishments where the practice was accepted. Since tipping was non-existent in China, no one could add to this conversation. It was difficult for employees to grasp how tipping influenced or improved service in China. Mr. Ying argued that, based on his experience, service was visibly improved when tipping was expected. However, he cautioned that it made things even more expensive than they already were.

Given employees’ general lack of experience in this area, the topic seemed likely to remain uncontested thus cementing the authority of Mr. Ying on the subject. However, to everyone’s surprise, Sandra suddenly agreed with Mr. Ying’s statement. Furthermore,
she offered input based on her own foreign experience: “In Malaysia, people also expected tips when we were there,” she said. Everyone quickly glanced at her. “We had to tip in the hotel and taxi! Ten percent!” she added. Mr. Ying agreed with this additional comment and quipped, “but we don’t have it here (China).” Helen remarked, “I think it is good we don’t have this tipping here…makes it cheaper, but service (here) is not good.” In this exchange, what would have been the final word from Mr. Ying had been subtly superseded by Sandra. Her observation of tipping custom in a different country indirectly informed the group that she had travelled there with her family on a vacation. In the process of making this performance, she diffused the uni-directional authority of Mr. Ying and also affirmed her status elevation among her colleagues.

3.B.B. Excerpt 2: Saving your Loved One – Sandra Reasserts Her Distinction

In this second excerpt, Sandra continued to assert her distinction among the group in conversation. Here she tested the group once again when she posed a trick question that she read online. She knew ahead of time that the discussion would be controversial and that any answer given by the group would be wrong. The question she posed was the sticky problem, “in distress, if the ship is sinking and there is only a single space in a boat, would you save your mother, wife, or child?” It was a difficult and uncomfortable topic for the group, especially for Mr. and Mrs. Ying who was still at the table, and for Ben and his fiancée Helen. Due to the potential traps involved, Mr. and Mrs. Ying smiled and stood up from the desk after the question was posed. It signalled the end of their lunch time participation and they left the employees to continue the discussion.
The group did not anticipate Sandra’s trap until too late. Afterwards, everyone realized that no answer would have been considered correct. But the question initially stumped the group. The discussion among the women, both single and married, wavered between mother and child. Since Stephanie and Belle were married, and Stephanie was expecting a baby soon, their answers favoured the safety of the child. Helen was also wavering between mother and child, but relented, “if I had a child, I would save her first.” This conundrum had a greater impact on the men in the group. For Ben, it was dangerous for him to answer because Helen was right beside him, and his mother was within earshot. He had to lean away from Helen and answered, “I would save my mother.” Then Helen boxed him playfully, and told him, “what if you have children?!" He then argued that, “if I have children, I will save them, but now I should (bixu) save my mother. You are choosing your mother too!” He teased Helen. Mark also agreed with Ben on the issue of children, but replied that he will also save his mother. These answers seemed to suit Sandra, when she finally revealed her objective in asking this question to the group. She now announced with great authority in her voice, “(in the study)…Males saved their mothers…they are really “mothers’ boys”… and women saved their children. So all your answers are normal.” With these words, the group felt relief that their answers were not really wrong or bad at least based on the information cited by Sandra. She herself remarked that, instead of the three choices given, she would have to save herself first before she could save anyone else. In this instance, Sandra once again asserted her shrewdness among the group.

3.B.C. Excerpt 3: Post-Partum Practices – Mrs. Ying’s Authority
In this example, I close with a typical lunch time topic, birthing practices. Mrs. Ying had a greater authority on this topic than any other members of the group. Her wider life experiences superseded the younger employees. The conversation began when Mrs. Ying asked Stephanie, with her burgeoning stomach, how she was doing in her sixth month of pregnancy. She asked Stephanie if she was going to subscribe to the month-long post-partum confinement (zuo yuezi) after birth. Stephanie answered that she might if her mother-in-law would be there to help at the house, but otherwise, “if she is not here then, there is only me and my husband, so I have to work at home.” Mrs. Ying shared that she too was forced to lie in bed by her mother for a month, during which time she was not even allowed to take a bath, when she gave birth in China. When she gave birth to her daughter in Japan, she discovered that she liked the Japanese practice better. “In Japan, women can take a bath immediately after birth if they want to. It is cleaner too!” Helen could not believe that it would be good to do this. The others were also alarmed by Mrs. Ying’s declaration. Mrs. Ying counteracted their stares with, “Yes, it is healthy and done by the Japanese!” She continued to lecture to the girls that, “…here in China, we have different beliefs about the body, about cold and hot and being sick…but in Japan, it is not the case. So, it does not follow that it is bad, or one can get sick by taking a bath or working immediately.” The girls were listening intently, especially since nobody had children yet. In cases where such practices were of interest to the group, Mrs. Ying was always enthusiastic to share her experiences and teach the employees. The pedagogical approach that dominated her and Mr. Ying’s treatment of the group during working hours thus entered the lunch space. Lacking such experience, the group had little to add.

These three excerpts demonstrated how lunch time conversation during the lunch period reversed the uni-directional monopoly of information from the business owners to
employees during meetings. This role reversal was one important feature of the QLA lunch period where individual employees can display status and distinction not possible during the normal work period. However, as the last example showed, both management and employees joined the banter. Both sides appear to conform with the appearance of respecting the authority roles yet also following one’s interest and advantage. At no stage did the employees gained the long-term upper hand on status but only on a temporary basis. In the end, then, communal eating at QLA acted like a kind of classic double-edged liminality: on the one hand, it created the kind of communitas that we typically see in liminal events, such as coming of age rituals and carnivals, on the other hand, role-reversals during communal eating at QLA allowed employees to temporarily gain status over managers (Turner 1969). The fact that such status reversals were temporary simply reinforced the everyday managerial hierarchy. In these examples, conversations served its ritual purpose of relieving stress from work discipline and managerial authority during every day life at work. However, these practices did not support the argument of demonstrating guanxi relations among managers and employees. Taken in a wider perspective, lunch conversations acted to cut off personal ties and establish impersonal sociality within a transient employment SME firm.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

This chapter demonstrated the dynamic of cutting off and building social detachment in a non-crisis context at QLA. In this chapter, I discussed the shift from information control to characteristics of individual distinction as the specific forms of power that manifested themselves when there was little actual work and therefore knowledge control
was unnecessary at the workplace. This type of power manifested itself in social situations through practices of individual distinction. These practices were played out in the form of rituals among employees and managers that did not endanger the company or the status quo. Instead, these practices created predictability and stability in a transient employment firm and during an uncertain economic period.

This chapter continued the argument that, outside of a crisis situation or actual work, social detachment were built around employee obedience at work and employee individual distinction during breaks or outside of the workplace. Routines, such as feasting and the lunch hours, were highlighted as the means in which individual distinction was possible while conforming to the work hierarchy. Food had always been highly symbolic of creating strong personal bonds and group unity in social contexts. However, in this chapter, I presented its antithesis – limiting personal depth and enhancing individual preferences and statuses. My research finding suggested that these cutting off practices separated personal with the professional life of QLA employees. These formed the basis of boundary building essential to impersonal relations in transient employment firms. This allowed for work to be done as well as provided opportunities to maintain individual statuses in ordinary jobs.

Another key finding of my study indicated that food-related practices can no longer be seen as integrative practices to build firm loyalty especially in transient employment firms. While lunch time performances and an out-of-the office dinner party had their roots in social food-sharing practices and, indeed, contributed to the development of temporary communitas, workplace dining was not necessarily evidence of long-term guanxi ties between managers and employees or among employees. This was because QLA food-
based rituals cut off any long-term social obligations by highlighting individual status distinction at the office. The first section laid the groundwork to establish the socialist legacy of impersonal dining or “forced commensality” into the workplace. This historical basis easily fitted into the flexible workplace and uncertain work environment. The outcome was that these QLA food practices constituted impersonal sociality that only temporarily maintained friendly work relations to facilitate work.

In this chapter, I also placed the issue of Chinese individuality within the social context of work and relational dynamics in the workplace. Unlike other work ethnographies, individual distinction in mundane, ordinary, transient work was an essential component to establish impersonal ties. During lunch time, a period outside of work, managerial authority was temporarily reversed. The third section examined how employees asserted their own identity through the rejection of direct food distribution from managers. Instead, employees brought their own lunch box and accepted food through indirect means. Sandra aggressively pursued her distinction among the group and supplanted Ben and Helen during an out-of-office dinner. She also regaled her co-employees and managers with her own guile and wit. Self-development was not only about occupational mobility but a way to regain individual status and distinction in a transient employment situation.
Thesis Conclusion

The study of Chinese firms has been hampered by the focus on cultural models exemplified by a framework like the “guanxi explanation.” This perspective focuses on selected traits that have been identified and reproduced in academia, business, diversity management models, and in the general public, especially the political sphere. In particular, the Hofstede Global Index of Values has been prominent in characterizing the Chinese work organizations as dominated by stability, order, and harmony. The “guanxi explanation” has been instrumental in codifying all these cultural values to analyse Chinese work relations and office culture.

This study on transient employment in family-owned and-run Chinese enterprises has demonstrated a different type of work relations and management practices that has been ignored or overlooked in favour of the “guanxi explanation.” These temporary and short-term employment destinations of college graduates such as QLA and SEA-EAD contradict typical representations or assumptions that Chinese work life is governed by Chinese “values” or relations inspired by “Confucianism.” The relations established within these enterprises are characterized by social detachment and a body of relationality that I call “impersonal relations.”

Impersonal relations are a category of relation-building in which the basis of interactions serve to restrict creating long-term, affective, and personal ties. This process of social detachment is a way to cut off material and emotional obligations to individuals in one’s network. This is a process that uses a spectrum of practices ranging from ritual-like
performances of social norms to contingent highly flexible interactions. The practices found in SEA-EAD and QLA business operations, peer relations, customer relations, and manager-employee relations show a loose network of various non-affective, calculating, and no-obligation ties. These impersonal ties are permanent features of flexible firms in order to compete, adapt, cope, and profit in the uncertain and unpredictable conditions of the labour/student migration industry. The “guanxi explanation” as a framework is inadequate to capture and analyse these conditions of work flexibility in firms that are transient employment destinations.

I will organize the implications of my findings into four parts. I begin by summarizing and detailing the body of impersonal relations described in my empirical chapters. I frame this discussion by suggesting the use of Strathern’s actor-network theory to describe the dynamics and production of impersonal ties that impact studies of Chinese business. The second sub-section re-examines how my findings regarding impersonal relations prompt us to re-think the role of ritual analysis in organizations. Rather than possessing qualities of stability and a long-term orientation, I highlight how ritual practices have characteristics that are short-term, contextual, and highly adaptive making them suitable for use in flexible firms. The final sub-section cites the significance of the mundane, ordinary workplaces such as transient employment SMEs for understanding central problems in anthropology such as relationality, work flexibility, and mobility. I close the conclusion with some recommendations or further research on this topic.
1. The Category of Impersonal Relations

I began the thesis by pointing out the misplaced emphasis on Chinese strong relations and the use of guanxi discourse to characterize Chinese firms. In my research, I outlined a body of relationality I called “impersonal relations” that had been missed by scholars using the guanxi framework into business research. However, it is not my intention to replace one discourse for another. This thesis set out to use an anthropological approach to studying and re-thinking how impersonal relations constitute a significant aspect of workplace relations in SMEs in China and play a role in work flexibility, the movement of people, and capital in local and international settings.

I discuss the implications of my main research findings in three sub-sections. First, I will examine the theoretical significance of research on impersonal relations and why the actor network theory (ANT) of Marilyn Strathern helps to understand the flexibility regime in Chinese workplaces. Second, I shall discuss the two different types of impersonal relations that I have observed in the Chinese transient employment workplace. The first type is the contingent or flexible variant and the second type of relationality appears more stable or more ritualized. The difference between the two lies in whether power is being exercised by individuals in order to control information (type one), or to re-affirm individual status (type two), or to return to professional trust (type three). The third subsection places the individual turn in Chinese society within the context of impersonal relations. I highlight the interconnection between the two as evidence for employee mobility.
1.A. Strathern’s Actor Network Theory (ANT) and Impersonal Relations

The current business literature on the Chinese workplace largely emphasizes that Chinese relations tend to be strong and personal (see Chen et. al. 2013, Luo et. al. 2011).

Consequently, impersonal relations pose an analytical problem which researchers have tended to solve by subsuming them within the guanxi frame (ibid.). As explained in the introduction, guanxi as a framework has been constantly redefined to accommodate all types of relations including impersonal ones. In doing so, impersonal relations are not explicitly recognized, and this does not help us understand the phenomenon.

Here, I find Strathern’s actor-network theory (ANT) useful. She adapts Latour’s actor-network theory (1993) specifically to address relationality in contemporary settings. Strathern (1992) visualizes “society” as an actor linked to other actors in a loose network bounded by context-specific links. She sets out an agenda to unite two seemingly contradictory categories that are common in the discipline: nature-culture, inside-outside, and society-individual. Anthropology, then, she continues, should focus, not on binary opposites such as society versus individual, but on studying the links between individuals—the type of bonds that they form and how they cut off or expand these links. In other words, Strathern applies this to contemporary kinship studies and understands relation-building as a dynamic spectrum rather than two oppositional categories. This shift in perspective accounts for the messy dynamics of human relationality on the ground instead of strict oppositional boundaries such as personal or impersonal. It is for this reason that I turn to Strathern’s ANT as a way to explore the
nodes that connected seemingly unrelated categories such as relationality, work, and mobility.

Strathern’s ANT provides me with a fresh perspective into analyzing two phenomena: how impersonal relations operate in Chinese transient firms as well as how impersonal relations and work flexibility are related. I will first summarize the two types of impersonal relations that I found in Chinese transient firms. Then I will return to their implications on issues of work flexibility and mobility.

1.B. Three Types of Impersonal Relations

By applying Strathern’s ANT framework, my findings demonstrate three types of impersonal relations in transient employment firms. One type can be categorized as highly contingent on the situation. The second type appears more stable and routine. The third type shows how the transformation from a highly contingent stage to a stable one occurs. The difference in dynamics between these three types depend on whether the node of connections and interactions among individuals relied on information control, professional trust, or on the competition for individual status. I found that nodes that used information control produced highly contingent workplace impersonal relations. On the other hand, where nodes of interaction were based on individual status, interpersonal relations were more stable and routine. Among customers and agent, the nodes of professional trust produced a dynamic shift from highly contingent to a more stable, power-neutral, professional interaction. The context in which information control, individual status, or professional trust was observed at QLA and SEA-EAD relied on several factors. These included the position of the organizations within the migration
industry hierarchy, the transnational, and local demand for labour or education mediation services, and the local arrangement of office life, particularly the number of employees, lunch arrangements, and manager-employee relations. These factors worked together to produce a wide spectrum of impersonal types of relationality seen at SEA-EAD and QLA.

The first type was characterized by a highly contingent, anonymous, professional, and profit-seeking type of relationality. This was particularly acute among agent transactions that may be mistaken as personal-like relations especially when a long-term “contract” had been established, such as between Ms. Park and Headmaster Qing. The friendliness and consistency of interactions merely made transactions easier but these were nonetheless based on a calculated profit-seeking strategy of Ms. Park’s to extract money from Headmaster Qing. This first type of impersonal relations was conditioned by the position of SEA-EAD as a second-level recruiter in the study abroad industry. I described in Chapter Two the rapacious profit structure of international foreign education sales and how the Chinese migration industry profited through strategic control of information. Due to the high demand for study abroad services, impersonal relations between agents within and outside of SEA-EAD used information control as the node of connection. This meant that impersonal relations expanded to collect information from diverse sources and retracted or shortened once information had been gathered and commissions secured. In Chapter Four, I discussed how SEA-EAD required indefinite expansion of ties, a hezuo arrangement, using different licensed and unlicensed brokers to gather different types of information and assistance. These included general information on foreign education systems, visa and migration rules, guidelines, and restrictions on commission disbursements. However, once student
enrolment was confirmed, the expanded network quickly retracted to restrict other claimants from sharing in the commissions. Hence, ties between and among agents remained impersonal and relatively anonymous in order to quickly facilitate applications with little obligations or commission-sharing possibilities. One outcome in the use of hezuo impersonal ties was that agents and transactions lacked accountability, which contributed to a chronic risk of fraud, and thereby required conflict resolution as shown in Chapter Six.

One of the key characteristics of the first type of impersonal relationship was the centrality of information control. This was evident in, for instance, SEA-EAD manager-employee relations. In Chapter Five, the response of Headmaster Qing to Mei Lin’s fraud revealed how work relations with his employees were inherently impersonal. He attempted to exercise control over specialized education consulting knowledge while employees avoided complete surveillance. The impersonal ties that resulted between manager-employee were built and cut off around the node of information control. All EAD employees nurtured and guarded skills and knowledge developed in their jobs to maintain their continued employment viability and to build future career possibilities outside of EAD. Those who had least access to specialized skills and knowledge, like Mr. Dian, passively maintained ties and continued to perform their jobs. Those who had greater skills actively pursued their ideas and later cut off ties, or were prepared to lose their jobs and move elsewhere when EAD conditions did not favour them or their ideas. We witnessed examples of these strategies in the cases of Mr. Shin and Mr. Smith. The Headmaster himself wielded control and segmented access to information within EAD, and this led to task redundancy between Mr. Dian and me. The focus on information control produced no-obligation temporary ties between Mr. Qing and SEA-EAD
employees. This type of flexible operation offered the least cost and effort in a cutthroat industry plagued by fraud as well as resulting in employee turnover and dissatisfaction. This highly contingent type of relationality had been described as part of a “flexible operation” by SEA-EAD employee Mr. Shin, and as work flexibility by labour researchers such as Kalleberg (2003).

A second type of impersonal relations that I observed at QLA was relatively stable or predictable compared with the highly contingent cases discussed previously. This was because QLA was a first-level firm in the migration industry unlike SEA-EAD. This meant that, rather than as an active recruiter, their business model profited from principally cultivating ties with clients directly. Moreover, during the research period in 2008, the downturn in the global economy slowed the acceptance of Chinese applicants to work in various Japanese industries. Both these factors resulted in QLA having little work in the office. These factors shifted the node of relations between manager-employees and among employees from competitive information control into one of competitive status differentiation and hierarchy acceptance. This factor promoted a type of QLA workplace relations that was professional, socially distant, with little significant personal links or interaction outside of the workplace, and more importantly, governed by ritual-like practices that may be interpreted as building or maintaining personal guanxi relations. However, as I described in Chapters Six to Eight, this type of professional friendly interactions was governed by work hierarchy and its reversal by using one’s individual traits or suzhi. This competition around individual traits or suzhi were valued highly in China’s consumer and labour markets to maintain individual and social mobility (Nyíri 2010, Anagnost 1997, Yan 2003a, 2003b, Yan 2003c, Pun 2003). Thus, ritual-like
impersonal practices during work and non-work periods constituted readiness and potential for employees’ movement elsewhere.

From Chapters Six to Eight, I showed how the second type of impersonal relations used ritual-like and routine practices during the banquet and the lunch hour. This may mislead us to assume that these types of practices built and demonstrated guanxi-type or personal relations. However, they were not. In Chapters Seven and Eight, Mr. and Mrs. Ying and their employees demonstrated what Evasdottier (2003) called as obedient autonomy, the acceptance of hierarchy in the workplace order to ensure individual autonomy in their personal lives outside of the workplace and non-work period such as the lunch hour. These included employees submitting to QLA’s role hierarchy and managerial authority during the work period (shown in Chapter Seven) and its reversal through the display of individual employee distinction by way of food refusal and conversational wit during the lunch period (shown in Chapter Eight). Another instance was also seen among employees. During the cleaning period prior to office work described in Chapter Seven, employees acknowledged each other’s office roles and its accompanying responsibilities. However, once the work period ended, for instance during an office party described in Chapter Eight, the event became a competitive arena to display individual statuses separate from their office identities. When the chapters are taken together, both these public performances ensure that employees have room to express their individual statuses outside of work hours without jeopardizing their work and position at the office.

The second type of impersonal relations used ritual-like and routine practices to reinforce a boundary between a professional and personal relationship. These practices cut off any personal or social obligation links with their work colleagues in two ways. One approach
was to abide by the hierarchy and authority according to the job positions within the company as seen in meetings and cleaning in Chapter Seven. This ensured that contractual identities and obligations were met during the work period. Another approach was to reverse managerial authority during lunch. However, the lunch hour signaled a non-work period, and therefore, any contractual obligations and positions became temporarily suspended. I described in Chapter Eight how this period became the means by which significant symbolic ties towards personal connections were rejected. These food and conversational ritual-like practices temporarily reversed any managerial authority and job-related status for employees. However, this period did not necessarily affect the overall office hierarchy. Once lunch was over, the status quo returned. Nonetheless, the lunch hour was significant for its public declaration of the professional identities separate from the employees’ personal lives. Both chapters demonstrated how professional obligations were established and how the lunch hour rites cut off any personal ties by means of reversing managerial authority and shedding off work identities during the lunch hour. These practices ensured that the employers’ authority and status were circumscribed only during the work hour; and an employee’s personal life did not become fully subsumed under a transient employment job or position outside of the work period. Food and commensality may be associated with building strong relations, but in the workplace at QLA these practices were used to craft social detachment and individual distinction.

The third type of impersonal relations demonstrated the transformation from a highly contingent relationship due to fraud into one where a return to professional relations implies relative stability. The cyclical process encompassed three ritual-like bargaining strategies. First, customers used emotions or threats of violence to present their cases.
Second, management deflected these threats by avoiding any direct confrontation. Finally, once emotions dissipated from both sides, a phase of truth-verification and resolution ensued. The ideal goal was to achieve a level of professional trust and contractual ties. However, this may not necessarily be the case as Mr. Ying in Chapter Six preferred to extend his dependency and extract emotion work from QLA to deliver service. This chapter showed how, following the nodes of power, displayed the shift from an unequal power relationship brought about by fraud to one that was power-neutral and contractual once more. The cyclical ritual-like process enforced social detachment to reduce the burden of emotion work and personal obligations and facilitate once again swifter financial transactions and human movement.

To sum up, this body of impersonal relations in transient employment firms like QLA and SEA-EAD consists of a wide range of both highly adaptive contingent practices and stable routines. These practices underlie the role of impersonal relations in the movement of people and money between local and international contexts. Impersonal relations are the ties that facilitate mobility. The phenomenon of personal and social detachment at SEA-EAD ensures the frictionless transfer of information and commissions. Friendly, reliable, and professional transactions with little personal obligations ease the burden of work for minimum wage-earning agents. It allows for the cooperation between second and third-level migration agencies to transform Chinese customers into fee-paying international students swiftly. On the other hand, the extensive yet loose network of impersonally connected individuals breed anonymity. These anonymous transactions in the network promote non-accountability and thereby increase the risks for fraud and blur legitimate and illegitimate activities within the industry. This
phenomenon is chronic and common in other information-sensitive and clandestine services in migration wherein criminal wrongdoing is difficult to pinpoint (see migration intermediary accounts by Lucht 2012 and Khosravi 2007). In QLA, the maintenance of impersonal relations among the employees and the managers ensure that work obligations are met without necessarily establishing deeper personal ties. These impact on an employee’s readiness to move when opportunities arise in the future. I discuss this further below.

1.C. Impersonal Relations and Mobility

Impersonal relations facilitate the movement of people – both customers and employees of these transient employment firms – to other companies and countries – by minimizing attachments. This process of detachment is essential, if not indispensable, to firms like QLA and SEA-EAD which act as conduits for the flow of money and people. Both these phenomena remake our understanding of Chinese SMEs as temporary anchor points with their corporate culture used to facilitate speed in the flow of human and financial capital.

I argue that social detachment are permanent features of transient employment firms. This explains why EAD and QLA employees disengage from their peers, jobs, and to their firms. QLA individual distinction and EAD skills development practices, then, can be understood within this category of impersonal relations as ways to speed up and maintain readiness for movement. In China’s current flexible capitalist economy, mobility is highly prized (see Nyíri 2010). Transient employment firms like QLA and SEA-EAD become waypoint structures or transient way places that provide temporary
relief for employees to save up cash or develop skills. These firms transform into viable
temporary stopovers in order to later establish life and connection elsewhere.
Nonetheless, these institutions still serve as friction points, or points that potentially hold
them back, therefore, social detachment strategies act to loosen connections or
rootedness in these transition points. It is not that the employees in these transient
employment firms do not wish for attachment or socially meaningful relations with
individuals. They wish to leave rote work and pursue a better paying job that can fund
their dreams. This is similar to the case among migrant labour living in the KwaZulu-
Natal region of South Africa whose frustration and longing to establish a pathway for
upward social mobility has been described by Ferguson (2013). However, the employees
at QLA and SEA-EAD demonstrated that they already knew that these firms did not
offer them such a pathway. Hence, social detachment and impersonal relations acted to
de-anchor themselves to facilitate their movement for later anchoring elsewhere.

Consumers also know the fraud risks and unpredictable service from a firm embedded in
flexible market practices. This explains why – contrary to what guanxi literature predicts –
EAD customers actually prefer a professional relationship with their agents despite their
use of personal-like rhetoric. This arrangement results in low power difference between
the two and thereby allows swift transactions and assures their travel abroad. The use of
this personal and affective rhetoric by customers, described in Chapter Six, became
necessary only when fraud had taken place and threatened their movement by trapping
them in place. Fraud and the resulting dependency on agents hampered the objective of
customers to establish connections elsewhere, preferably abroad and armed with new
degree credentials. Customers deployed personal-like rhetoric to restore contractual
success with calculating brokers.
My research findings thus demonstrate other forms of relationality that have previously gone unexamined due to the overemphasis on the guanxi explanation in Chinese business literature. Since Chinese organisational analysis has been colonised by the guanxi explanation and notions of strong personal relations, the findings of social detachment and the individual turn in scholarly works on contemporary China appears to disrupt it (e.g., Yan 2003c, Ong 2008). However, in my study, I locate the individual turn not separate but an essential part of Chinese impersonal relationality. Given the overemphasis on the guanxi explanation to firm analysis, the phenomena of social detachment and Chinese individuality are overlooked and contextually isolated from each other (see Chen 2013, Barkema et. al. 2015). By recognizing both these processes within firms as interrelated, these connections of individual distinction and social detachment are pathways towards social and economic mobility.

2. Ritual in Flexible Firms

My findings on impersonal relations also forced me to re-think the role of ritual analysis in organizations in a time of work flexibility and employee mobility. I discuss here two key features of ritual that are applicable to this study. First, I examine ritual’s aspect of unpredictability. I then discuss the ephemeral, short-term characteristic of ritual practice.

Academic discussion of the use of ritual in organizations suffers from a lack of innovation from anthropologists and business scholars in the last few decades. This is due to a narrow application of the concept of ritual practice (see Smith and Stewart 2011,
Islam and Zyphur 2009). Most analyses and applications of ritual used by practitioners focus on how its integrative function helps to instill corporate loyalty and stabilise organizations. However, in a time of work flexibility and mobility, ritual analysis has been relegated for use in understanding relatively stable organizations, such as universities (Dacin 2010, DiDomenico and Philips 2009) and for describing company mealtimes (Plester 2014, Linden 2009). Indeed, company meal practices may temporarily produce communitas in the manner described by Turner (1969) and, indeed, I found this in my own work. They may also re-affirm and sustain existing power and status differentials, as my work also shows. In Chapters Seven and Eight, the QLA employee party and lunch hour events confirmed and supported the outcomes of daily stability, authority hierarchy, and group unity. Overall, however, the end goal of long-lasting group integration, job stability, and firm loyalty promised by the Turnerian view fail to apply in a period wherein labour mobility, flexible work, and transient employment firms dominate the labour market. These practices in ritual-like forms actually constitute ways to foster detachment. Taussig (1997) criticizes anthropology’s use of ritual to artificially render order in the text when the wider system is innately violent and oppressive. This is one primary reason why ritual analysis in contemporary organizations skews firm representation towards the appearance of stability and predictability. This is in contrast to the uncertainty and anxiety brought about by labour and work flexibility within firms.

How can we then make sense of ritual-like practice in such a context? The description of a “failed ritual” (e.g. Schieffelin 2007, Collins 2004: 51-52) in terms of procedural error or ideal outcome is insufficient to capture the nature of ritual practices at transient employment firms like QLA or SEA-EAD. The very nature of these ritual practices in QLA and SEA-EAD emphasizes affective and personal detachment rather than
procedural error or failed outcomes. Therefore, I turn to the other features of ritual practice that overcome its integrative characteristics. I take inspiration from some of the literature on healing ritual studies that find uncertainty and disorder in its practice and outcome. For example, among the Luangans of Borneo, Herrmans (2016) argues that healing performances are knowingly done even if the subjects and practitioners knew that a cure may not occur. In the case of Taussig (1987), he places ritual healing practices in the context of the colonial violence and terror legacy experienced by the Indians in the Putumayo region of Columbia. He argues that shamanic healing offers little closure or cathartic resolution but that the practice itself is simply a way to navigate exigencies of fragmentation, loss of self, and the threat of death encountered in the everyday culture of terror. In both cases, the outcome of healing and health, merely represent one possibility of ritual practice in an uncertain world wherein the subjects feel marginal to the complex nation-state and world order.

In the case of SEA-EAD, ritual practice in conflict resolution structure instances of uncertainty and instability that characterize the study abroad industry. Ritual-based impersonal relations practices between customers and agent provide troubleshooting opportunities for common problems in the volatile industry. For instance, in Chapter Six, the conflict resolution rituals observed in six cases follow a ritual structure pattern described by Van Gennep (1960) as a rite of passage or a transformation from one phase to another, with a period of separation, liminality, and aggregation. The ritual structure appears to be contained, predictable, and orderly. However, the goal is to restore not communitas but social detachment: the impersonal professional working relations between agent and customer. The rituals in themselves are an artificial frame to structure and disguise inherent unreliable agent-customer relations. Hence, one central limitation
to my use of ritual structure to describe volatile situations such as the SEA-EAD company fraud is the flattening of such inequities in the text. However, by using ritual structure as the text format, I want to highlight the customer’s attempt at control of the nodes of power in a consumer environment prone to uncertainty.

For QLA, the sense of unpredictability at the workplace is represented by the vulnerability of the company to the 2008 global economic downturn. This uncertainty is masked by the appearance of orderliness, in other words, the lack of work and clients at the office produces order. This is made even more palpable through ritual-based social detachment practices. The sense of order is magnified because the links between individuals are based on demonstrating suzhi individual traits rather than the control of information. This means that ritual practices engaged by employees use social rules for group activities such as cleaning and eating together. The cleaning and meal times are two liminal group activities that distinguish or transition from non-work to work periods by reversing and also reinforcing managerial authority in the workplace. The QLA work day generates order that follow the ritual structure and liminality concept described by Turner (1969). This could mislead observers to assume that labour migration consulting is orderly, and that managers and employees have strong or a guanxi-type relationship. The ritual practices based on displaying individual traits indeed crea moments of stability amidst great anxiety over a weak economy and relative boredom from the lull in office life. However, these practices neither assure employee loyalty nor long-term commitment of an employee to his or her job or to the company. Instead, these ritual practices reproduce impersonal ties that emphasize social detachment instead of the Turnerian communitas and strong ties between and among the managers and employees. Indeed, employee distinction using suzhi individual traits maintain employee mobility and
prevent rootedness. These are displayed during the liminal activities at work. These employee strategies do little to transform the overall workplace status quo yet circumscribe the authority and influence of the managers on employees’ lives only during the work period. These de-anchoring strategies allow employees to make do with their employment and work situation while anticipating potential opportunities and taking back control of their personal life and career. This type of social detachment attempts to cope with the highly uncertain situation of the global economic downturn, their low wages, and lack of career advancement in a family-run company.

Ritual analysis needs to be much more nuanced and can no longer be seen as simply integrative in purpose in organisational culture. My findings on transient employment firms show how impersonal relations and individual distinction are facilitated by ritual. Ritual practices are not just in the domain of strong personal ties but also reproduce the body of impersonal relations that foster individual and social detachment in the workplace. Impersonal ritual practices establish boundaries between work and the domain of the private self. Rather than integration, these practices detach the employee from the firm in order to ensure the possibility of movement for better opportunities elsewhere. These are employee strategies that manage the consequences of unpredictability found in transient employment workplaces. The ritual form may mislead observers to conclude stability and predictability. However, the ritual form is necessary to produce a sense of stability for workers in a highly uncertain work environment brought about by the intimate link of these firms to the global political economy of migration. By expanding our view on ritual, it can remain relevant in organizations that are characterized by transient, short-term employment, and rapid transactions.
My research findings on impersonal relations also highlight another feature of ritual as practiced in transient employment firms: its orientation on the present. This short-term ephemeral feature of ritual is also linked to its other attributes such as flexibility and unpredictability. Herrmans (2016) links the present-orientation to ritual’s emergent, creative, and transformative aspect. She outlines several key implications of ritual’s creativity (ibid.). One, participants play an active role in an event that rely less on formal properties of the ritual, even if it may refer to forms inspired by the past. Second, actors turn ritual performances into present-oriented events, deploying symbols in a specific genre for specific situations and conditions (ibid.). Third, Herrmans argues that in risky and unpredictable circumstances, ritual outcomes rely on a performer’s ability to adapt and respond in culturally appropriate ways to the specific circumstances. Altogether, emergent ritual rely on an orientation to the present.

Ritual-based impersonal relations performances operate in a similarly emergent fashion. In contrast with strong personal relations, impersonal relations offer few guarantees of a future or a reliable past as basis of interactions. This makes it fast, highly adaptable, and cost-efficient in a transient employment firm embedded in a flexible capitalist system. This can easily be seen in the conflict resolution practices in Chapter Six that are necessary to counter chronic transactional failures in education consulting at SEA-EAD.

It requires a set of recognizable social patterns of bargaining to revert to the trustworthiness of commercial impersonal transactions.

At QLA, office cleaning and lunch meals are a daily series of dramaturgical scripts that cut off ritual’s long-term quality through an emphasis on the individual. For this to
occur, QLA employees must first recognize managerial authority during the work hours and in the clean-up activities. It is only after this that they could free themselves from managerial control and their identity as an employee, instead, highlighting their individual qualities outside of office hours. QLA mealtimes, discussed in Chapters Seven and Eight, become the stage at which employees assert their separation from, and boundary with, the firm. These actions are antithetical to the goals of an ideal firm, but are necessary for the survival of smaller firms subjected to the demands of flexible capitalism. For managers/business owners, these ritual-like practices periodically stabilize firms so that they could continuously operate in uncertain work environments and socialize employees into flexible work systems. For employees, these provide a viable work environment while remaining poised to switch job. For this to work, ritual practices need to remain present-oriented.

3. The Significance of Transient Workplaces

Transient employment firms are mundane, ordinary, and unremarkable, unlike bigger and more modern firms, in terms of human resources and management philosophy. The brief nature of employment of their staff warrants little interest in these places as a suitable site for fieldwork. However, these workplaces are theoretically rich research sites because of their important role as anchor points or “moorings” as Urry (2007) describes them, in flexible capitalism.

In this research, observations of these workplaces tie together the interrelated issues of social detachment, ritual practice, and mobility that shape and are shaped by flexible
capitalism. I will dissect the impact of these transient employment firms on two levels. First, I will discuss the role of transient workplaces as anchor points in flexible capitalism. As social artifacts of flexible capitalism, transient employment firms such as SEA and QLA facilitate the international flow of capital and labour. Next, I will then examine how the practices of social detachment and ritual practice together speed up and slow down the flow of capital and people within the firm and outside its boundaries. These two practices position transient workplaces as central points in mobile possibilities rather than simply knowledge dead-ends.

Firms such as QLA and SEA are small anchor points in an extensive international network of labour migration and study abroad industries. These act as hubs in the movement of candidates from the national to the international spheres while money moves in from the international to the national level. Due to their size and lack of operational sophistication, these family-owned and managed service firms are transient employment destinations for college graduates.

Firms like QLA and SEA appear significant and insignificant at the same time. On the one hand, they are part of a global proliferation of the non-descript office form common in any part of the world similar to the anonymous public spaces such as airports and shopping malls that Augé (2003) calls “non-places.” On the other hand, they display significant social relations that facilitate or limit movement and information flows that make the study of such firms theoretically and empirically significant.

One of the areas of significance concerns the impersonal relations found in these generic office spaces that are under-theorized in the scholarly literature on China. Augé refers to
these relations as “solitary contractuality” or a set of relations in which individuals in such a space are reminded of their contractual relations and purposes with each other (Augé 2003: 94, 101). Moreover, an individual entering such spaces, he argues, sheds his individual identity and “becomes no more than what he does or experiences in the role of passenger, customer, or driver” (ibid.: 103). In the extreme, Augé describes these relations as “solitude and similitude,” forced upon individuals by their surroundings (ibid.). Likewise, QLA and EAD employees choose to exercise such functional identities in the workplace and use practices of social detachment to enforce the separation between their workplace identity with their identities outside of the workplace. As a result, SEA-EAD and QLA employees are also similar to other workers worldwide coping with flexible work and who are temporarily moored in the workplace until a better opportunity appears. The difference lies in the way this form of disconnection occurs in China between individuals and between employees and managers.

Firms like QLA and SEA are porous anchor points in the international migration market. This is made possible through impersonal relations, which not only produce social detachment, but also promote speed in transactions within and outside the domain of the organization. However, there are different factors that hamper this ideal scenario. In Chapter Three, I discussed the interplay between the network of impersonal relations among agents and the movement of commissions from the educational institutes to the education brokers. These networks embody the varying hierarchy of information control by agents depending on their position in the Chinese migration industry. This factor impacts the speed and ease of flow of commissions. Moreover, another speed limitation is the international audit and licensing bodies that serve to regulate and vet broker integrity. These regulations hamper the speed and ease for smaller firms such as SEA to
receive full commissions and thereby cannot compete with second-tier broker firms. Workarounds exist to overcome those restrictions, but paradoxically these increase the risk for fraud. In Chapter Four, I described the movement of customers to their destination countries and the challenges faced by agents that were unseen by customers as the agents navigated the international market. The agents must balance profit, a prestigious school, and highly desirable city or country locations in order to secure the most profitable and desired route at the quickest time possible. Together, these two chapters show how transient employment firms, when shed off the guanxi explanation in the Chinese case, reveal their role as porous anchor points in the movement of people and financial capital.

In tandem with the concept of porous structures, ritual practices of social detachment also help create and accelerate speed in the movement of people. Since transient employment firms like SEA and QLA extract productivity and labour by enforcing a flexible operation, this same flexibility through impersonal relations enables employee mobility. I have discussed two types of employee movement in this research. One case is an explicit challenge to managerial authority at SEA-EAD in Chapter Four. The multiple cases show an accelerated employee departure ranging from a week to a little over a month. Meanwhile, employee mobility at QLA is more implicit with declarations of individual autonomy. These practices demonstrate temporary stability by using status-based impersonal relations to slow down employee departure. Having stayed for two years, Mark left a month after my departure while the rest stayed behind until the relocation of the office in 2010 forced a sharp reduction of staff. In both cases, practices of impersonal relations ensure that employees are poised to respond and anticipate any changes to their job situations.
To sum up, transient employment workplaces require investigation in the context of flexible capitalism because of their key role as moorings or anchor points in the flow of goods and people. SEA-EAD and QLA are examples of how China has fared with its experiment in flexible capitalism, higher education expansion, and the resulting impact on work and urban relations among the working population. Freed from the strictures of the guanxi explanation, this thesis demonstrates that these transient workplaces become important sites for contemporary practices in Chinese social detachment and the movement of people and money. It is not that strong personal relations are not sought out or valued by Chinese employees; it is because their jobs entail little upward mobility, job status, or high pay that impact their individual goals (see Ferguson (2013) for the South African case). Cultivating dependence or long-term obligatory relations are not worthwhile. In its place, impersonal relations provide the minimal trust, transactional efficiency, or predictability necessary under these conditions.

Transient employment firms such as SEA and QLA exemplify porous structures with a network of impersonal relations that facilitate profitability for business owners and career mobility for employees. These structural attributes are indispensable for business owners like Headmaster Qing and Mr. and Mrs. Ying in order to reduce transaction costs using cheap labour. These managers extract profit efficiently by withholding long-term patronage or exchange relationships from their employees. This is essential to establish competitive intermediary businesses in the migration industry prone to employee turnover. With minimal friction points, the ease of movement of commissions paradoxically relies on relative employee mobility or the inherent expectation of
employee turnover. This movement constitutes the very heart of the flexible operation in place at SEA-EAD and more implicitly at QLA.

4. Limitations and Further Research

This work on impersonal relations opens up further questions on three interrelated topics for future research: Chinese relationality and ritual practices, transient employment firms, and mobility. This section is organized around these four themes.

This research has determined different types of impersonal relations that range from highly contingent to relatively stable forms of interactions in the Chinese workplace. I have also identified three factors that determine the type of interactions. If the interaction is based on information control, the outcome of the impersonal relation would be highly contingent. If the interaction is largely based on individual traits competition, then the interaction would be relatively stable. If the interaction is predominantly about power difference, then the interaction enters into a ritual-like dynamic to restore power neutrality. Further research should also uncover other nodes of interaction that may differentiate or at what point impersonal relations may turn into personal or strong ties. Here, research into the hidden online world of the Chinese employees are key areas where new work communities thrive. This online mobile interconnection may reveal links of differentiation between these types of relationality.

The field of online research has matured in the last decade. New interview questions should include a worker’s use of online platforms and the corresponding individuals on those programs. This may be equally difficult to ask but general questions may be helpful to identify which platforms employee use to segregate, use, and classify their list. Online
tool kits suggested by Miller et. al. (2016) and on the investigation of mobile money by Taylor (2016) are helpful guides and templates.

My findings also show that impersonal relations are accompanied by repetitive routines that use normative rules from mundane activities like cleaning or meetings to special events like a banquet or party. The next step is to identify more events and routines in other companies. Since banqueting is ubiquitous in Chinese work and non-work situations (see Mason 2013), this needs to be examined for its links to maintaining social detachment and mobility or its role in revealing what personal relations entail. In terms of textual representation, I have already identified that order and stability rendered by ritual structure is not helpful in conveying uncertainty and alienating work conditions. I suggest exploring different writing techniques like the genre of magic realism that can present ritual-like situations within the conditions of instability (see Taussig 1997 for instance).

My findings are limited to two private SMEs in the migration industry. However, transient employment can also be found in SMEs in other industries as well as among larger firms. There is compelling primary and secondary information that small and large firms experience transient employment at different rates. For purposes of research, the size of the unit within these firms may impact the outcome of the research in terms of contact with the number of employees, lack or presence of a group leader, more or fewer group-led activities, type of work possibilities, and contact with other units. The outcome may be closer or further from my experience with less group activities, highly individualized tasks, lack of a supervisor, and minimal to no contact with other units.
Finally, this thesis is situated in problems of kinship and relationality. My findings identified the mechanism of social detachment in contemporary Chinese urban relations. In order to broaden the thesis’ relevance, the next step is to theorize impersonal relations on two fronts: which meaningful attachments do these college graduates anchor themselves to or fail to do so, and in what other ways do these ties impact the flow of capital. To what extent this works and how it works in other industries are subjects for the next project.
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## Appendix 1: Glossary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pinyin</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ayi</td>
<td>阿姨</td>
<td>housekeeper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chaoxianzu</td>
<td>朝鲜族</td>
<td>one of the designated minority groups in China that refers to the descendants of Korean immigrants living in Northeast China, including Qingdao, Shandong Province.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dagong</td>
<td>打工</td>
<td>casual wage work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>danwei</td>
<td>单位</td>
<td>primarily a work unit but also a type of urban organization wherein an individual life is circumscribed around this unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fei zhenggui jiu ye</td>
<td>非正规就业</td>
<td>informal employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ganging</td>
<td>感情</td>
<td>sentiment, affective feeling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gge</td>
<td>哥哥</td>
<td>elder brother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nuli gongzuo</td>
<td>努力工作</td>
<td>work hard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>guanli</td>
<td>管理</td>
<td>supervise, manage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>guanxi</td>
<td>关系</td>
<td>ritualized and everyday practices of reciprocity and exchange based on varying degrees of sentiment and instrumentality among strong relations such as kindred, relations by blood and marriage; and in some situations, exchange among unequal, impersonal, hierarchical status and rank relationships (teacher-student, patron-client) that transforms them into a strong bond</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>beizuo</td>
<td>合作</td>
<td>working together; cooperation, collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>huaqiao</td>
<td>华侨</td>
<td>Overseas Chinese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hukou</td>
<td>户口</td>
<td>household registration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>huncuoer</td>
<td>混血儿</td>
<td>mixed-blood child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>huoban</td>
<td>伙伴</td>
<td>partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jiejie</td>
<td>姐姐</td>
<td>elder sister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>laodong shuchu</td>
<td>劳动输出</td>
<td>labour export</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>langfei</td>
<td>浪费</td>
<td>waste</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>linghuo caozuo</td>
<td>灵活操作</td>
<td>flexible operation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>liucue</td>
<td>留学</td>
<td>study abroad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>luan</td>
<td>乱</td>
<td>chaos, disorganized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>renqing</td>
<td>人情</td>
<td>human sentiments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shangban</td>
<td>上班</td>
<td>go to work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shi tang</td>
<td>食堂</td>
<td>canteen, dining hall, mess hall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sibeyuan</td>
<td>四合院</td>
<td>An architectural design referring to a simple four-sided building compound (four studio rooms in this case) that opens into a central courtyard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>suzhi</td>
<td>素质</td>
<td>“quality of being,” a socio-political term that refers to both ascribed and cultivated characteristics of an individual indicating status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Pinyin</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>心平气和</td>
<td>xinping qihe</td>
<td>emotional cooling down; becoming calm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>信用</td>
<td>xinyong</td>
<td>trustworthiness, especially in reference to creditworthiness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>学习</td>
<td>xuexi</td>
<td>learn, study, train</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>找事</td>
<td>zhao shi</td>
<td>creating trouble or fuss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>做朋友</td>
<td>zhuo pengyou</td>
<td>being friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>坐月子</td>
<td>zhuo yuezi</td>
<td>month-long post-partum recuperation confinement period</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix 2: A Snapshot of Belle’s Work Mornings in a Week

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>12/03/09</th>
<th>13/03/09</th>
<th>16/03/09</th>
<th>17/03/09</th>
<th>20/03/09</th>
<th>24/03/09</th>
<th>25/03/09</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0900</td>
<td>Log in QQ, Read Yahoo news in China</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Book keeping</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0905</td>
<td></td>
<td>QQ Chat</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Office meeting with the Bosses</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0910</td>
<td>Brings out the forms</td>
<td>Clean new pair of shoes</td>
<td>Preparatio for Work; Petty Cash Safe; book keeping</td>
<td>QQ chatting</td>
<td></td>
<td>Meeting with Helen as convener for 10 minutes; bosses are in Japan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0920</td>
<td>Occasional checking in QQ</td>
<td>Chat with Helen</td>
<td>163.com news</td>
<td>Mobile texting; snack yoghurt drink</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0930</td>
<td>Yahoo news; The bosses left; everyone is chatting</td>
<td>Book keeping while QQ; boss is here</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0940</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yahoo news</td>
<td>Reading news; morning snack yoghurt drink Helen &amp; Sandra</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1000</td>
<td></td>
<td>Read newspaper</td>
<td>Still news viewing; Stephanie lotions her hands</td>
<td>QQ solitaire game</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1015</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Snacks tea, bread QQ solitaire</td>
<td></td>
<td>Meeting of Ben and</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Tencent</td>
<td>Mark; Stephanie rice puff; Belle and Steph tea</td>
<td>game</td>
<td>Helen</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>--------</td>
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<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1025</td>
<td>Boss leaves and the chat resumes</td>
<td>News &amp; QQ solitaire</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1030</td>
<td>Group chatting</td>
<td>News &amp; QQ</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>12/03/09 13/03/09 16/03/09 17/03/09 20/03/09 24/03/09 25/03/09</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1030</td>
<td>about clothes particularly new pairs of shoes of Helen and her pair</td>
<td>solitaire</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1035</td>
<td></td>
<td>Looking at fat baby pictures and QQ chat</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1045</td>
<td>QQ chat; Mark eating breakfast sandwich roll and crispies by Stephanie</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1055</td>
<td>Yahoo email; Stephanie is on mobile; Helen is also using her mobile</td>
<td>QQ chatting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1100</td>
<td>Grooming nails</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1110</td>
<td>Chatting between Ben, Sandra, Mark, Stephanie</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Activity</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1115</td>
<td>QQ chatting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1135</td>
<td>Reading newspaper passed on to her by the bosses</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1145</td>
<td>Lunch break</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>