



Education, real estate, immigration: brokerage assemblages and Asian mobilities

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ABSTRACT

Mobilities of people and capital from Asia to Australia now encompass policies and practices that link immigration, citizenship, international education and real estate investment in complex and entangled ways. These mobilities are mediated by 'brokerage assemblages' that cut across state, non-state, human and non-human actors and processes. This article's primary contribution is to establish how assemblage thinking can be productive for understanding how such complex and interconnected mobilities are mediated. It then illustrates the potential of this approach with a preliminary empirical analysis of a selection of online content that forms part of the brokerage assemblages that link, facilitate and create education, immigration and real estate mobilities from Asia to Australia, primarily from China. We focus on online materials that circulate through three key platforms: (1) a major online investor portal based in Hong Kong and Shanghai that targets transnational investors and brokers (2) a smaller Australian-based property portal utilised by Australian real estate brokers and (3) one mainstream and one industry specific Australian media outlet. We use assemblage thinking to show how forms of information are coded and recoded across different platforms not only to represent, but also to constitute, the links between education, real estate and migration mobilities.

KEYWORDS

Assemblage; mobilities; real estate; education; migration; Asia; Australia

Introduction

The mobilities of people and capital across borders are heavily mediated processes, with a wide range of actors, institutions, policies and technologies implicated in the creation and facilitation of these movements. Much of the existing literature on how these mobilities are configured, enacted and mediated tends to consider international education, foreign investment and migration as largely distinct flows. Public discourse is replete with familiar discourse about the foreign student, investor and migrant, and these narratives often fail to account for the multiple co-constitutive subjectivities (e.g. student/investor/migrant) that make up the contemporary mobile body. In the context of contemporary mobilities of people and capital from Asia to Australia, education, immigration and real estate are inextricably linked, and these mobilities are mediated by what we call 'brokerage assemblages'

– complex networks made up of mutually constitutive and generative components that cut across state, non-state, human and non-human actors and processes.

These brokerage assemblages contribute to the production of goods (e.g. foreign real estate and university education), actors (e.g. foreign home buyers and student migrants) and encounters (e.g. bringing a foreign student, an Australian university and an Australian dwelling together). The mobilities that emerge from these encounters enfold both policies and desires around education, migration and real estate. Brokerage assemblages operate through both virtual and embodied spaces, which collectively mediate encounters and information flows between the co-constitutive subjectivities of mobile students/investors/migrants and real estate agents, property developers, migration and education agents, accommodation providers, bank lenders, labour recruiters, and umbrella agencies that facilitate services across and between these many sectors.

The contribution of this article is twofold. The primary aim is to establish the parameters through which ‘assemblage thinking’, mobilised through an empirical analysis of ‘discursive coding’, can be a useful research tool to understand the complexity of how intertwined and co-constitutive forms of mobility are discursively mediated. A secondary contribution is to apply this approach to a preliminary analysis of a selection of online content, drawn from ongoing empirical research into the entanglement of education, migration and investment mobilities. Through this analysis, we seek to demonstrate how multiple industry grammars or ‘codes’ organise the information within these broker assemblages, as well as how these assemblages are implicated in the representation, enactment and performance of the social world.

Study, migration and investment mobilities

Previous work, including our own (Robertson 2013; Rogers 2016b), has made mention of the emerging links between study, migration and investment mobilities between Asia and Australia, Canada and the U.K. (Knowles 2016; Ley 2011; Rogers, Lee, and Yan 2015; Watkins, Ho, and Butler 2017), yet the brokerage assemblages that facilitate these mobilities are under researched. Robertson (2013) argues that an ‘education–migration nexus’ has been apparent in Australian policy since the late 1990s, with mobilities of international education inextricably linked to desires for temporary or permanent migration options for both individual migrants and transnational families. Work by Rogers (2016a, 2015) shows immigration and real estate have been linked to changes in foreign investment regimes for at least the last half century.

Combined, our previous work (Robertson 2013; Rogers 2016b) suggests that there are potentially complex links between foreign real estate investment, migration and international education pathways, driven by both current policy arrangements and the agencies of mobile subjects who travel between Asia and Australia. Elite and middle-class families in Asia see properties in Australian cities as investment opportunities, retirement migration enabling assets, and potential residences for younger generations to live when they study overseas. This is enabled by a suite of national foreign investment policies in Australia. Foreign developers can build new residential dwellings for sale to domestic and foreign buyers; individual foreign investors and temporary residents can purchase new dwellings; and temporary residents, including foreign students, can purchase one established home (Rogers, Lee, and Yan 2015). The so-called ‘Golden Ticket’ Significant

Investor Visa (SIV) programme qualifies foreign investors for permanent migration if they invest over \$AU5 million through a real estate portfolio or property trust. As a result of these policies, high-net-worth investors, a new suite of foreign middle-class investors and temporary migrants (including students) have variegated migration prospects and housing experiences that are directly linked to the amount capital they bring to Australia.

Chinese mobilities are of particular significance in the Australian context. China is the top source country for SIVs, making up 88% of visa grants for the top five source countries (DIBP 2016a). China has also remained the top source country for student visas over the last 8 years, with nearly 66,000 student visas granted to Chinese nationals in 2014–2015 (DIBP 2016b), and is the second top source country (after India) across the migration programme as a whole (DIBP 2016c). According to the Australian Foreign Investment Review Board, Chinese investment in residential and commercial real estate increased from \$2.4 billion in 2009/2010 to \$24.3 billion in 2014/2015 (Australian Government 2009–2016). This was an increase of over 900% with China the largest source of foreign real estate capital in Australia during the 2014/2015 calendar year.

There is a wealth of existing literature on the brokerage of contemporary migration, and it is far beyond the scope of this paper to review this literature in its entirety. We note, however, that much of this literature focuses on agents, recruiters, smugglers and traffickers who facilitate the movement of low skilled or undocumented workers from the Global South to the Global North, rather than the complex and often virtual assemblages that facilitate middle-class mobilities.

In turn, there is neglect of thorough analysis of brokerage in much of the literature on migrants and real estate investment in the West. While seminal work in the late 1990s on the emerging mobile capitalist class in Asia acknowledges the significance of both inter-generational investment and international education as family strategies for achieving financial capital and ‘flexible citizenship’ (Ong 1999; Pinches 1999), a complex array of largely digital knowledge enterprises that mediate and facilitate these desires have become of increasing importance in the last 15 years. More contemporary literature, in turn, has often focused solely on the effects of migrant or foreign investors and global real estate industries on housing prices and demand (see, e.g. Ley 2015; Ley and Tutchener 2001; Moos and Skaburskis 2010). Recent ethnographic and place-based research has engaged with foreign homebuyers in specific locales from a variety of perspectives. Pow (2011) for example, explores Singapore’s gated community of Sentosa Cove as an elite transnational enclave; Cook (2010) views the regeneration of urban districts in Prague through foreign capital as ‘the production of luxury’; and Cousin and Chauvin (2013) explore the socio-spatial segregation between ‘islanders, immigrants and millionaires’ on the island of St Barts in the French West Indies. While these studies shed important light on to how mobile investors’ practices reshape urban spaces and relations, brokers and agents remain at the periphery of such analyses, and foreign property investment remains considered only within the domain of the global ‘super rich’ rather than also as a potentially middle-class transnational practice (see Davies 2016; Rogers 2016a for important exceptions).

In addition, while a wealth of literature exists on the experiences of international students in Australia (particularly on Asian students), including some analyses of their housing choices and experiences (Fincher and Shaw 2009; Stone et al. 2013) there is a lack of current research that looks at the connections between student, migrant and

investor mobilities and how these connections are mediated and represented by a burgeoning and complex set of actors and processes. In fact, ‘student migrants’ and ‘investor migrants’ are often seen to be disparate groups – student migrants in Australia are often depicted as potentially marginalised and exploited as both consumers and temporary labour (Robertson 2013), while literature on investor migrants positions them as ‘super-rich’ and highly ‘mobile elites’ (Birtchnell and Caletrio 2013, 3, 6), owning multiple homes (Paris 2011, 2013) and holding ‘a variety of investments in world cities and offshore tax havens’ (Koh, Wissink, and Forrest 2016, 3).

Most recent media discourse in Australia links Chinese investors with increasing property prices, reflecting ongoing nationalist anxieties about both foreign property investment (Rogers, Lee, and Yan 2015) and Asian migration (Watkins, Ho, and Butler 2017). This has limited much of the scholarly and media discourse to policy critiques and concerns about the impact of investment and migration policy on ‘local’ residents and urban space. In order to begin to set a research agenda that can centre on the complex connections between study, migration and investment mobilities, we need to move beyond conventional typologies of discreet categories of mobility, as well as research approaches that only allow for analytical inquiry into specific, locally bounded ethnographic contexts, or policy critiques based on market empirics or nationalist concerns. The remainder of this article argues that ‘assemblage thinking’ can be used to reconceptualise the complex and crisscrossing mobilities that surround education, immigration and real estate investment, and that this in turn opens up new empirical possibilities for investigating the brokerage of these intersecting mobilities.

Thinking with assemblage; centring discursive codes

There is a voluminous literature on the concept of assemblage, which can be loosely divided into two broad themes: (1) assemblage theory; and (2) assemblage thinking (see, e.g. Acuto and Curtis 2013a; Allen 2011; Anderson et al. 2012; Featherstone 2011; McFarlane 2009). Here, we outline how we mobilise a particular approach to assemblage that allows an analysis of the mutually constitutive and generative components of complex brokerage systems.

Over the last decade, the philosophically diverse works of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), DeLanda (2006) and Latour (2005) have been grouped together under the title of ‘assemblage theories’. The more applied assemblage analytical tactics of Sassen (2006, 2014) and Ong (2006, 2011) have been labelled ‘assemblage thinking’, most significantly by the authors themselves, who have distanced themselves from the more philosophical project. Each author brings a different ontic framing to his or her notion of assemblage, and at the level of ontology these diverse theories are in many cases not wholly compatible.

DeLanda (2006), however, provides a useful starting point for this study of the brokerage of education–migration–real estate mobilities in doing away with essentialised categories as a basic principle of operation. Concepts such as ‘nation-states’, ‘the market’, or racialised categories such as ‘Asian’ or ‘European’, need to be explicitly interrogated within our analysis because these subjects and objects are always emergent – they are always becoming and never complete. This is not to say that these categories will not remain important discursive and legal devices that will continue to frame policy and public discourse about the movement of human and financial capital around the Asia-Pacific.

Rather, DeLanda's (2006) concept of assemblage is useful for theorising beyond the nation-state-centrism that locates the power to manage foreign students or real estate investors solely with governments and government policy. Under this notion of assemblage, for example, the cultural profiling of 'Eastern' and 'Western' global migration and real estate professionals breaks down, and the physical and regulatory boundaries that sit between different countries are also called into question (Acuto and Curtis 2013b). Global migration and real estate professionals, and foreign students and investors, are freed from the conceptual categories that might limit how we think about their actions.

When these essentialised categories become part of the focus of the analysis, the borders between the countries and identities of the people involved are exposed as being more porous and fluid. New sites are opened up for empirical investigation. The complicated cultural identities and nation-state allegiances of the agents, or the multi-language electronic technologies they create, or their movement across the discursive and legal frontiers of nation-states, become, when reconceptualised with assemblage thinking, the explicit target of the investigation. This allows for a conceptualisation of contemporary migration, education and real estate industries as complex, non-essentialised assemblages that blend culture, class, industries, knowledges and technologies to shape and reshape migration, education and investment discourse, policy and practice around the world. This conceptual framing requires us to theorise the social and material worlds as transient and open (i.e. *becoming* [Deleuze and Guattari 1987]) and as a sociology of material and social relations (i.e. flat ontologies with blended agency [Anderson 2014; Anderson et al. 2012; DeLanda 2006; Latour 2005]). We are forced to seek out and collect data in the often opaque spaces that sit between the cultural, regulatory and geographical spaces of different nation-states and cities.

We draw in our approach to assemblage from the work of Sassen and Ong, who have called their assemblage analytical tactics 'assemblage thinking' (see, e.g. Acuto and Curtis 2013b). While they work from a very different ontic register to Deleuze, Guattari and DeLanda, we align with Rogers (2016b) arguments that Sassen and Ong's 'assemblage thinking' 'moves us closer to the establishment of a set of analytical tools with which to undertake an analysis'. Sassen develops the idea of a globalising territory that is increasingly 'ungoverned' by nation-states (see Sassen in Acuto and Curtis 2013b, 22), wherein we enter 'a new phase of advanced capitalism ... one with reinvented mechanisms for primitive accumulation' (Sassen 2014, 8). Ong shows that while this so-called 'ungoverned territory' is not necessarily governed by nation-states, it is still governed by non-government and private actors (see Ong in Acuto and Curtis 2013b, 22). Ong's Foucauldian inspired concept of a 'global assemblage' is defined as a 'space of enquiry, not a theory but a way to "frame" [the] analysis ... the space of problematization and intervention is the space of assemblage' (see Ong in Acuto and Curtis 2013b, 18, 20). The networking of different local actors and physical sites creates a seemingly 'global' space within which to locate a range of governance practices, peoples, objects and events (Corry 2013, 54); that is, people and objects that have been essentialised by government and non-government actors with the aim of governing them (Foucault 1997, 1980). In other words, we want to expose what is often essentialised (e.g. the mobile body, the nation-state) by scoping out a non-essentialised assemblage as the locale of the analysis.

We seek to gain empirical entry into 'brokerage assemblages' as a 'space of enquiry' primarily through an analysis of the discursive codes that run through and between networks

of brokerage platforms. Berry and Pawlik (2005, 1) suggest that the idea of coding, decoding and recoding is a defining feature of the contemporary moment. Foucault (1997) argued power is not operationalised simply by amassing knowledge. Rather it is through the coding, decoding and recoding of discursive data, which is used to produce knowledge, that power is truly operationalised. Coding practices are used to invent and fabricate discursive realities that fashion new structural possibilities. Coding practices have particular ideas built into their coding schemas, and they conform to these ideas. The coding schemas work to ‘displace subjectivity’ and are ‘a reflection of the biases, norms, and values of the coding elite’ (Berry and Pawlik 2005, 2).

Understood as a modality through which society is organised, we thus argue in this article that discursive coding, decoding and recoding has a particularly powerful function in international education, migration and real estate mediation practices. In the case of the brokerage systems surrounding transnational education, migration and real estate, there have been significant recent changes in technologies that mediate these codes – changes which increase the speed with which discursive content can be amassed, analysed and transmitted (Manyika et al. 2011; Rose-Redwood 2006). Understanding these codes and how they move thus illuminates the emerging discursive ‘realities’ that structure imaginaries and subjectivities surrounding a ‘real estate–education–immigration’ nexus.

Mapping assemblage through mediating technologies

Methodologically, it is easy to get lost in an analysis of complex assemblages with their many moving parts and organising logics. Specificity is important, and the following analysis exposes how different real estate, migration and education knowledges are brought together to produce new knowledge about the global real estate–education–migration nexus. We do this by focusing on both the *form* (i.e. the platforms) and *content* (i.e. the information and resources) within a given assemblage.

In terms of the (plat)forms, various brokerage assemblages bring together different social, cultural, electronic or institutional mechanisms that enable particular communication flows. We conceptualise these mechanisms as ‘mediating technologies’. The concept ‘technologies’ is not used here to mean an electronic technology, but rather to describe any mechanisms that facilitate the flow of resources and information. Mediating technologies thus encompass public policy, traditional and new media, home loans, the Internet, visas and housing markets, but they also include human actors, such as individual real estate or migration agents. The ‘mediating’ part of the concept is deployed as a way of trying to map the different heterogeneous parts that constitute or make up a brokerage assemblage, which the brokers act through.

In terms of the *content*, different mediating technology assemblages allow for a variety of information and resources to flow through and coalesce at different moments in time. These information and resource flows are conceptualised as ‘discursive codes’. We are interested in how international brokers assemble different mediating technologies to bring new discursive representations and performances of education, migration and investment mobilities into being.

This methodology allows the analysis to move beyond limited and nation-state-centric policy debates that tend to silo investment, migration and education policies and

mobilities and that focus solely on the regulation and legitimization of inflows of people and capital. International brokers operate in the space between nation-states, but are still bound in varied ways by nation-state institutions and still perform, to different ends, nation-state-centric discourses.

A wide variety of established, new and constantly emerging knowledge platforms are implicated in the brokerage assemblages that are of empirical interest to this paper. They are made up of diverse and densely networked mediating technologies – including public policy, home loans, education institutions, visa categories and housing products (Sumption and Hooper 2014). Brokerage *platforms*, however, range in scale. For example, global ‘heritage’ firms, such as investment banks and Big Four professional service firms provide ‘one-stop-shop’ services for elite investor and business migrants, allowing information to flow to potential clients about Australia’s foreign real estate investment rules, taxation systems and SIV rules. Newer and more specialised global brokerage firms bring together various configurations of immigration and investment services. Their *platforms* bring new and old media together, enabling potential migrants, students and investors to share advice and experiences with each other, as well as connecting to professional brokers. Locally based businesses also form part of the brokerage assemblage, although operating at different scales of service. A good example is the Australian-based small business *School Mentor*, which assists parents (local as well as migrant) in selecting the right school for their child, through both facilitating school visits and mediating and interpreting government metrics such as the National Assessment Program - Numeracy and Literacy (NAPLAN) rankings. There are also the new (realestate.com.au or domain.com.au) and traditional (*The Australia*, *The Age* or *Sydney Morning Herald*) state- and national-level media corporations, which play a key role in mediating information about foreign students and investors to the wider Australian public (Rogers 2016c).

The diversity and dynamism of platforms operating in this space making any exercise in comprehensive mapping of these assemblages unfeasible. We seek instead to enter the complexity of the assemblage at specific points, selecting three different types of platforms as the focus of our discursive analysis. The remainder of this article thus focuses on two major investor and broker portals (as relatively new and largely digital content platforms), as well as some supplementary analysis of major Australian national news outlets (as ‘traditional’ and purportedly ‘national’ media forms). We have purposefully selected these entry points as they ostensibly speak to different audiences and use varied representational tactics, but analysed together reveal how discursive codes are deployed and re-played across diverse platforms.

The first online portal we focus our analysis on, Juwai.com, was launched in 2011 by Australians Andrew Taylor and Simon Henry. With offices in both Hong Kong and Shanghai, Juwai is one of the largest online Chinese foreign investment portals connecting Chinese buyers to international agents. Juwai’s creators describe the enterprise as a cross between a software company, a social media platform and luxury publication, targeted at a Chinese-language audience globally (Financial Review 2015). Although Taylor and Henry aspire to build Juwai as a luxury lifestyle brand, its Chinese-language property portal is the current focus, with over 4.5 million property listings across 60 countries and 80,000 partnerships with real estate agents and brokers (Financial Review 2015). Juwai draws profits primarily from advertising, direct marketing, and, since 2015, the Juwai IQ data service

that sells data products drawn from online behaviours and customer surveys of site visitors to external corporate and government clients.

The second online portal we discuss below is ACProperty.com. Like Juwai, ACProperty is primarily a portal for Chinese-language property listings – yet it is smaller in scope than Juwai and with more of a transnational focus on China–Australia investment specifically, rather than a global reach. ACProperty positions itself as servicing Australian-based Chinese-speaking buyers as well international investors. Beyond property listings, however, ACProperty also features significant discursive content channelled towards a pedagogical transfer of knowledge about Chinese buyers to Australian brokers. It is on this pedagogic discursive material that we focus most of our subsequent analysis.

We also provide a briefer analysis of how education–migration–investment discourses appear in Australian-based media. Here, we focus on industry specific media as well as traditional journalism. For the former, we explore content from the ‘news’ section of RealEstate.com, one of Australia’s leading property advertisement websites. While RealEstate.com has recently included international listings, its discursive base is still the national, with its tagline ‘Australia lives here’. Much of its news content focuses on national property markets. RealEstate.com is owned by digital advertising company REA Group, founded in Melbourne, but with office throughout Australia, Europe and Asia. We also draw on discourses from *The Australian*, Australia’s premium national broadsheet newspaper, owned by Australian multi-platform media company NewsCorp.

We have collated, translated and thematically analysed the *form* and *content* of these different mediating technologies to show how the representations on these platforms encourage subjects to imagine and enact new transnational mobilities. The empirical reliability of the statements, narratives and graphs that are produced by the new global brokerage firms and media corporations is of less concern to us here than the politics of presenting these data to investors, migrants, students, brokers and others. It is worth noting, however, that the data produced by companies such as Juwai is collated from their own web-based databases, which, at a minimum, could have a built-in sampling bias.

Decoding and recoding information: Juwai

Juwai’s web presence mediates information in terms of its own internal content (news, research data and advertising), external content (policy, news and research), and translations of foreign agents’ content into Mandarin. The information running through Juwai is frequently decoded and subsequently recoded for their potential Chinese investors, and foreign-based real estate sales agents. The firm argues that their geographical and political location is important – i.e. Hong Kong – allowing them to facilitate transnational agents’ access beyond China’s ‘Great Firewall’, which can block or slow down sites hosted elsewhere.

Juwai mediates and translates, through their own industry codes, a range of internally and externally produced data, news and nation-state technical constraints, but always with the end goal in mind, which is to facilitate the sale of international real estate. Nonetheless, the firm foregrounds educational mobilities as being deeply embedded within investor mobilities and long-term migration prospects. For example, they created simple graphics by recoding the data in the Hurun Wealth Report, showing that 60% of wealthy Chinese

are seriously considering emigrating overseas, and 85% want to educate their children overseas.

Various discursive devices, particularly metrics, are referenced and decoded by *Juwai*. These include The Times World University rankings, Foreign Investment Review Board Reports, Australian government data on graduate outcomes, and its own website rankings and traffic metrics. *Juwai* also publishes in Chinese summaries of information from Australian sites on a range of education–migration–investment issues, from stories on a lack of student housing in Australian cities, to news on immigration policies surrounding student and working holiday visas. *Juwai* is thus positioned as a knowledge enterprise and data broker – a portal for decoding and translating information, rather than only information production or the facilitation of direct communication between buyers and brokers. It also seems to speak to a wide audience, not just high-net-worth individuals seeking ‘Golden Ticket’ opportunities, but also students, business migrants and working holiday makers.

Within *Juwai*’s recoded and somewhat essentialised narratives, education and financial investment are not separate processes. Rather, education of children is simply another form of investment that frequently synergises with property. Education is constantly named by *Juwai* as a legitimisation of investment practices and is situated strongly within multi-generational family strategies of capital accumulation:

There is no better expression of long-term investment in the future of the family than in education. Chinese have always highly valued education, and education hotspots, such as the US, the UK, and Australia are some of the most sought after by Chinese investors. Why education? It’s simple. Education benefits the entire family – whether financially or otherwise – as it can put future generations on an upward trajectory in society. (Juwai 2015)

Andrew Taylor, the Australian Co-Chief CEO of *Juwai*, brought this same discursive narrative into a different assemblage of mediating technologies, and to a different audience during his speech at the 2014 G20 Leaders’ Summit in Brisbane, arguing that national investment in education infrastructure in Australia will be crucial to maintaining the benefits of capital flows from China:

One of the most important things any locale can do to attract more Chinese investors is to improve the quality and global reputation of its schools and universities. This is a long-term strategy that delivers long-term benefits, beyond simply attracting international investment ... Chinese culture puts a great priority on both real estate as a way to build and preserve wealth, and on education as the route to a better life. That explains why good schools and universities have such drawing power for them ... A good university or high school is as much a selling point to Chinese buyers as beautiful beaches, great architecture or a strong economy ... Most people don’t think of schools and universities as infrastructure, but investing in these institutions stimulates investment and economic growth more than do new roads or rail lines. (Taylor 2014, as cited in Bishop 2014)

Taylor’s speech is a prominent example of the mobility of codes across different discursive contexts, sites and audiences across the brokerage assemblage, as *Juwai*’s representations of a real estate–education–migration nexus are communicated to government power brokers. This shows the leverage that a digital advertising enterprise, drawing on the knowledges produced by its site visitors and users, can have in shaping knowledge within high-level governance circles. This illustrates how discursive codes not just are re-coded by commercial actors to reflect and influence state interests, but how state and

non-state agents become mutually entangled in the discursive mediation of new forms of mobility of people and capital.

Encoding student, investor and broker subjectivities: *ACProperty*

In this section, we focus on how new information about education, migration and investment can be taken up and performed by investors, migrants, students and even the brokers themselves across the brokerage assemblage. *ACProperty* bases its legitimacy on transcultural, but still nation-state-centric, claims about its business as being ‘Australian made and owned’ and ‘run by a bunch of young Chinese migrants who have been living in Australia for over 15 years. They call Australia home’. This presentation speaks to the overlap between broker/migrant subjectivities, and the complex balance of multiple cultural legitimacies that shape ideas of desirable brokerage subjects. These subjects are themselves a form of mediating technology – information is passed through them and varied representational narratives both construct them and are mediated by them.

One key way *ACProperty* encodes subjectivities in specific ways is through a repeated discursive disruption of the subjectivity of a ‘foreign investor’, instead focusing its market education materials on the fact that many Chinese buyers already live in Australia, have family in Australia, or are planning to move to Australia. They also decode different demographic data to illustrate this – providing infographics on the number of China-born working in Australia, the number of student visas holders, the proportion of students renting who would like to buy a property (65%) and the proportion of students who would like to buy a property within one year of graduation (75%). Much like *Juwai*, how educational desires drive investment behaviours is reiterated by *ACProperty* several times.

Web-based technologies manifest as a representation of mobiles subjects’ realities while simultaneously becoming the sites through which the subjects learnt about and perform their mobility. For example, *ACProperty* (2015) cites the top two investment reasons for Chinese buyers as ‘they plan to send their children to study in Australia, and Australian properties offer them safer investment returns’ and advises brokers ‘if your projects are in a well-known school zone, do not hesitate to place an emphasis on this in your property description’ (3). Melbourne University is cited alongside the Sydney Opera House as a ‘famous landmark’ that can be used to promote the desirability of a property’s location, and consumer behaviours around property locations are described in relation to intergenerational educational investments:

most Chinese buyers are interested in a particular suburb instead of a specific property. For example, if a buyer’s daughter will start her university’s [sic] life at Monash Caulfield Campus, the buyer will most likely search for all properties located in Caulfield. (3)

ACProperty also features embodied transcultural intermediaries, who must be culturally and linguistically competent as Chinese but spatially and culturally embedded within Australian networks to be successful, as a prominent discursive code. For example, in a ‘Checklist to make your advertisements more attractive’, *ACProperty* informs brokers that ‘indication of having a Chinese-speaking staff member on your team will definitely add a few more scores’. However, it also states that Chinese buyers seek brokers who are ‘born and bred’ in Australia, ‘as our Chinese buyers always say:

“If I want to buy a property in Australia, I will want to access the market as a local Australian Chinese”. According to *ACProperty*, the transcultural capital of brokerage systems and broker subjectivities matters – but their local embeddedness matters too. This can, of course, be read as a marketing tactic for a business like *ACProperty* to position themselves favourably because of their local connections compared to their more ‘global’ or Chinese-based competitor agencies. However, these representations still speak to the complexities of encoded subjectivities within the education–immigration–real estate nexus. Buyers can be foreign citizens but locally emplaced; agents can be migrants themselves; buyers want to be able to access transcultural intermediaries who are locally emplaced; and overseas buyers want to replicate the consumer knowledges and behaviours of ‘local’ Chinese.

ACProperty also touts other mediating technologies as crucial to its services – and these are largely technologies that seek to connect different actors who are embedded in different local spaces in order to mediate education–immigration–real estate mobilities. These mediating technologies include both the virtual use of Chinese-specific social media applications such as *WeChat* as communication platforms for multiple brokerage actors and clients to connect, and the real-time, embodied significance of property, immigration and ‘luxury life’ expos held across various Chinese cities. These expos are not simply venues for brokers and migrants/investors to meet face-to-face, but spaces in which particular class aesthetics and identities of a wealthy elite are performed (Rogers 2016a).

Recoded national narratives: Australian media discourses

In our analysis of *Juwai* as platform, the nature of knowledge production and reproduction across the brokerage assemblage can be seen in the regular translation and summation of mainstream Australian news stories on property markets, immigration policies and foreign investment legislation. However, mainstream Australian news outlets themselves rarely present narratives that deal explicitly with entangled immigration–education–investment mobilities and the new knowledge enterprises that surround them. National media coverage remains largely centred on nationalist anxieties about foreign investment and Asian migration as having potentially negative consequences on the domestic population, which we have covered elsewhere (Rogers, Lee, and Yan 2015). However, there are some emergent discourses about the links between investment and education, which we briefly explore here, in order to show how these assemblages are represented within largely nation-state based imaginaries.

Recent stories in *The Australian* and *RealEstate.com*, for example, acknowledge the importance of schools in attracting Chinese investment, with articles titled ‘Schools the key to lure Chinese buyers’ and ‘Chinese buyers seek good schools, large blocks’. However, these articles simply position good local schools as desirable to Chinese real estate buyers, with little sense of who these buyers are and what their existing connections to Australia might be. As the *RealEstate.com* article notes, Chinese buyers are not very different from Australian buyers, who are also willing to pay a 10–15% premium for a property near a ‘good’ school. The article in *The Australian* also reflects on the changing nature of brokerage, outlining how a real estate firm has established a new education services arm, which is partnering with Melbourne private schools and will help potential students to pass the requisite English tests. The *Australian Financial Review* also provides comment on the changing trends within brokerage industries, writing about emerging

‘proptech’ companies as ‘disruptive technologies’, which use Chinese social media platforms like *WeChat* in looping together not only buyers and sellers, but also various other intermediaries such as ‘their accountant and lawyer or a housekeeping service’.

Rather than positioning the Australian media’s audience as the local Australian public or at times a local professional industry, the Australian media is a mediating technology that is being recoded and redeployed by firms such as *Juwai* and *ACProperty* in an attempt to target mobile subjects across the Asia-Pacific region. However, while the Australian media might reflect *on* brokerage as an industry, the media is less aware of its position *within* the brokerage assemblage. While it is outside the scope of this paper to explore, it is worth noting that the Australian government and national foreign investment and migration policies are implicated in the global real estate–education–migration nexus in much the same way: national narratives become coded and recoded across global online platforms to disseminate complex knowledge to a global audience of potential migrants, students and investors, as well as brokers.

Conclusions

In this paper, we have drawn on a mode of ‘assemblage thinking’ in order to reveal how different real estate, migration and education knowledges are brought together to produce new knowledge within a global ‘real estate–education–migration’ nexus. We have positioned the brokerage of student/migrant/investor mobilities from Asia to Australia as an assemblage of various mediating technologies, and have analysed a selection of discursive codes that move through these technologies, focusing on three key platforms: online investor portals, Australian media outlets, and firms that ‘educate’ local real estate brokers. We have undertaken this analysis to show how knowledge is coded, decoded and recoded across platforms, revealing how the bundles of heterogeneous parts and information circuits that make up a global property–education–migration brokerage assemblage are, at any given moment, both discursive and performative. Discursive ‘realities’ become ‘encoded’ onto the bodies of mobile subjects operating within this assemblages, as ‘broker’ and ‘client’ bodies alike perform the realities they help to create.

A few of these discursive ‘realities’ have emerged as particularly significant in our analysis. Although Australian media narratives about Chinese investment still tend to circulate around ideas of ‘High Net Worth Individuals’ who are primarily seeking property investments, it is beginning to position the object of the ‘school’ as part of investment decisions. Other mediating technologies, however, present a much more complex picture of how flows of education, real estate and migration are intertwined, intergenerational, and deeply cultural as well as financial. ‘Investment’ as a discursive code does not just apply to financial investment in property, but also to education and migration outcomes. Brokerage assemblages thus structure their services around this broader and more collective framing of transnational investment. We have also shown that different mediating technologies, while aiming to provide information and resources to different audiences, are interconnected and translate and decode knowledge across and between different platforms, sets of data, and cultural and linguistic landscapes for different purposes. Quantitative ‘big data’ on demographics and consumer behaviours flow alongside narratives around cultural values and desires that can be both discursive and performative. Emplacement in particular national contexts can enable technical decodings of national constraints

(such as China's 'Great Firewall') or can signify the kinds of transcultural but locally emplaced capital that make intermediaries seem desirable and successful (such as the ability to speak Chinese combined with being 'at home' in Australia).

Our analysis of online platforms and content can, however, only reveal a fairly limited dimension of the complex processes at work here. It cannot tell us about the actual lived practices of mobile migrants, students and investors, or the real decision-making processes of transnationally mobile families and how they parse their encounters with and interpretations of the information flowing through these mediating technologies into this decision-making. However, we think we have made some inroads into suggesting potential directions for an ongoing research agenda, and establishing the operability of 'assemblage thinking' in furthering this agenda. Further research is required to uncover how mediating technologies and discursive codes are used and made sense of in the lived practices of diverse actors operating within brokerage assemblages across varied mobility pathways.

Disclosure statement

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