To certificate, not to learn: Language certificate purchase by Chinese students in Russian universities

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The practice of purchasing language certificates among Chinese students in Russian universities is the centre of our ethnography. Illustrating China's "certificate fever" and culture of credentialism and the informal higher education market in Russia, the "Test of Russian as a Foreign Language" (TORFL) certificates have transformed from an assessment of language proficiency to a semi-formal institutionalised commodity. Facing barriers in learning Russian language, rigid requirements for graduation and employment, and family expectations, Chinese students view the purchase of certificates as a survival strategy. Intermediary agencies exploit institutional loopholes in Russian universities, construct professionalised service that advertises certificate authenticity, and form collusive relationships with university personnel. The trading of TORFL does not merely manifests educational corruption but also global educational inequality, the deformalisation of certification systems, and students' "everyday resistance" against peer and family pressure. It reveals the transformation of higher education from knowledge-orientation to credential-orientation, from a learning process to a business transaction.

Introduction

> ... I can't pass the B level exam myself, it's much harder than A. I don't want to work in a Russian-related field in the future, I just need a certificate as a highlight when I go back to China to look for a job. As long as I can get this certificate, I don't care if someone else takes the exam for me or cheats...

In the contemporary globalised education system, the certification of language proficiency has become a key criterion for international student mobility. From TOEFL and IELTS to TestDaF and TCF, language examinations in various transnational educational pathways represent students' learning abilities and serve for enrolment, certification, and institutional "legitimation". Our ethnographic report elucidates the cultural logic of Chinese students within the Russian language certification system, exploring how they navigate language examinations, participate in informal mechanisms, and construct the rationality of their own behaviour. In-depth interviews were carried out between 2024 and 2025 among ten Chinese students at various Russian universities. These interlocutors have one common experience—they have purchased the *Test of Russian as a Foreign Language* (hereafter TORFL) at two famous universities in Moscow.

Abbreviated in Russian as TRKI (*Test po russkomu jazyku kak inostrannomu*), TORFL is the national language examination of the Russian Federation designed to assess the Russian language proficiency of non-native speakers. Called in Chinese *Duiwai eyu dengji zhengshu* (对外俄语等级证书), it has become an indispensable step for Chinese students pursuing

studies in Russia. TORFL is divided into six levels, ranging from A1 (Elementary Level) for beginners to C2 (Fourth Level Certificate), which corresponds to native-level proficiency. Competence in academic writing and speaking is recognised from B1 onwards. According to regulations of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation, the B1 certificate is the minimum language requirement for foreign students to enter undergraduate programs, while the B2 certificate is necessary for applying to masters and doctoral programs. At the local level, Russian universities enjoy high autonomy from the enforcement of central government standards, therefore depending on the individual university's requirements, the B1 or B2 certificates are necessary for graduation.

In recent years, following the development of Sino-Russian relations, higher education cooperation between the two countries has expanded. According to Zhang Hanhui, the Chinese Ambassador to Russia, there are currently over 60,000 Chinese students studying in Russia (TASS, 2025). Since the early 2000s, a series of bilateral initiatives—such as the "China-Russia Year of the State," the "China-Russia Year of Scientific and Technological Innovation," the "China-Russia Year of Tourism," and the "China-Russia Year of Culture"—have deepened educational and cultural exchange. Within the "Belt and Road" Initiative, cooperation in language education, joint academic programs, and mutual recognition of academic qualifications has steadily advanced.

The number of Chinese students pursuing education in Russia continues to rise. While these students face academic pressures, language barriers, and cross-cultural adaptation challenges, they must also navigate the "gatekeeping mechanism" of language proficiency examinations. TORFL certificates serve not merely as linguistic thresholds for graduation and further education, but are connected to practical interests such as migration, employment, and citizenship—functioning as "passports" or "permits" (通行证 *tongxing zheng*). The function of TORFL transcends the verification of language competency, manifesting itself as a symbolic form of a Chinese-specific educational "credentialism" (文凭主义 *wenping zhuyi*)—which is born out of certificate inflation and commercialisation caused by marketisation (Tomlinson & Watermeyer, 2020). In Chinese society, credentials (文凭 *wenping*) embody cultural notions of literacy and achievement. Parents regard a child's overseas certificate as visible proof of the family's investment and as something they can proudly mention in conversations with relatives, colleagues, or neighbours. The older generation values literacy and wishes that children will work as public servants (公务员 *gongwuyuan*), convinced that commercial and private companies *do not* guarantee stability (Jemec, 2025a). Many Chinese students majoring in Russian language hope to return home after graduation to compete in China's national civil-service examinations and seek employment in departments such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the General Administration of Customs, or the Ministry of Commerce, for which the TORFL certificate is an essential credential.

In contrast to the seriousness of other foreign language certificates, operations around TORFL expose significant informality: irregularities including proxy tests, the leakage of exam questions, the involvement of intermediary agencies and even the sale of certificates. Through *WeChat* groups aimed at Chinese students studying abroad, personalised "one-on-one" intermediary services, and informal networks embedded within Russian universities, the TORFL certificate has evolved into a commodity. Some Chinese students obtain certificates with ease by paying and bypassing formal procedures. This phenomenon is not anecdotal but has normalised and systematised into an informal practice. An increasing number of Chinese students opt to purchase TORFL certificates rather than obtain them through official channels.

Given the high demand for TORFL certification in Russian universities and the Chinese labour market, how do Chinese students involved in certificate purchase interpret their own actions within the intersections of ethics, institutional regulation, and intermediary practice? How do students, as subjects of transnational educational migration, formulate strategic responses within the complex structures of credentialism and informal commodification? Not attempting to criticise ethical issues, our ethnography adopts an anthropological perspective, moving beyond the binary framework of "cheaters" versus "institutional loopholes" to examine the cultural logic and strategies that characterise student action.

Building on this shift away from moral judgments, we argue that the trade in TORFL credentials should be understood as a patterned strategy through which Chinese students navigate unequal conditions in the global education marketplace. Drawing on anthropological work on Chinese student migration and the international education industry, we show how students mobilise China's credential-oriented educational habitus, family expectations surrounding "face" (面子 *mianzi*), and the loosely regulated ecosystem of post-socialist universities to construct alternative pathways of legitimacy. These practices reveal how transnationally mobile students negotiate risk, value, and recognition in a system where certificates—not linguistic competence—circulate as the dominant currency.

Literature review

Standardised language examinations, as a form of screening, assess linguistic competency. They also bear social, cultural, and institutional meanings, making them important research subjects. With the globalisation of higher education and increasing transnational mobility, language examinations beyond English have become increasingly embedded within national power mechanisms and global credentialing systems. According to the education scholar Elana Shohamy (2007), contemporary language testing is not a neutral instrument, but a power apparatus inscribed in political, social, and educational contexts. The political nature and cultural bias of language testing deserve critique, since in highly utilitarian examination contexts, individuals readily perceive such tests as either "pathways" or "barriers" (Shohamy, 2007).

Recent research continues to explore how testing operates as a form of governance. Shohamy (2022) emphasised that language exams reinforce the illusion of meritocracy while reproducing social inequalities in multilingual societies. Similarly, according to the notion of "language test activism", researchers and teachers resist the hegemonic control of standardised testing systems (Carlsen & Rocca, 2022). Such perspectives align with Heller's (2010) argument that language is increasingly commodified under globalisation, and that language certificates operate as marketable cultural capital. The intersection of testing and power, therefore, is both linguistic and political, defining who may legitimately belong to national and global educational spaces.

Russian higher education allows for academic misconduct, while students' lack of identification with examination systems results in plagiarism, cheating, and fraud (Denisova-Schmidt, 2017). For Chinese native speakers, participation in TORFL introduces disadvantages such as inherent linguistic distance and little pedagogical support. These students are often marginalised within the testing regime. When a system communicates that "passing equals legitimacy", yet suffers from weak credibility and compromised enforcement, it becomes rational—if not inevitable—for students to adopt a cultural and instrumental logic aimed at the outcome. In a previous study, the authors argued that Chinese students prioritise diploma acquisition over socialisation and integration. Such limited engagement and strategic detachment from the host society reflects "short-term strategies for surviving abroad and long-term career goals at home" (Wang & Jemec, 2025). These dynamics resonate with the concept of "everyday resistance" (Scott 1989) where groups forced into subordinate positions opt not for protest or self-exodus but for maintaining a minimal autonomy within structural oppression through the manipulation of grey spaces, mimetic compliance, and symbolic action.

In such contexts, people legitimate informal exchanges not as transgressions but as reasonable and workable adjustments to instability, shaping what becomes acceptable everyday reality. For this reason, Chinese students tend to develop various strategic coping behaviours, including informal strategies that exploit institutional loopholes. Such strategies are inscribed in a wider culture of informal student self-organisation. As studies on Chinese students in Siberia show, students build a Chinese "comfort zone" in digital spaces such as *WeChat* groups (Koreshkova & Ivanov, 2024) and use these ethnically exclusive platforms to exchange currency, share information, and sell goods from China (Jemec, 2025b). These practices resonate with what Feng and Horta (2021) noted that students strategically depend on education agents and intermediary networks to manage risk and secure more predictable outcomes within unreliable or opaque institutional systems.

Market-oriented reforms have produced overexpansion and qualitative decline in Russian higher education. Between 1993 and 2010, student enrolment nearly tripled (Sivak & Yudkevich, 2017). To sustain revenue, many universities lowered admission standards, effectively turning academic credentials into "mass-produced commodities" (Susimenko et al., 2018). Studying academic dishonesty among young people who spend their last formative years at university is important as their career and lives will be influenced by

what they had learned about cheating at university (Denisova-Schmidt, 2023). Furthermore, research on Russian higher education shows that cheating, academic ghostwriting, and certificate trading are not isolated deviations, but structurally embedded "win-win" arrangements negotiated within ambiguous legal–illegal boundaries (Osipian, 2008). Such dynamics resonate with broader global transformations in which linguistic proficiency and certification have increasingly been commodified and embedded within transnational mobility regimes (Heller & McElhinny, 2017). Within this environment, grey intermediary practices found fertile ground, creating a parallel informational space that targets self-paying students from China (Jemec, 2025c). At the same time, international student mobility has been reshaped by de-globalising tendencies, compelling students to rely more heavily on informal infrastructures and self-protective strategies (Yang & Tian, 2023). Chinese students' engagement with Russia's post-Soviet education system must therefore be situated at the intersection of informal adaptation, moral reasoning, and the broader commodification of global education.

While Chinese students' engagement with a specific post-socialist education system is shaped by marketisation, institutional ambiguity, and informal adaptation, these factors alone cannot account for their motivations. Their strategies must be situated within the cultural and moral logics that shape educational aspiration in China. It is in this broader context that the phenomenon of "credential fever" (考证热 *kaozheng re*) becomes essential for understanding why certificate acquisition takes on heightened significance in transnational settings. In recent years, both higher education and workplace culture in China have exhibited a pronounced trend toward credentialism, in which certificates have become the primary indicators of individual competence and social positioning (Li & Jian, 2014). This trend stems not only from intensifying competition in the labour market but is also driven by socio-cultural factors including cultural traditions connected with national examinations and weak social trust. Therefore, Chinese university students have developed a "pan-certification strategy" — a tendency to construct advantages for a future workplace through the mass acquisition of professional qualification certificates (such as CPA, CFA, FSA) and cross-disciplinary language certificates (such as TOEFL and IELTS) (Shi, 2012). Once this cultural logic extends to transnational education, language proficiency certificates can no longer be understood merely as assessment tools of language competency.

Research on China's domestic higher education system demonstrates that credential inflation has intensified competition and transformed certificates into essential markers of employability and status (Lin et al., 2024). This dynamic resonates with Collins's conceptualisation of the credential society, in which educational degrees function as a form of "social currency" that inflates as more credentials chase a limited stock of desirable jobs (Collins, 2019). Collins further argued that modern systems merely disguise an earlier logic of advantage: instead of purchasing office outright, individuals invest in educational certificates, which—subject to the fluctuating "monetary" value of this cultural currency—are used to secure labour-market positions that remain insulated from open competition (Collins, 2019).

Recent empirical research on China's domestic adult higher education sector confirms that students themselves experience this double bind: credential accumulation is "both an opportunity for non-degree holders to gain employment and a trap that holds them back" as regular-university graduates crowd the same labour-market space (Guan & Blair, 2021). When this credential-oriented logic extends transnationally, overseas language certificates—including TORFL—are readily incorporated into students' broader repertoire of competitive signalling. This credential-oriented logic is not confined to Chinese students; striking parallels are found in other transnational testing environments. A comprehensive literature review on student academic misconduct identified a constellation of intersecting factors—peer influence, perceived low risk of detection, cultural differences, teaching environments, and internal and external pressures to succeed. This collectively normalised cheating behaviour across higher education systems worldwide underscores that cheating is rarely an isolated individual failure but a situated response to systemic pressures (Miles, Campbell & Ruxton, 2022).

Direct empirical evidence emerged from Ma and Chong's (2022) multidisciplinary study of Chinese students preparing for IELTS in a Sino-British joint program. Participants routinely narrowed their English study to test-specific skills, relied heavily on private tutoring agencies that provided predicted answers, and engaged in repeated test-taking, effectively treating the exam as a procedural hurdle rather than a valid measure of proficiency. This pattern closely mirrors the TORFL trade documented in our ethnography. Moreover, an organised cheating network for IELTS was attested in Indonesia, with Chinese test-takers sanctioned by the police for using fake passports to sit the exam on behalf of others (Dân Việt, 2024). Collectively, these academic and journalistic accounts indicate that the purchase of language certificates is not an isolated deviance but an embedded response to global credential inflation, institutional loopholes, and culturally specific pressures.

The combination of the socially constructed nature of language testing, the institutional context of educational corruption, and the cultural logic behind Chinese students' strategic behaviour renders the phenomenon of purchasing certificates not merely an ethical issue but the outcome of intersecting social, cultural, and transnational parameters in education. While Chinese-language scholarship provides useful macro frameworks for explaining practices such as certificate buying and proxy testing, it lacks ethnographic detail. Conversely, research on Russia has paid insufficient attention to how these actions are organised, interpreted, and legitimated within cross-cultural interactions in post-socialist educational settings.

By situating TORFL trading within this intersection, our article offers an ethnographic account of how Chinese students respond to structural uncertainty and institutional opacity, assembling pragmatic strategies that allow them to meet formal requirements without engaging with the learning processes these certificates were designed to measure. This approach highlights how such behaviour should be understood not only as a coping mechanism but as culturally and institutionally situated practice shaped by ethical ambiguity, negotiated legitimacy, and the commodification of global education.

Method

This ethnographic study employs participant observation and in-depth interviews. In contrast to macro-level policy analysis, our research objective is not to make statistically generalisable judgments about exam-related behaviours, but rather to excavate the interweaving between subjective meanings of individual behaviour, social networks, and institutional pressures. This allows for a focus on how actors construct narratives and moral rationalisation within frameworks of multiple legitimacies.

Fieldwork was carried out from March 2024 to January 2025 among ten Chinese students at various Russian universities. These interlocutors are united with one common experience—all have bought the TORFL certificate at two relatively famous universities in Moscow. Both universities have a high concentration of international students and are among the thirteen Russian universities authorised to administer the TORFL examination. The four female and six male students covered different regions and academic objectives, matriculated at the preparatory course and were enrolled in undergraduate and postgraduate programs. All students used Chinese social media platforms such as *WeChat* and *Xiaohongshu* (the Chinese original of *RedNote*) to find intermediary agencies and learn about informal ways of obtaining TORFL certificates. Most respondents had established primary contact with intermediaries, while a small portion had agreed on arrangements of third-party proxy test-taking.

During the fieldwork, the authors, themselves foreign students in Russia, integrated into Chinese student networks as observers, gaining insight into their intentions in purchasing certificates. The authors observed how students prepared for the exam, how they contacted educational intermediaries, gained answers in advance, and participated in online cheating. Online information and advertising materials related to TORFL certificates were also inspected. Processes on *WeChat* platforms including the advertisement of online cheating, services in taking proxy tests, and the sale of answers were tracked. In addition, the authors also conducted semi-structured interviews with two agents employed in an educational intermediary company.

Regarding research ethics, given the sensitive nature of the topic—exam misconduct, proxy test-taking, and certificate purchase—this study adhered to ethnography and qualitative research ethics. All participants were interviewed after giving their verbal informed consent. Personal names, university affiliations, and intermediary companies mentioned have been anonymised using pseudonyms. Throughout the fieldwork, the authors maintained a non-participatory observer role, refraining from engagement in any intermediary services, certificate facilitation, or other inappropriate activities. To help participants feel comfortable when discussing sensitive issues, interviews were conducted via *WeChat* voice calls or face-to-face conversations in informal settings, such as kitchens in university dormitories.

Why buying a certificate?

More than half of the ten interviewees decided to purchase a TORFL certificate not due to a fear of not possessing a formal Russian language certificate or a sense of linguistic inadequacy. Instead, they emphasised the limited practical impact of the certificate on career prospects. The contradictory yet coexisting logic of "I will never use it" versus "I still have to obtain it" emerged as a dual imperative that shaped their decision-making. One such example is Bei Bei (male, 24), a masters student in computer science, who, after completing the preparatory course, obtained a B1 Level TORFL certificate through an intermediary. During the interview, he stated candidly:

> ... In the future, I want to return to China and work for Baidu, ByteDance or other Internet companies. These companies have nothing to do with Russia. When their HR looks at your resume, they will only ask if you have a Russian language certificate...

Bei Bei emphasised that the TORFL certificate functioned primarily as a means of fulfilling a requirement, rather than as a genuine representation of linguistic competence. He used the Chinese term *jiaochai* (交差, literally "to hand in an assignment or fulfil a duty") to convey the ritualised nature of certification. The symbolic function of the certificate as a credential retains institutionally recognised legitimacy even when it is decoupled from pragmatism. Other students expressed similar sentiments, describing the certificate as a "stepping stone" or "ticket to enter the system". As one respondent put it, "Who really cares how well you speak Russian?" This suggests that the sociolinguistic value of language proficiency is overshadowed by the performative legitimacy of holding the certificate.

In some cases, TORFL certificates act as verification documents of one's study background. If corresponding documentation is provided according to requirements, human resources (HR) departments are unlikely to conduct further verification. Given that the working language in their prospective careers is not Russian and there is no actual demand for Russian proficiency, the certificate becomes a form of symbolic professional capital, rather than a marker of actual abilities. A new logic of action emerges: language examination no longer serves as a certification of practical abilities. The value of the certificate lies not in what it proves one can do, but simply in demonstrating that one can meet a potential requirement by employers and HR structures. In this scenario meaning is absent but symbols are abundant. Purchasing certificates rather than gaining them through personal study efforts is no longer a shameful behaviour but rather represents an efficient shortcut.

This helps us understand why some students feel entirely calm when purchasing certificates, without even questioning whether they are doing something wrong. They are inscribing themselves into an employment system that looks only at certificates while ignoring actual competency. Students-turned-graduates do not consider themselves to be deceiving anyone but provide the correct document that the market expects. These narratives show that students' decisions emerge not from deviance but from a credential-

oriented habitus formed in China and reproduced in the transnational education market, where certificates—not competencies—serve as the primary currency of value.

While this behaviour superficially resembles corruption, its foundation is rooted in an institutionalised cultural logic. Considering TORFL certificates to be merely tools for assessing competence, we may be unable to explain student motivations and agency. The sale of certificates as a process of legitimising credentials under certain institutional ideologies illustrates that what students are doing is creating practical pathways to meet thresholds.

Pressure from "them"

Chinese students' decisions to purchase TORFL certificates are not always the result of individual choice. More often, these actions unfold within a social atmosphere shaped by multiple intersecting expectations. Family and peers—both forms of "close-knit relationships" (近身关系 *jinshen guanxi*) in Chinese culture—exert subtle but powerful forms of pressure surrounding the need for certification. This pressure does not typically take the form of explicit mandates or clearly defined career objectives. Rather, it emerges as a moral invocation, blending expectations, a socially-constructed "face", and the management of emotional disappointment in career advancement.

Face or *mianzi* is one of the most discussed issues among Chinese people, representing a Confucian cultural concept highly correlated with "shame" (Li, 2019). In this context, TORFL certificates, as cross-disciplinary universal credentials of language competency, transcend their pragmatic function to become symbols of decency. They are not intended to demonstrate language ability but serve as proof to "account to parents". Children are not required to show great achievements, yet returning upon graduation empty-handed constitutes a failure. This pressure is evident with China's many one-child families that substantially invest in their one child. Parents view their children's overseas education as upward family mobility, with degrees, achievements, and certificates representing returns on this investment. When formal examination pathways are uncertain, unstable, or costly, having a language certificate—even one obtained through informal means—can still fulfill family expectations regarding "face" and means to avoid "loosing face" (St. Andre, 2013). This creates a sense of obligation for students to take shortcuts to fulfill the formal appearance of success. Jing Jing (female, 23), majoring in psychology, recalled an argument with her mother:

> ... Do you know how involutionary China is now? If I don't have this certificate, I can't even find a job. And my family really needs me to get this certificate so that they can have mianzi...

This cultural logic is closely connected to the experience of "involution" (内卷 *neijuan*). In his seminal study of Indonesian agriculture, Clifford Geertz observed that when individuals are constrained by limited resources and lack real opportunities for breakthrough, they respond by intensifying personal effort—increasing input within a closed system—thus creating patterns of rising efficiency but diminishing marginal

returns, a process he termed "agricultural involution" (Geertz, 1963). In recent years, similar trajectories of involution have become increasingly prominent in China, particularly in education and employment. Fierce competition has led individuals, supported by their family, to pursue degrees overseas, and many utilise these overseas credentials to re-enter and compete within an already saturated and competitive domestic job market. Therefore, studying abroad is not necessarily an escape from involution, but sometimes a reinvestment into it under new guises (Chen et al., 2024). This dynamic is illustrated by Huan Huan (male, 22), a preparatory course student:

> ...There was a girl in our class who spent three months studying for a B1 level exam, but still failed. Other students paid for their certificates and now have them in their hands...

Rather than portraying Chinese students as simply avoiding effort or evading study, it is more accurate to say that they are managing risk—and at the core of that risk lie family scrutiny and the pressures from a deeply involuted society. For many Chinese students, the decision to take or not take the TORFL is not merely a practical or individual choice. Rather, it is a socially embedded judgment, shaped within complex networks of relationships and intersecting layers of institutional, cultural, and emotional pressure. The ethical boundaries of certification begin to blur, and students' motivations extend beyond genuine aspiration toward linguistic competence. Students' choice to purchase a TORFL certificate is a symbolic submission (象征性交差 *xiangzhengxing jiaochai*)—a charged and negotiated response to the psychological and social economies in which students, their families, and the job market are entangled. Seen through this lens, students' actions are best understood as embedded in kinship-based moral economies, where transnational education becomes a site in which "responsible" behaviour is defined by the ability to meet familial expectations, preserve face, and navigate involutionary pressures.

Who is selling the certificates?

In acquiring a TORFL certificate, educational intermediaries function not only as agents of services, but also as producers of a discourse that generate a sense of legitimacy. Their activities collectively contribute to what can be described as a form of "grey legality"—a practical order that normalises unofficial practices through enacted routines and ethical justifications. This order does not stem from isolated underground transactions by informal agents. It is the product of weak institutional enforcement, the de-formalisation of academic evaluation, and a robust market demand for services that offer the smooth obtainment of official certificates. Students establish contact with intermediaries primarily through *Xiaohongshu* and *WeChat*. On these platforms, TORFL certificate-related advertisements appear in clever and subtle ways, wrapped within insightful information about international student experience, peer-to-peer advice about exams, or users' posts about daily life in Russia. Common tags include "regular process", "direct issuance of language certificates", "guaranteed pass and delivery".

As Figure 1 shows, posts may feature actual photographs of TORFL certificates (with fictional unique certificate identifiers), highlighting a standardised exam process and constructing trust and authenticity. The advertisement by an educational agency below

offers the TORFL certificate in Level 1, Level 2 and Level 3, which are equal to B1, B2, and C1, guarantees the possibility of notarisation and the smooth issuing of certificates. In the given case, the intermediary agency "still had places (名额 *ming'e*) for two groups for the given exam session which candidates could choose to attend at two universities in Moscow. The post ends with "inquiries welcome".

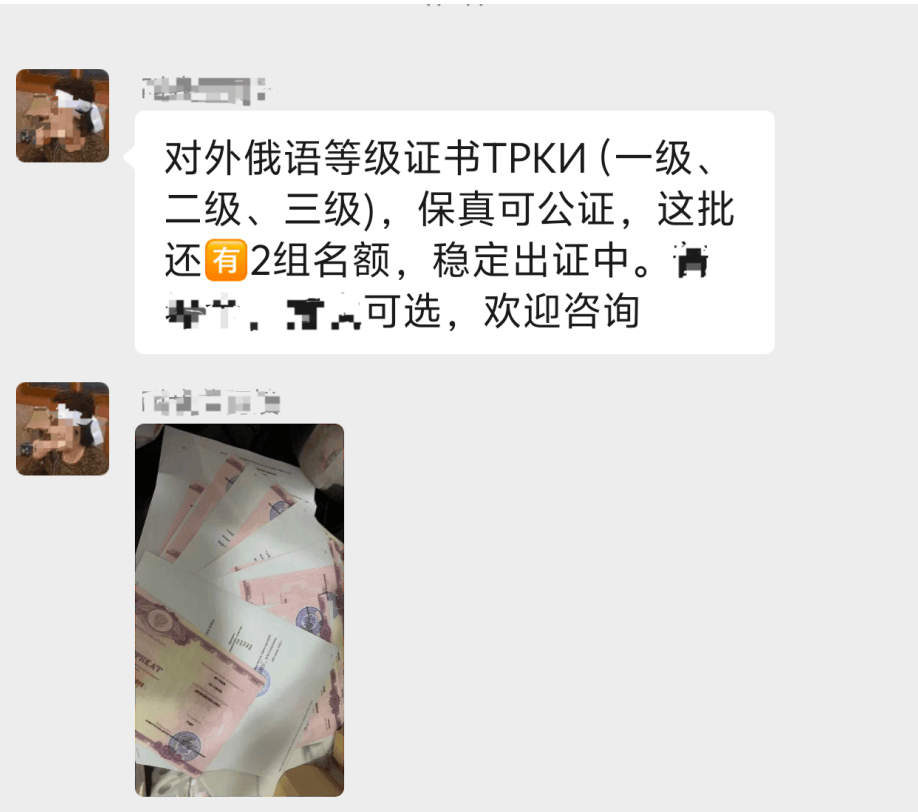

Figure 1: An education agency advertises and sells language level certificates in a student-based *WeChat* group. Screenshot by Wang Yiyang 2025

Once a student expresses interest, the intermediary typically adopts a more client-oriented discourse on *WeChat*, framing the process as supportive, legitimate, and risk-free. In one instance documented during the study, the author recorded the following intermediary agency's statement:

> All exams are online. We will prepare the oral answers for you, which you need to prepare a little. Don't worry about failing the exam, we will arrange free pre-exam training for you. As for the four parts of grammar, writing, reading and listening, you don't need to worry about it, someone will answer them for you.

This type of intermediary discourse exhibits a clear structure aimed at reducing uncertainty. It typically begins by downplaying the difficulty of the exam, using phrases

like "It's all online, not hard at all," and then transitions into showcasing institutional capability, through assurances such as "We'll take care of everything for you." In doing so, the exam is reframed—not as an evaluative process—but as a mild, friendly, and predictable experience. This rhetorical shift allows students to lower their cognitive resistance and anxiety, leading them to accept the informal path as a rational and manageable alternative. Based on the authors' observation, the purchase of the certificate typically involves several key stages:

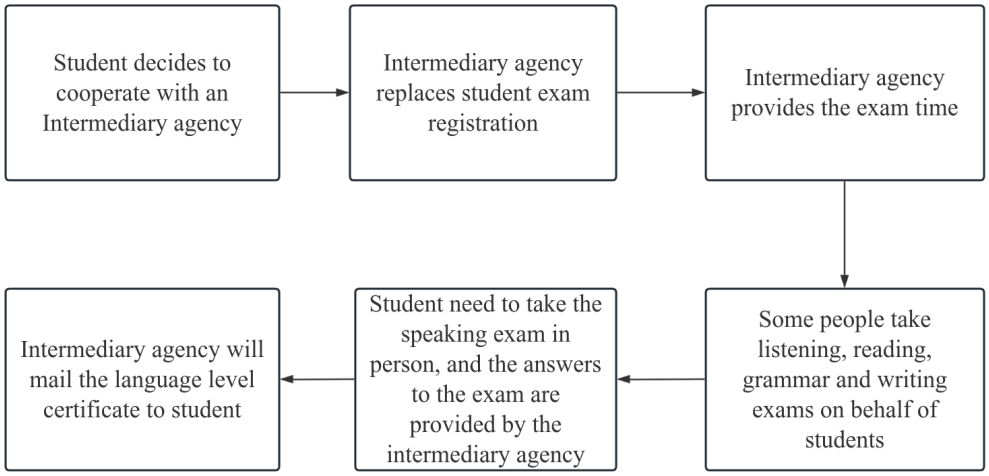

Figure 2: Key stages of selling certificates. Scheme by Wang Yiyang (2025)

For many clients, the primary concern is the authenticity and reliability of the certificate. This refers to concerns about whether the credential will in future withstand institutional scrutiny or challenging employment settings. Ethical judgments are unimportant. Phrases such as "guaranteed authenticity", "online verifiable", and "issued by official university" become keywords in a chain of trust. The emphasis is not on the legitimacy of the exam process, but on the perceived legitimacy of the document. On its surface appears a validity of systems that recognise only symbols, not origins. The excerpt from Ying Ying (male, 23), a third-year undergraduate student in sports, illustrates this issue:

> The bottom line I can accept is that 'this certificate is real', which means it can be checked, has a QR code and a seal, and can be used when needed. How the certificate was obtained is not important.

Beneath the service-oriented surface constructed by this interplay of discurse and logistics, there lies a more obscure but consequential force—the tacit involvement and consent of individuals within the university. Although this study did not involve direct access to staff members in Russian universities, student accounts suggest that the credibility of some TORFL certificates does not primarily stem from sophisticated forgery techniques on the part of Chinese intermediaries, but from the leakage of official resources. For example, Ni Ni (female, fourth-year undergraduate), recalled:

> The agent assured me that the certificate was genuine and that I could check at the university. It was issued by a university in Moscow. On the exam day, I only needed to turn on the camera of my computer, and all the documents had already been uploaded to the system. In fact, all I need to do is show up on the exam platform.

The original framework of TORFL, designed to assess language proficiency, has been displaced, giving way to a commodified system governed by administrative vulnerabilities and exchanges of institutional power. Intermediary agencies capitalise on this loosened institutional terrain. These actors do not merely facilitate; they reconfigure the testing process into an informal, yet functional economy. Students' participation in such arrangements is not necessarily a product of ignorance or deception. Rather, it reflects an increasing accommodation: if the process is quiet and discreet, the outcome effective, and the chain of responsibility sufficiently blurred, the act of purchase is no longer perceived as wrong. Instead, it is seen as a reliable solution—a socially acceptable way to achieve a result within a world where means and morality are decoupled. The intermediary system demonstrates how state institutions, university actors, and student networks co-produce a semi-formal market of credential legitimacy, revealing a moral grey zone characteristic of post-socialist education economies.

Discussion

Against this broader backdrop, this article brings the anthropology of Chinese student migration into conversation with research on the political economy of international education to illuminate how students experience and respond to these shifting institutional conditions. Existing scholarship has extensively examined aspiration, mobility strategies, and educational desire, yet has paid far less attention to the micro-practices through which students navigate opaque, uneven, and often contradictory educational infrastructures. The ethnographic cases presented here suggest that TORFL trading is not simply a reaction to individual academic difficulty, but a situated response to credential-oriented expectations formed in China, family-based moral economies, and the semi-formalised practices that characterise post-socialist higher education. This perspective reframes the TORFL market as an empirical site where students negotiate risk, legitimacy, and compliance within a global system in which certificates—rather than learning—serve as the primary markers of institutional recognition.

The commercialisation of higher education and the increased demand for universities to become financially self-sustaining have caused a shift of institutional priorities—from fostering academic value to the accumulation of revenue (Kezar & Bernstein-Sierra, 2015). Under intensified credentialism, where the goal of education is not learning but the completion of a degree, language certificates become key forms of commodified and de-formalised credentials. In universities that rely heavily on international students as a source of income, language examinations are objects of transaction rather than a pedagogical process. Academic ethics yield to commercial logic. TORFL certificates reflect institutional gaps and complicity arising from the globalisation of higher education in both Russia and China.

Comparative evidence also suggests that the commodification of language credentials is not unique to Russia. Following the revival of air traffic and the loosening of visa regimes after Covid-19, students from China preparing for IELTS started travelling to geographically close "exam hubs"—Ulaanbaatar, Tashkent, Almaty, Yerevan, Seoul, Hong Kong. Intermediary agencies organised face-to-face sessions in hotels the day before the exam. Candidates were provided with answers for listening, reading, and writing, which they were expected to memorise overnight, while the speaking test had to be performed individually. Although these strategies varied depending on exam format and local "enforcement", the logic remained the same: intermediaries adapted flexibly to each specific test. This converts what was intended as assessments of meritocracy and language competency into routinised, commodified exchanges. The TORFL phenomenon belongs to a wider transnational credential market, where geography, exam modality, and supply-chains shape the ways in which certificates circulate as convertible social objects rather than indicators of language ability.

Following the concept of the social life of things (Appadurai 1986), TORFL certificates are not static documents of achievement but dynamic practices and discourses. Appadurai argued that the value of an item is not intrinsic but constituted by its circulation through social and cultural contexts. In its new life, the certificate circulates as a convertible commodity and symbolic artefact. Its value lies in its capacity to function as a passport across institutional thresholds and to fulfil family and social expectations. The ethnographic cases illustrate that language certificates acquire value less through their pedagogical function than through the ways they circulate within transnational markets.

Students who hold outcome-oriented views of education perceive higher learning less as knowledge production than as an investment in status and mobility. This orientation makes them likely to engage in cheating, seeing it not as a moral issue but as a rational shortcut for securing better opportunities (Bertram Gallant & Drinan, 2006). This utilitarian perspective culminates in a radical re-evaluation of cheating itself. When the entire system—from university graduation requirements to employers' hiring criteria—recognises only the certificate as the ultimate signifier while remaining indifferent to the learning process, it encourages opportunistic behaviour. Students keenly perceive that what is being assessed is not who they are but what document they hold. Acquiring a "genuine" certificate through illicit means thus appears to many as a rational strategy - it satisfies the sole institutional requirement at minimal cost.

Those who refrain from cheating, by contrast, may become "losers" in this distorted arena—gaining knowledge yet forfeiting formal eligibility. This paradoxical inversion demonstrates a systemic failure. Rather than fostering learning, the structure's skewed incentives end up punishing sincere learners while rewarding savvy institutional arbitrageurs. Intermediary agencies exploit and reinforce this orientation by offering guarantees, reshaping examinations into predictable, customer-friendly processes. The result is a system where knowledge is compressed or bypassed, and education is transformed into a transaction. Certificates become the tradable currency of a credentialist economy.

Conclusion

Drawing on fieldwork conducted between 2024 and 2025 among Chinese students in Russia, this ethnographic report finds that the commercialisation of the Test of Russian as a Foreign Language is not an isolated or deviant behaviour, but rather a strategy shaped by the intersection of examination regimes, dynamics within the transnational educational market, and socio-cultural pressures at home. Chinese students' decisions to purchase language certificates are driven by an instrumental, career-oriented logic and family expectations. Confronted with poor knowledge of the target language and risk, students view the purchase of certificates as the most cost-efficient response. Meanwhile, intermediary agencies exploit systemic loopholes to offer a highly professionalised service, forming networks centred on the reproduction of legitimate-looking outcomes. TORFL has shifted from an assessment of language ability to a commodity—one that can be outsourced and rebranded through monetary transactions, the re-delegation of duties and responsibilities, and discursive legitimation.

As global educational and employment systems increasingly emphasise credentialisation, the value of TORFL certificates no longer lies in language competency. It serves as a passport for migration and institutional thresholds such as applications for study visa, graduation, and job search. Students' purchase of certificates reflects their view of certificates as a form of highly convertible educational capital. Its function is "proof" rather than "competency". This phenomenon should not be simplified as ethical ambiguity that gets manifested in cheating, but should be understood through cultural logic and institutional diversification.

Global language certification regimes become increasingly diversified by cultural and market logics; hence student behaviour should be understood within the context of resource inequality, institutional constraint, and family pressure. Confronted with a higher education system that is increasingly commodified, and with national credentialing mechanisms that privilege form over content, we should further investigate these questions: Does a language certificate still represent knowledge? For individuals navigating the liminal spaces of cross-cultural education, is there truly a compliant yet effective path forward? This research offers a preliminary empirical entry point and invites for further investigation into the cultural, political, and institutional dynamics in an age of not only educational globalisation but also de-formalisation.

Taken together, our study situates the purchase of TORFL certificates not as moral deviation but as a pragmatic response to the intersecting pressures that shape contemporary educational mobility. By putting ethnographic attention on the micro-practices through which Chinese students interpret, navigate, and endure the ambiguities of post-socialist educational institutions, the analysis contributes to anthropological debates on Chinese student migration and the political economy of international education. The TORFL market reveals how legitimacy, responsibility, and value are negotiated in everyday actions within transnational social fields where certificates—not competencies—serve as the central currency of recognition. In foregrounding these practices, our article highlights the frictions and inequalities embedded in global

credentialing regimes and underscores the need to reconsider what "learning," "compliance," and "success" mean in increasingly commodified and diversified educational landscapes.

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