

‘We’ve Done Our Bit’: Post-COVID Experiences of Precarious Privilege Among Western International School Teachers in Shanghai

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Abstract

In this article, we consider how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected migration experiences and decisions among transnationally mobile Western international school teachers in China. International school teachers are among the most numerous groups of Western ‘expats’ in the country, arriving from the beginning of China’s ‘Reform period’. Drawing on exploratory interviews with international school teachers, we examine experiences of precarious privilege against the backdrop of COVID-19 lockdowns. We analyse our participants’ decisions about onward migration or permanence in China. In spite of evidence showing erosion of privilege during the pandemic, international school teachers remain largely insulated from its impact due to the privileged nature of their employment. Of greater significance was the impact of the Shanghai lockdown on the participants’ mobility and emotions, which proved the catalyst for two of the three participants to return to the UK.

Keywords

China, education, migration, narrative research, qualitative research, transnationalism

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Introduction

A decade ago, James Farrer (2014) could write that ‘China wants you’ in a paper examining experiences of highly-skilled migration to China and professional development among Western ‘expats’. Farrer concluded that the ‘Chinese dream’ of professional success and upwards social mobility was not available to everyone, with race and nationality stratifying highly-skilled migrants’ opportunities to a significant degree. Nonetheless, white Western expats might come to enjoy considerable privileges and success. These conclusions were supported by other research at the time, such as Stanley’s (2013) ethnography of American language instructors in Shanghai.

Today, research points to an ‘end of the Chinese Dream’ (Kefala and Lan, 2022), given an erosion of white privilege and the onset of ‘precarious whiteness’ (Lan et al., 2022), in the context of rising nationalism in China, growing political tensions between China and the West (Minzner, 2020), the tightening of China’s visa system, and the impact of policies related to the COVID-19 pandemic (Lan, 2022a). In particular, the restriction of expatriates’ transnational and everyday mundane movements during China’s prolonged anti-COVID lockdowns created a kind of ‘transnational limbo’ (Nehring and Hu, 2022), which has negatively impacted the wellbeing and livelihoods of expatriates in China long term.

Significantly, there has yet to be a study that considers the impact of the pandemic on international school teachers in China, although recent news (Shazal, 2022) suggests that they have been greatly impacted by the pandemic and are opting to leave China to work in schools elsewhere. International school teachers have long been a salient group among highly-skilled migrants in China, given their numbers and their role as agents of international-level education in China’s precarious process of ‘Opening Up’ (Poole, 2023). Their recent experiences of life and work in China and their migration intentions are therefore of broader sociological relevance, as they may indicate changes in experiences and practices of transnationalism, particularly among ‘expatriates’ (Ridgway and Lowe, 2022), at a time of ‘decoupling’ and far-reaching transformations of processes of globalisation in a multipolar global order (Minzner, 2020).

International school teachers, typically teachers from the US and UK, comprise a relatively privileged group in China. Sandwiched between the elite business expatriate at one extreme and the more precariously positioned English as a second language (ESL) teacher at the other, the international school teacher occupies a ‘middle’ position of expatriation (Bunnell, 2017) that combines the ‘privileges of the emancipated globetrotter and the precarity of contractual employment in the neoliberal age’ (Rey et al., 2020: 370). International school teachers are motivated to work in international schools for a variety of reasons, including facilitating transnational mobility, making a difference to students’ lives, and accruing savings and social and cultural capital (Poole and Bunnell, 2023).

In China, international school teachers tend to work in one of two types of international school. The first, referred to as Schools for Children of Foreign Workers (SCFW), cater exclusively for China’s expatriate population. SCFW schools will offer the most attractive packages and typically hire qualified (i.e. holding a teaching licence from the home country) teachers from the UK or US. The second type of school, referred to by

various names, such as private bilingual schools or internationalised schools, cater for a growing local middle class who aspire to international education that transits to (higher) education overseas. Internationalised schools are primarily staffed by host-country Chinese faculty, with expatriate faculty forming a privileged minority (Poole, 2021). While the remuneration and benefits in such schools are not as competitive as those offered by SCFW schools, they are still competitive when compared to other education sectors in China, such as ESL teaching or public university lecturing.

Prior to 2022, China was a popular destination for international school teachers, due to the rapid expansion of the international school sector and the prospect of attractive salaries and opportunities to travel throughout China and the Asia-Pacific region. However, the impact of the pandemic has contributed to the precariousness of the international school sector, which has eroded expatriate teachers' privilege and led to increasing numbers of Western expatriates choosing to leave the country. Although the exact numbers of teachers leaving China is not clear, it has been estimated that up to 40% might leave within a year (Hall, 2022). While the Chinese government lifted all Covid restrictions in late 2022, there is little evidence of a reversal in expatriate numbers, perhaps due to growing public resentment towards foreigners in China, ever-growing numbers of skilled Chinese returning to China, and increased decoupling from the West (Bickenbach and Liu, 2022).

In this article, we examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on migration experiences and decisions among international school teachers in China. In doing so, we add to academic debates on highly-skilled international migration to China and changing notions of privilege, which, in the wake of the global pandemic, we frame in terms of precarious privilege.

Theoretical framework

The concept of precarious privilege goes beyond traditional notions of precarity by exploring how privilege and precarity can coexist. By emphasising subjective experiences and emotional landscapes encompassing stability, security, vulnerability, and alienation, precarious privilege helps to shed light on the complexities of these intertwined states. This emerging concept has roots in both international school literature and mobility literature, each offering unique perspectives. For example, the international school literature (e.g. Rey et al., 2020) has focused on the tangible aspects of precarity, such as short-term contracts and demographic factors like age, race, and ethnicity. Conversely, the mobility literature (e.g. Chen and Wang, 2020) explores precarious privilege in terms of physical locations and senses of belonging, revealing a spectrum of temporal experiences that move between feelings of security and vulnerability.

We focus on the temporal dimension of precarious privilege in order to show how experiences of privilege and precarity coexist, shift, and evolve over time and across space (Green, 2023). We also problematise the notion that expatriates in China are inherently privileged by showing that privilege is a fluid concept that changes in response to the environment. Although our sample is small, we were able to utilise the in-depth interview to get the participants to articulate their experiences before, during, and after the pandemic/Shanghai lockdown.

In addition to this temporal dimension, researchers have also noted that precarious privilege is mediated by intersecting underlying factors, such as occupation, gender, and race (Poole and Bunnell, 2023). Although issues of race were not explicitly mentioned by the participants, it is necessary to address it here as research on white foreigners in China implicitly implicates race and notions of whiteness in foreigners' everyday lived experiences. According to Lan et al. (2022), there has been a general decline of white privilege in China due to increasing nationalism and the impact of the global pandemic (Lan, 2022b) and the emergence of 'middling whiteness' (Camenisch, 2022), which also represents a form of precarious whiteness. As we show in the Findings and discussion section, the participants reported changing responses to their white-skin over time, ranging from curiosity and interest (from about 2010 to 2014) to indifference (2015 to 2020) and finally to suspicion and hostility (2020 onwards). White skin marked the participants out as Other, and therefore synonymous with Covid-19 itself as its potential carriers and spreaders.

Another aspect of precarious privilege that sheds light on the participants' migration decisions in the context of the pandemic is that of agency. Agency in this article refers to an individual's ability to make choices independently, which can be contrasted to structures, which might be said to restrict an agent (Bailey, 2021). It has been noted (Poole, 2023) that international school teachers feel agentic because of the relative ease in transitioning from school to school. Significantly, while this agency has been impacted by the pandemic, studies (e.g. Bailey, 2021) indicate that some dimensions of privilege remain, such as the ability to be mobile. The ability to retain agency amid restriction can be attributed to teachers' status as international school teachers and their white-skin privilege, both of which factor into our analysis.

Methodology

Data for this qualitative study come from in-depth interviews with three expatriate international school teachers. We employed chain referral sampling to identify information-rich participants (Patton, 2002). We recruited teachers who had lived and worked in China for over 5 years and were in a position to discuss how their experiences of life and work in China, as well as their migration intentions, had changed as a result of the impact of the global pandemic and local lockdowns. The first author used his connections as a former international school teacher to approach three teachers (Marcel, Ian, and Jim), who all agreed to be interviewed. Table 1 offers biographical information about the participants.

Following BERA guidelines (2024), the participants are referred to by pseudonyms, to ensure anonymity, and were requested to provide informed consent. The participants were interviewed by the first author via Microsoft Teams from Beijing, as at the time of data collection, Marcel had returned to the UK, and Ian and Jim were based in Shanghai.

Interviews were conducted in the third quarter of 2022 and lasted from 60 to 90 minutes. The interview questions were informed by the precarious privilege concept and sought to tease out its intersectional nature by considering how the participants' occupation, family status, and nationality mediated their negotiation of the pandemic. The interview questions were also informed by our lived experiences of living and working in China. The first author, for example, was formerly an international school teacher in

Table 1. Biographical information about the participants.

Participant	Age	Nationality/ ethnicity	Gender	Date arrived in China	Years in China at time of interview	Family status	Type of school
Marcel	Late thirties	White, British	Male	2008	14	Married (Chinese wife/one child)	SCFW
Ian	Late thirties	White, British	Male	2017	7	Married (British wife, also a teachers/ one child)	SCFW
Jim	Early thirties	White British	Male	2014	9	Single/no children	Internationalised

Shanghai, where he experienced the initial outbreak of the pandemic before moving to Beijing. The second author also experienced the Shanghai lockdown of 2022, where he was formerly an academic. Our lived experiences helped us to build rapport with the participants before and during interviews, helping to elicit deep, rich, and candid responses. The first author’s positionality as a white British male also influenced his recruitment of the participants, as the majority of teachers in his network are similarly British and male.

The interviews sought to understand the participants’ experiences of being expatriates in China, their mobility stories/why they came to China and their intentions to leave or stay (agency), and their experience and negotiations of the Shanghai lockdown (precarity and agency). While the Shanghai lockdowns might be understood as a universal experience (i.e. the participants experienced what 25 million other people did), the participants were arguably in an advantageous position due to their status as white international school teachers, which, as we show in the findings, contributed to their ability to be agential and make decisions about whether to remain or leave China.

Interview recordings were transcribed and then checked and corrected against the original recordings. Our approach to data analysis was inductive and exploratory, in line with a ‘small n’ case study. We drew on Braun and Clarke’s (2021) approach to thematic analysis, identifying salient themes and patterns in our participants’ interview narratives. Here, our data analysis took on a four-step procedure. The first step involved familiarising ourselves with the data. This involved separately reading over the transcripts and noting down general observations and then reconvening to share our initial insights and impressions. The second step involved generating and assigning codes. These codes were idiosyncratic in nature and involved labelling text that resonated with the concept of precarious privilege. The third step involved collapsing the codes into developing themes and assigning codes to over-arching themes and sub-themes. This process identified the following themes and sub-themes: pre-pandemic privilege (e.g. professional

opportunities); pandemic precarity (e.g. restrictions to the participants' mobility, existential uncertainty created by lockdowns, the ability to shelter within the international school as a protective enclave); and the emergence of post-pandemic precarious privilege (e.g. time to reflect, increased mobility, and the accumulation of symbolic and economic capital).

The findings we present in the following are drawn from three cases. This small number of cases is due to the exploratory nature of this study. On the one hand, foreign international school teachers still in China are often reluctant to discuss their experiences given the close monitoring of public speech in the country. On the other hand, those who have left China become difficult to access given their onward migration to diverse international destinations. In this sense, this article offers valuable exploratory insights into the experiences of a difficult-to-access period, which has arguably been one of the most difficult periods for immigrants in China in recent history. The three cases we discuss in the following sections are grounded in detailed interviews that were rich in detail and therefore offer meaningful insights in response to our research objectives. At the same time, they lay the groundwork for more extensive research on our subject matter.

In line with one of the core objectives of qualitative case study research (Marshall et al., 2022; Wolcott, 1994), our interviews therefore allow for the in-depth description and conceptually driven interpretation of a heterogeneous range of individual experiences, beliefs, and choices at a time of sudden crisis. They do not map the entire range of such experiences, beliefs, and choices on the part of Shanghai 'expat' teachers during the COVID pandemic, but empirical generalisations are commonly not achievable through qualitative case study research, whether on the basis of 300, 30, or 3 cases (Feagin et al., 1991). Notably, research on international school teachers (Poole and Bunnell, 2023) and expatriates in China (Lan, 2022b; Stanley, 2013) has relied on small samples to generate in-depth insights into patterns, experiences, and practices of migration. Thus, Lan (2022b) relies on data from three participants to develop compelling insights into what it means to be a white expatriate in post-pandemic China. Equally, Tu (2023) builds on a single case to analyse the role migration infrastructure plays in organising care practices in Chinese transnational families. There is therefore a significant precedent for our work with a small sample.

Findings and discussion

Pre-pandemic privilege

This section explores the participants' reasons for coming to China and their initial motivations for remaining in the long term. Doing so highlights a number of privileges, including access to professional development opportunities, the ability to save, and the ability to be mobile and travel. While the participants offered some evidence of pre-pandemic precarity, including a subtle erosion of their status as expatriates, their interviews generally painted a positive picture of China during the mid to later part of the 2010s. This is not to suggest that their lives were precarity-free. Previous research (e.g. Bailey, 2021) has highlighted contractual precarity as an inevitable and inescapable reality of international school teaching. Rather, the participants framed their pre-pandemic

experiences as having opportunities to access privileges they normally otherwise could not, which the pandemic and ensuing lockdowns eroded.

Marcel qualified to teach Maths in the UK and was inspired to ‘see more of the world’ after learning about international school teaching from a friend. He considered working in an international school to be a ‘great opportunity’ and moved to China in 2008 to work in a prestigious SCFW in Shanghai. Although Marcel initially planned for his stay ‘to be short-term’, he ended up working at his school for 14 years. His decision to remain in China was based on professional development opportunities and the attractions of Shanghai:

It was the career development opportunities coming up that if I worked hard, I’d be eligible for and the love of the city, which made me think, ‘You know what, I can see myself signing another contract’. I never thought it would turn into fourteen years. (Marcel)

Ian was similarly attracted to Shanghai as it afforded opportunities for travel and career advancement. He moved to Shanghai with his wife, who was also a teacher, in 2017, where they both worked as English/art teachers, respectively, in a non-profit international school that modelled itself on the English private boarding school model. However, over time, he came to feel that it was not possible for expatriates to integrate into the Chinese society, even if they had lived in China for many years:

To be honest, a lot of the expats who live here, they’ve been here for a very long time, and I feel like people just forget that. This isn’t their place and you don’t just accept everyone is still a person. You still have feelings. You still have values. Whether it’s money or experience or whatever. You take what you need from here and get out as quickly as you can. (Ian)

Arriving in 2017, Ian arrived during a transitory phase when the status of expatriates in China was on what Marcel described as ‘a gradual decline’. Nevertheless, Ian adopted a pragmatic attitude towards being an outsider, emphasising the need to exploit the situation for all its material worth as there is little chance of long-term integration. Indeed, there is evidence that expatriates have always struggled to integrate into Chinese society, even before the global pandemic (e.g. Stanley, 2013).

Jim’s initial experiences broadly echo those of Ian and Marcel. Jim was motivated to move to China in 2014 after his brother told him about a trip he had gone on through the STA (Student Travel Association):

I did my last exam at university in June, and at the beginning of August, I was applying to Shanghai. The original plan was to go home, do a PGCE and that obviously went to plan! Because eight years later, I am still here. I didn’t go and do my PGCE. There was just something about living and working here that after three months just made me think I want to do this for another year. (Jim)

While Jim noted that things had changed since 2014 – ‘I remember being here in 2014 and walking down the Bund. And you get like five or six people stop you for a picture and nowadays nobody cares’ – he retained a positive outlook on living and working in China:

Nationalistic. I love that. I love it when people use that word. I think the entire world is becoming nationalistic. My time here has always been really positive. I always found people really friendly. I don't think it's changed a huge amount. It got more expensive. At least in Shanghai, it's become equal parts more Chinese and more western. (Jim)

Jim may have perceived China more positively for several reasons. First, he worked in an internationalised school, where most staff were Chinese, giving him an insight into Chinese life and culture. Jim and Ian lacked this, since their schools primarily hired expatriate teachers. Second, Jim was fluent in Chinese and therefore able to understand how Chinese society worked, thereby integrating into the culture more easily. In contrast, both Marcel and Ian were not fluent in Chinese. Even though Marcel had a Chinese wife, he still felt that he could never fully integrate into Chinese society due to the language barrier:

Having a Chinese wife really helps to make you feel more integrated. But I think in Shanghai, you get a tendency to get lazy and stick to people from a similar background. I think I still led a kind of blended life. I think it's very difficult for foreigners to ever feel fully integrated unless you're, you know, that guy, Afu,¹ who's a social media person and fluent in Chinese. (Marcel)

Despite Marcel's inability to integrate into the Chinese society, his marital status will play a significant role in helping him to negotiate the Shanghai lockdowns, as his Chinese wife was able to assist in translating government notices and understanding the inconsistent implementation of policies. Similarly, Jim, who was fluent in Chinese, was able to follow policies and requirements. In contrast, neither Ian nor his wife spoke Chinese or had much contact with Chinese speakers.

Pandemic precarity

This section examines the impact of the pandemic on the participants' day-to-day lives in Shanghai. The Shanghai lockdown began on 1 April 2022 and was designed as a short-term measure to deal with an outbreak underway since February. However, the lockdown would last over 2 months, ending in June 2022. During this time, the 26 million residents of Shanghai were required to stay in their homes, many of which were physically locked from the outside, and undergo daily mass testing (Song, 2022). Infected residents were also required to isolate in quarantine centers (so-called 'fang cang camps'), which, according to many sources (e.g. Wang, 2022), were under-resourced and, in some instances, required individuals to sleep in gyms and factories. There were also reports of food shortages as residents could not receive food deliveries due to the lockdown (Jiang, 2022). Overall, the Shanghai lockdown had a profound negative impact on the wellbeing of Shanghai residents (Shepard and Chiang, 2022), and according to some accounts (Lim, 2022; Nam and English, 2022), it has resulted in neuroses, burnout, and increased anxiety. It is within this context that we next explore the participants' experiences of the Shanghai lockdown and how it exacerbated existing forms of precarity, while also creating new opportunities, which we frame in terms of precarious privilege.

Restrictions to mobility

A concern shared by all the participants was the impact of the lockdown on their transnational mobility. As noted earlier, many international school teachers are motivated to work in international schools as it facilitates international mobility. This was also the case for Marcel who relied on being able to return to the UK to stay connected to family and friends:

Normally in the summer time, I go home. First summer we could not. Then the next year, they were saying, 'Okay, you can try and go home'. You still had a three-week quarantine to do. You still had really expensive flight tickets. You've not been seeing your pals. You miss your own country and all of that. (Marcel)

Not only did the lockdown restrict the participants' transnational mobility, but it has also restricted their taken-for-granted privileges of living and working in China – their mundane movements. These mundane movements included being able to leave one's apartment to go to the shops, take a walk or eat out at a restaurant. These restrictions were described by the participants as 'scary' (Ian), 'ridiculous' (Marcel) and 'political' (Jim). Ian also expressed similar feelings as Marcel:

It has been restriction after restriction after restriction. It's just nonsense that just so much illogical stuff happens from day to day when they were saying like, 'Oh, one person per household can go out per day' or 'A couple can't go out together for a walk'. We just order *waimai*² when we need something and just play it as safe as we can. And this is part of the reason that we're moving to campus as well because in our apartment building, you just never know what's going to happen from one day to the next. (Ian)

Significantly, moving on campus became a strategy adopted by Ian and his wife for dealing with the unpredictability of the situation. International schools have been described as expatriate enclaves (Woods and Kong, 2020), effectively separating themselves and teachers from the local community. While such segregation is problematic for subverting the intercultural ethos on which international schools are based, against a backdrop of lockdowns and uncertainty, such segregation becomes a strategy for negotiating precarity, albeit a strategy that is only available to a certain privileged individuals, such as international school teachers.

Disempowerment

The participants also talked about the emotional challenges of the Shanghai lockdown, which induced feelings of disempowerment and helplessness:

We were kind of thrust into this situation, and again, being completely a political outfit, you know, we're put in that situation. For three months, we had very little control over anything that was happening. (Jim)

The disempowerment is conveyed through words and phrases such as 'thrust', 'put into', and 'little control over anything'. The disempowerment was echoed by Marcel

who reflected that ‘it [being put in lockdown and taken away to centralised quarantine] could happen at any point, any time and I don’t feel satisfied, I don’t have enough faith that it wouldn’t happen again’. Meanwhile, Ian felt that he was ‘constantly teetering on the edge of either jumping on a plane or having a mental breakdown’ and likened the situation to ‘death by a thousand cuts’. Death by a thousand cuts, also sometimes known as ‘slow slicing’ (lingchi), was a form of capital punishment practised in China until about 1900 that involved the executioner administering a series of cuts to the skin of the victim designed to kill them as slowly and as painfully as possible. Ian’s allusion to death by a thousand cuts suggests that the pandemic for him was akin to a form of torture slowly chipping away at his resolve and perhaps even his sanity.

The feelings of disempowerment were more acute for Ian and Marcel, who both became parents during the pandemic. While Marcel’s son was born during the initial outbreak in 2020, Ian’s son, Martin, was born during the Shanghai lockdown, which led to many unanticipated challenges:

Martin was effectively grown in lockdown, and we escaped in an ambulance a couple of days before his due date to go to a hotel round the corner from our hospital because if you get locked down, like fully locked down, they won’t let you go to your hospital, but you’ll be taken to a public hospital. Then Martin was born, and we came home back to the apartment, back into lockdown and he had some problems. So we had lots of hospital appointments. Each time, we had to get a certificate, get permission, all this kind of stuff and pay 2000 RMB [approximately 220 GBP] and a time for a private car to take us to the hospital for each appointment.

There were even reports of babies and children being forcibly separated from their parents (Liu and Mozur, 2022) which also made Ian and his wife feel more helpless and desperate:

And then when they were separating parents from their kids and the kids were in these like makeshift baby and kids’ hospitals that were massively understaffed. Just terrifying that they could lawfully take your child off you and the British consulate couldn’t do anything about it.

This disempowerment and uncertainty may explain why Marcel left China after the Shanghai lockdown was lifted and why Ian was planning to leave in the summer of 2023. Significantly, Jim, who was single and did not have a family, appeared to negotiate the lockdowns with more ease and, as will be shown in the next section, planned to make China his home for the foreseeable future. An individual’s family status fosters both privilege and precarity. On the one hand, having a family may have helped to deal with the uncertainty of the situation by providing support and security. On the other hand, having a child introduced unforeseen forms of precarity that Marcel and Ian did not anticipate, such as lack of access to services that they took for granted.

Discrimination

During the initial outbreak of the pandemic in 2020, the participants felt that they had been discriminated against due to the perception that Covid-19 was brought into the country by ‘foreigners’:

I remember in 2020, it must have been May or June going into a restaurant and the waitress coming to the table and taking my temperature, but nobody else's and I immediately just said, 'Hang on a second, there's other people here. You can take their temperature too?' (Jim)

Significantly, foreigners in China have always had to negotiate both privilege and discrimination. They are simultaneously Othered by their white skin (Liu and Dervin, 2022), while also empowered by unearned privilege (Lan, 2022a). This is also the case for international school teachers in China, where having a white face is often enough to qualify them to be a teacher (Poole, 2021).

However, by the end of the Shanghai lockdown, the participants felt that the initial discrimination had been replaced with a sense of everyone having lived through and experienced the same trauma, which had a levelling effect:

So I think that since the Shanghai lockdown, that's changed a little bit, and I think a lot of that has disappeared. I think people here kind of realise that if you're still here, you've been here through that and so you've gone through the same thing as us and there's almost this kind of renewed sense of togetherness. (Jim)

Ian also echoed this view, believing that 'we've gone past the point of like, "the foreigner!" I think everyone's gone past being wary of each other, and now they are just, "I don't give a fuck anymore!"' Significantly, despite race being linked to precarity in the literature (e.g. Lan, 2022a), the participants did not consider this to be a significant factor in their own experiences of the Shanghai Lockdowns. This may be, as Jim notes, due to the scope of the lockdown policies, which, impacting both Chinese and non-Chinese residents, brought about temporary structural change. Conversely, underlying material factors, such as location, race, and occupation, may have contributed to the participants, who were white British international school teachers, being shielded from discrimination.

As a cosmopolitan city, Shanghai has always been home to different cultures and nationalities, which might have resulted in greater tolerance to difference (such as race). Moreover, as white British, the participants may have also experienced less discrimination due to the positive connotation that white-skin often connotes in China. This contrasts with the experiences of many Africans in Guangzhou, who experienced forced quarantines, evictions, and refusal of essential services (Human Rights Watch (HRW), 2020). This point suggests that both location and race intersect in individuals' experiences of precarious privilege. Finally, international school teachers may be less embedded in the locale, forming so-called expatriate enclaves (Woods and Kong, 2020). Even when the participants were not always physically on the school grounds, they remained symbolically connected to the school and could leverage this connection to negotiate lockdown-related issues (such as Ian and his family moving onto campus). This point suggests that occupation is an aspect of precarious privilege that allowed some of the participants to access resources and privileges to deal with the lockdowns.

Post-pandemic precarious privileges

Mobility agency

Marcel was able to leverage his extensive experience of teaching International Baccalaureate (IB) mathematics in international schools to secure a position in an

independent school in Scotland: ‘Coming in with say fourteen odd years of experience puts you in poll position’. However, he remained ambivalent about his return to the UK:

I had been wanting to come back at some point. I was hoping to stay out and do another contract and save good money. But I think Covid basically made me confirm this. I didn’t have confidence that these policies would change. So, yeah, Covid forced me to come back I would say. (Marcel)

On the one hand, his phrasing suggests that he chose to return to the UK. He had been considering a return to the UK, and the pandemic was the catalyst to make this happen. On the other hand, he also talks about Covid ‘forcing’ him to return to the UK, which suggests a loss of agency.

Temporal agency

Precarious lives may also offer opportunities for generative futures, as illustrated by Ian who planned to return to the UK in the summer of 2023:

This is most definitely our final year. We’ve been saving for a very long time. And then you think, ‘You know, for my son’s wellbeing, maybe we should go back’. So our plan is to buy somewhere between five and seven acres on the north coast. Scotland way, north Scotland. I have a piece of land and we will build our own house or our own earth and home and build another house to use as an Airbnb and set up a permaculture retreat. Perhaps a little camp site on there as well. We’re just trying to strip away as many layers of that daily hassle that we can. (Ian)

Like Marcel, Ian was able to leverage his international school teaching experience to envisage a post-pandemic future that is diametrically opposed to the restrictions and unpredictability that he experienced during the lockdown. Ian envisages a future of simplicity. The fact that Ian can envisage this future implicates his privilege, which stems largely from his position as an international school teacher. First, he is able to purchase property, which implies he has been able to accrue a substantial amount of savings. Moreover, as a British citizen, he is able to relocate to his home country where, by 2022, lockdown measures had all been lifted, and life had returned to relative normalcy. While China has subsequently lifted lockdown measures, teachers like Ian may no longer consider the economic benefits of international school teaching in the country to be worth it, particularly when the policies regarding lockdown appear to be so ad hoc and arbitrarily imposed. Ian’s case represents an interesting form of precarious privilege, whereby a precarious situation (the lockdown) becomes the catalyst for mobility and the construction of a more generative and satisfying future. In a sense, Ian seeks to escape from precarious privilege by leveraging the combined economic privilege of his and his wife’s international school teaching experience and investing it in a generative future.

Reflective agency

While the Shanghai lockdown had been the catalyst for Marcel and Ian to leave China, it gave Jim time to reflect on what it was he really wanted to get from his life and career, which helped him to realise that staying in China would be his best move:

It gave me an opportunity to look at things and examine things. And, you know, I sat down and I thought, ‘Well, if I stay, what’s keeping me here? If I go, what am I leaving with that I didn’t have when I came here?’ And I thought about that one in particular and I thought ‘If I leave, I go back to the exact same situation that I left eight years ago. I’ve not gained anything’. I’ve got, you know, some things on my CV, but I’m not going to get off a plane and start teaching at a school in the UK in September. So, what do I go back to? (Jim)

Jim’s rhetorical question – what would I go back to? – is a reminder that despite being relatively privileged, he is still in a precarious situation as he has become locked into a closed system of privilege. While his ability to speak both English and Chinese would have been a valuable skill in the context of internationalised schools in China, it would not have the same exchange value in other types of international school or schools back in the UK. While Jim could return home, his mobility choices were somewhat restricted as in so doing, he would effectively lose his status and the privilege, such as salary, benefits, and lifestyle. Unlike the other participants, Jim did not hold a professional teaching qualification, which would also make returning to the UK and securing a teaching position in a state school difficult. Age, family status, and the type of school may also have restricted Jim’s mobility choices. Given that he was unmarried and childless, it should have been easier for him to be mobile. He was younger than Ian and Marcel, both of whom were in their late thirties. Moreover, Ian and Marcel were both married, with Ian’s wife also employed as a teacher, whereas Jim was single and may have had less motivation or time to accrue savings. Finally, Ian and Marcel both worked in a SCFW school, which typically offers higher salaries and better benefits than internationalised schools, whereas Jim worked in an internationalised school that did not offer such attractive benefits. Therefore, despite being in China longer than Ian, Jim appeared to be in a less-advantageous position, due to the factors of age, type of school, and family status.

Conclusion

We view the pandemic and the imposition of lockdowns as a water-shed moment where international school teachers’ lived experiences shifted from a position of contractual precarity to one of precarious privilege, where their status as international school teachers afforded them access to privileges that other residents of Shanghai may not have had access to while also restricting privileges that they took for granted, such as the ability to be mobile and access much-needed services, such as hospitals for their families.

To date, sociological research (e.g. Kefala and Lan, 2022; Lan, 2022a; Lan et al., 2022) exploring the experiences of expatriates in China negotiating the pandemic has tended to place the issue of white privilege and precarious whiteness at the forefront of analysis. While we acknowledge the salience of these factors in expatriates’ lived experiences during the pandemic and living and working in China more generally, we argue that there is more at work. The impact of the global pandemic implicates other underlying factors, such as occupation, family status, gender, and age that can easily be overlooked due to the topicality of race. These more mundane privileges also require analysis, as they inform the emergence of a post-pandemic precarious privilege that signals the end of the China dream.

In relation to the literature on international school teachers, there has been a tendency for authors to emphasise the economic aspects of privilege (e.g. Rey et al., 2020), while not sufficiently considering how such privileges are temporally and contextually constituted. With reference to expatriate teachers in Shanghai, we show that their privileges are not just economic in nature but intersect with occupation, nationality, and family status, which sustained them during a time of uncertainty and precarity. This insight cautions against the bifurcation of the expatriate experience as either agential or disempowered. As this study shows, the participants were disempowered but were still able to be agential amid restrictions due to their status as international school teachers and, in the case of Ian and Marcel who were in their late thirties, had accrued enough savings and professional capital to return to the UK. Significantly, the participants' agency was future-oriented, anticipating a time when they could act without any restrictions. These imaginaries of agency are ontologically significant as they conceal hidden privileges, which we consider to be tied to the participants' status as international school teachers, as well as their white-skin privilege (implied, rather than explicitly stated by the participants). Even though individuals may not be able to physically act, they are still able to invest in future-oriented imaginaries, which they would realise at a later date.

We also utilise the concept of precarious privilege in order to nuance the international school teacher label. International school teachers have been described as a 'middling actor' (Bunnell, 2017) who balance contradictory positions. Baikovich and Yemini (2023) describe this position as 'holding both low-status (high job uncertainty; limited tenure) and high-status roles (a niche in a 'global middle class'; freedom of movement; the ability to enroll their own children in these schools)' (p. 1). Based on this application, precarious privilege emerges as both a concept and a unit of analysis. As a concept, it brings into focus the lived reality of the middling position by showing how status is constituted by material factors, such as occupation, age, and to a lesser extent, gender and race. As a unit of analysis, precarious privilege moves beyond the bifurcation of privilege and precarity as discrete ontological units by showing how, at the level of lived experience, they are mutually constitutive of each other, thereby giving rise to a muddled middling positionality.

Our research has broader implications for interdisciplinary debates, about the implications of the pandemic for processes of globalisation, considering broader shifts in the global geopolitical and economic order (Beaverstock et al., 2023). COVID-19 has highlighted the reliance of transnational social processes and attendant infrastructures on national-level policy, governance, and infrastructures (Nehring and Hu, 2022). China's far-reaching and sudden lockdowns and border closure during the pandemic temporarily severed global economic, social, and cultural ties, from international student movements to global supply chains (Hu et al., 2022). In the wake of the pandemic, questions remain about the extent of China's decoupling from transnational social processes, in response to growing international tensions and rising nationalism at home (Minzner, 2020). The experiences of transnationally mobile, Western school teachers in China offer important insights in this regard.

More research is needed to understand the career trajectories of former international school teachers, such as Marcel and Ian, as well as teachers, like Jim, who have chosen to remain in China. If international school teachers are choosing to relocate to other

countries, where are they going and why? What role might they and expats more generally play in an inward-facing, de-coupled China? Where and how does internationalisation fit into this project? Scholars from a variety of disciplines, including migration studies, international education, and sociology, may wish to address some or all these questions in order to ascertain whether expats like Marcel, Ian, and Jim have ‘done their bit’ or whether they still have a part to play in China’s ongoing project of internationalisation.

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Notes

1. Afu, whose real name is Thomas Derksen, is a German Internet celebrity active in China. He is fluent in Chinese and also speaks the Shanghainese dialect. He has a YouTube channel, Thomas阿福, that depicts his experiences in China. See <https://www.youtube.com/@ThomasAfu> for more.
2. Waimai is the generic term for food delivery services.

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