

A Cultural Perspective, for Better or for Worse

Author S. Kelly Franklin is the coordinator of the Haggerty English Language Program at the State University of New York at New Paltz. He has served in a number of leadership positions in globally-recognized professional organizations, and currently volunteers as coordinator of the English Language Training and Administration Network within NAFSA's Recruitment, Admissions and Preparation Knowledge Community.

Look at photos taken at a traditional Japanese wedding, and you will see, sitting between the solemn-faced bride and groom, a person known as the "nakoudo," or matchmaker. This person may in fact have only met the twosome during preparation for the ceremonies, playing no role whatsoever in initially linking together the happy couple, but nonetheless will occupy a seat of high honor in the photos and celebrations.

Similar traditions, using intermediaries or go-betweens for any major transaction, exist across much of Asia. This custom goes a long way towards explaining the prevalent use of commission-based education agents and outside advisors in many Asian countries today.

In Japan, Korea, China, Vietnam and other Asian lands, education agents come in all shapes and sizes. Services range from the bare-boned and problematic, such as simply aiding in the acquisition of an I-20 (visa application form) to providing support at every step of the school-seeking process down to flight bookings and even renting the students their suitcases.

Some in the U.S. higher education arena find the very word "agent" an anathema, arguing that the school selection and admission process is best coordinated by the student acting alone and further, that the student gains valuable knowledge and confidence by undertaking the process without extensive outside help. This thinking extends often to even wishing that the would-be students avoid allowing even their parents to play much of a role in navigating the metaphorical sea separating them from their new home in a foreign land of study. A softer approach to the same opposition argues that advising services such as those provided by EducationUSA programs or British Centers, that charge no fees either to student or school, are the only legitimate and moral methods of assisting school selections.

In countering those arguments, even the staunchest supporter of the quasi-governmental free information providers needs to see that the sheer numbers of prospective students in the highly populated Asian countries would overwhelm the advisors if every prospective student sought their aid. Even in smaller countries such as Taiwan, the total number of students seeking education in the USA could only be served if the budget and staffing of EducationUSA centers grew exponentially many times over, overnight. In China, India or even Japan, thousands of prospective students live hundreds or even thousands of miles from the nearest advising center, generally situated in just a few large cities, and perhaps only in the country's capital.

Beyond the massive numbers that could seek counseling from toll-free advising centers, the level of support often sought by those masses far surpasses what could be done. Good agents in these countries go to increasingly greater lengths to make the entire process, from choosing a school to arriving there, as easy as possible for the student and also with as much safety and security as possible for their parents – parents who are renowned around the world for being extremely protective and concerned about the welfare and education of their blessed offspring. The better agents keep massive databases on hundreds of schools with information that goes far beyond dates, prices and admissions criteria. Admissions directors across the U.S. can vouch for the minute and often mind-numbing details requested in surveys that must be answered to assure an agent that their institution will provide the level of comfort sought out by the demanding parents who are more than willing to pay often excessive fees to have that level of knowledge (and corresponding comfort) regarding their child's future home.

In truth, many of the roles played by agents in years past are not as vital today, with the advent of instant communicative abilities around the world and the wealth of information available to anyone with basic computer and Internet skills. Even visa regulations have changed negatively in terms of an agent's usefulness; in older days the visa procurement could largely be done by the agency without the prospective student doing

anything more than adding a signature to the correct spots on forms, whereas now every student (with rare exceptions) must appear before consular officials and undergo an interview process.

But, tradition dies hard, especially in Asia. Families still feel the need acutely. Many school officials have sure had, as this author has on more than one occasion, a student or ex-student at their school inquire about a sibling enrolling on the same campus, given them more than adequate information on how to do so, only to receive at some later date the application materials sent to them by an agency in the student's homeland. Many Asians simply believe that the best and proper way to get into a good school (in the U.S. and elsewhere) is through paying fees to the "matchmaker."

And truth be told, it seems to be fairly simple to "hang out a shingle" announcing that you are beginning a new matchmaking agency. A year-old list of agency e-mails in many countries would be sorely out of date, including many who had realized that the agency streets are not paved with gold, and missing many new names that had just begun with their own visions of easy lucre. Detractors of using educational agencies surely could provide ample evidence of agents who don't know education systems well, who steer students only to certain schools (obviously, those that pay bigger commissions), and those that don't offer consistent advice to their clients beyond the stage of getting an I-20 into their eager hands.

Nonetheless, no entire industry can be condemned based on the few rotten eggs in the field. And, the qualified professional agents in most Asian countries have made great strides in promoting ethical and professional standards. Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Taiwan, Thailand and other countries around the world all have professional associations that promote standards among their members, and many of these country or regional associations also participate in FELCA, the international association of agencies promoting higher standards. Universities and language programs that work with agents would be wise to check or even insist that agencies seeking to cooperate with them are members of these associations and subscribe to their standards and the standards of NAFSA.

The perception across Asia and in many other countries that intermediaries, go-betweens and third-party agents are necessary is deep and strong. It will not go away, at least until the day that the U.S. government can establish free counseling centers with knowledgeable EducationUSA advisors in every hamlet and burg across the world. Even if that day comes (and no one with an ounce of reality in their heads is anticipating this day any sooner than the Apocalypse), someone will figure out a way to "improve" on the offerings of the free counsel, assuring parents that his agency's efforts can go beyond the free services to get the precious pup into a more prestigious institution, and the race will proceed anew.

It's the way of the world, and growing. FELCA now includes agencies from ten countries (<http://www.felca.org/>) and more will surely follow, as new countries emerge with the economic conditions needed for sending greater numbers abroad. The global market for students is evolving rapidly and will always be dynamic, with new "players" coming up for brief or extended periods of prosperity and ambition.

Institutions that deal with agents or that will consider doing so need to do their homework, need to vet their prospective partners well, and will often need to go further and educate them, especially as new markets and new agencies emerge, as to what the schools need and expect from their counseling partners. At least, schools will often see the need to clean up the scruffy agents a bit so that things look better in the metaphorical photo with the "matchmaker" ensconced between the school and their new student. It's tradition.

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