‘I’ve Become a Lot Tougher’: Expatriate Teachers’ Experiences of Precarity and Resilience in Non-Traditional International Schools in China

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Abstract

The arena of education known as ‘international schooling’ has grown enormously, from a body of 2,500 schools in 2000 to almost 13,500 by 2022. By 2019, China had emerged as having the most schools delivering a non-national curriculum in English outside of an English-speaking nation. The arena continues to be dominated by British and North American educators. One enduring aspect of workplace reality is the short-term contract, normally of between two and three years. The field is acknowledged to be inherently precarious and insecure, with high levels of turnover, and a bleak ‘negative’ lens of imagination has always persisted. This paper focuses attention on the lived experiences of expatriate teachers among the growing body of ‘non-traditional international schools’ that might be best termed ‘Chinese Internationalised Schools’. Through in-depth phenomenological interviewing of six expatriate teachers, the reality of ‘short-termism’ was examined. Whilst the findings highlighted, as expected, the negative aspects of short-term employment, the findings also identify many positive outcomes. These include opportunities for developing resilience, agency, and reinvention. This offers scope for a new vision, based upon the accumulation of ‘resilience’, which helps to explain the continuous growth of the arena despite the presence of precarity.
Keywords

international schools – international school teachers – China – precarity – resilience – short-term contracts

Introduction

This paper is concerned with the arena of ‘private, K-12, English-immersion’ (Tarc et al., 2019) educational institutions termed loosely as ‘international schools’. The number of schools hit 2,500 in 2000, then rose to 6,000 in 2012, and reaching 11,000 by 2019 according to one estimate (Speck, 2019). That was based upon identifying, in the main, schools globally that deliver a non-national curriculum in English outside an English-speaking nation, unless they are located in an English-speaking nation and deliver an international curriculum. At the same time, the number of teachers employed in the arena rose sharply from 90,000 in 2000 to 492,000 in 2018, and ‘the vast majority are qualified English-speaking teachers who have trained and gained teaching experience in the UK, USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand’ (isc Research, 12th December 2018). The isc Research website in July 2022 was showing a figure of 571,000 educators teaching 5.89 million children in 13,180 schools.

Comment from two decades ago (Hayden et al., 2000, 107) had described how they traditionally catered for ‘globally mobile professional people whose children accompany them to a variety of postings worldwide.’ They were largely at that time modeled on the 1924-established International School of Geneva which helped pioneer the International Baccalaureate (IB). This ‘Traditional’ (Hayden & Thompson, 2013) arena is identified by Tarc et al. (2019, 666) as comprising ‘well-established; internationally-accredited, not-for-profit schools.’ Recent reports identify them as ‘elite traditional international schools’ (Bunnell et al., 2021), numbering about 600.

The landscape has substantially changed. Nation-states such as Dubai and Malaysia now lie at the centre of the action (Machin, 2017). By 2019, the United Arab Emirates (Dubai in particular) had the most students, and Greater China the most schools. Yet, surprisingly, both these areas of the world have largely defied research attention, and the sudden growth in Greater China especially seems to have caught many scholars by surprise.

At the same time, operating mainly within the market-led side of the operational spectrum (Cambridge & Thompson, 2004), a very different sub-set of International Schooling has emerged in recent years. Referred to as ‘non-traditional international schools’ (Hayden & Thompson, 2013), these newer...
institutions tend to deliver a non-local curriculum (wholly or partly in English) within a for-profit context aimed at locally based children. Our paper is concerned with the lived reality of being an expatriate teacher in this ‘non-traditional’ context in Greater China.

**The Research Context**

It has been stated (Bailey, 2015, 4) how ‘research on the careers and professional identity of teachers in international schools remains little theorised.’ Moreover, we also agree with Bailey’s (2015, 5) point that there is a growing need for ‘a more complex explanation of the motivations and careers of teachers in international schools.’ This seems important not only in terms of it becoming an increasingly popular career-choice for many educators, but also because it is seen as offering different yet inter-connected outcomes.

On the one hand, it is seen as a form of ‘lifestyle migration,’ a search for the ‘good life,’ offering expatriate educators who move overseas ‘a privileged form of mobility driven by globalisation, individualisation, increased ease of movement, work-related flexibility, and increases in relative global wealth’ (Rey et al., 2020, 361). This all sounds quite positive, and can be added to other findings (e.g. Bailey, 2015; Savva, 2013; Hryck, 2015) where it is seen as offering an attractive, fresh schooling pathway. This is reinforced by Bailey’s (2015, 4) findings from the case study in Malaysia where expatriate ‘teachers are able to re-claim elements of their autonomy and articulate a strong sense of professional role and freedom in their new setting.’ Further, the teachers there found (Bailey, 2015, 5), ‘a renewed joy in teaching in the international context.’

Yet, at the same time, the literature also confronts the darker, more negative side of international school teaching involving insecurity and instability (e.g., Blyth, 2017; Brady, 2022; Bunnell, 2016; Caffyn, 2018; Poole, 2019; Savva, 2017). This is a by-product of structural factors such as short-term, temporary contracts. Hardman (2001, 129) refers to the ‘customary 2-year contract’. Subsequently, Hardman’s (2001) small scale survey showed that only 11% of teachers had worked in one school and 89% had worked at two or more. Hayden and Thompson’s (1998) seminal study into the perceptions of teachers as to what constitutes an ‘International Education’ had shown that 40% had taught in five or more schools. This contractual aspect of high-turnover, and hyper-mobility, is often accompanied by organizational factors such as wage discrimination (Canterford, 2003), and personal burdens such as debt accumulation (Rey et al., 2020). Caffyn has shown how the ‘Traditional’ models are prone to micro-politics due to their inherent fragmentation, caused by ‘issues of identity, fear and vulnerability’ (Caffyn, 2010, 50). Meanwhile, Blyth’s (2017)
autoethnographic account of a contractual dispute paints a bleak picture of life in the arena. Hardman (2001, 128) points out that a major problem is the fact that there is often a high degree of resentment felt by ‘Local Hire’ teachers towards the better paid ‘International Hire’ teachers.

In this context, of a mixed and complex variety of outcomes and seemingly inherent tensions facing the expatriate teacher both entering and transitioning within the growing arena of non-traditional schooling, there is a need to further investigate the nuances and the reality of their work. The notion of ‘international school precarity’ has emerged in recent years (Bunnell, 2016; Poole, 2019; Rey et al., 2020) yet it has still to be fully explored or defined. This is especially relevant given the shifts and changes that have led to the recent huge growth of the ‘Non-Traditional’ area, a development which obviously weakens the platform upon which studies such as that by Hardman (2001) can still now be judged. Moreover, this obviously opens up a major avenue of research inquiry, and will require multiple inquiries, from numerous geographical settings.

Our paper shifts attention towards Greater China, which offers an original focus, and will help to tap into much unchartered territory. Based on our interviews with six teachers in CISs based in a major Chinese city, we will show whilst short-term contracts might be a factor behind instability and precarity they can also be viewed as offering opportunities for developing resilience, which can be defined as:

‘the capacity to rebound or bounce back from adversity, conflict, failure or even positive events, progress and increased responsibility’ (Luthans, 2002, 702).

Next, we will discuss in detail the emergent form of the ‘non-traditional’ setting in a Chinese context.

The Emerging Picture in China

The overall growth of ‘international schools’ in Greater China has been relatively quick and sudden; there were 22 schools teaching 7,000 children in 2000, but this rose to 260 schools and 120,000 a decade late (Brummitt and Keeling, 2013, 30). That number had doubled again by 2016 (Sharma, 2016), and had reached 857 schools educating 372,000 children by 2019 (Morrison, 2019). At that point in time Shenzhen had 100 schools, and Chengdu had 25 (Keeling,
The southern Pearl River Delta area of Guangdong is the major site of current growth (Quinn, 2021).

Further, the growth in China has been quite complex, involving a richer diversity of provision than might be found in other nations. On the one hand, there is the continued growth in ‘Schools for Children of Foreign Workers’, representing in the main the ‘traditional’ (Hayden & Thompson, 2013) type, catering mainly for children of expatriate workers and delivering the programs of the IB.

However, the biggest growth area has been among the ‘Non-Traditional’ arena, delivering what is termed ‘cosmopolitan nationalism’ (Wright et al., 2022a, 2022b). The exact picture is not clear, but reports signify a growth in demand among Chinese nationals. One study (Ying & Wright, 2021, 1) ‘examined the strategies of a ‘new rich’ class in China to transmit advantages to their children through admission into highly ranked overseas universities’. Further research (Soong, 2022) has shown how a seemingly new middle class in Shanghai is deliberately seeking out a cosmopolitan schooling pathway for their child(ren).

A larger and growing body of newer private, profit-driven schools have thus appeared (Wu & Koh, 2022a) delivering a fusion of national (Chinese) until Grade 9 and international curricula, such as the IBDP or Advanced-Level from grade 10 to grade 12. This development, with an international curriculum at pre-university level seems quite common; Savva (2013, 17) described a ‘Non-Traditional’ model in China, where most ‘students were culturally and ethnically Chinese, despite being Anglophone passport holders’ and ‘the school followed the national curriculum of England up until the final 2 years of secondary school, at which point it offered the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Programme.’

This type of school, representing two-thirds (i.e. about 600) of all international schools across China (Keeling, 2019), goes by various names, such as ‘Hybrid schools’ (Tarc & Mishra Tarc, 2015), ‘International Chinese Private Bilingual Schools’ (Gaskell, 2019), ‘Non-Exclusive International Schools’ (Young, 2018), and ‘Chinese Internationalised Schools’ (CISs/CIS for short) (Poole, 2020, 2021. This, the ‘CIS’, forms the basis of our paper. It is argued (Poole, 2021) that this type of school should be considered ‘elite’ (i.e. it should not be seen as inferior) and decoupled from the normal or traditional description of international schools, hence the moniker ‘internationalised’ might be more suitable. Characterised by the coexistence of national and international orientations and operated in partnership with Chinese business, the CIS is staffed both by local Chinese hires (representing 60% of the school’s staff,
according to Gaskell, 2019), and overseas expatriates (obviously, 40%), many of whom will not have a teaching license.

Methodology

The Research Philosophy

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was utilized as a guiding methodology for this study. IPA aims to provide a detailed examination of personal lived experience, by ‘giving voice’ (Larkin et al., 2006) to the participants, aiding contextualisation and allowing greater sense-making by the researcher. IPA is also predicated upon a phenomenological philosophy which aims to produce an account of lived experience on its own terms, rather than one imposed or prescribed by pre-existing theoretical preconceptions (Smith & Osborn, 2015). This resonated with the study’s aim, which was to develop a more nuanced approach to understanding teachers’ experiences of short-term precarity. In-depth semi-structured phenomenological interviewing (Seidman, 2013) was utilised as the main method for data collection as it enabled us to capture the lived experiences of the participants.

The Participants

Our six participants were chosen as they were all employed on short-term contracts (2–3 years’ in duration) and also had experience of working in CISs and/or had experience of working in other international schooling contexts. They were interviewed from January to July, 2020. All interviews were conducted face-to-face, audio recorded and then transcribed. The participants gave informed consent and were informed that extracts from their interviews might be used in subsequent papers. Following guidelines laid down by BERA (2018), the participants are referred to by pseudonyms in order to ensure anonymity.

Tarquin was middle-aged qualified teacher who hailed from the UK.

Nora, a qualified teacher back home in the United States, she had spent most of her teaching career on the international schooling circuit.

Norman was an experienced Australian IST. He had also held several middle, and senior management, positions.

Sam, an American, represents what Bailey and Cooker (2019) refer to as ‘the accidental teacher’, an individual who began his career in the corporate world in the USA.

Tyron hailed from South Africa. A qualified teacher, he had taught in two schools in China at the time he was interviewed.
Eva hailed from the United State and was in her mid-thirties. She was a qualified teacher and had been teaching in international schools for about seven years.

The participants were also approached due to their willingness to be interviewed about their experiences. Trust is an essential feature of the researcher-participant relationship within many qualitative paradigms (Given, 2008), but it can take a long time to establish, if indeed it is established at all. Typically, researchers do not spend an extended amount of time in the field, and generally are removed from the phenomena they are investigating. These two factors make establishing a connection with research participants difficult (Given, 2008). In our case, the first author, at the time of data collection, was an IST who worked alongside the participants. Not only did this make gatekeeping and establishing and maintaining trust easier, it also offered an invaluable insight into the topic under investigation. The experiences the participants talked about were not abstract concepts removed from the authors’ lives, but were very real to us. The second author had also formerly worked in International Schools. Therefore, we had first-hand experiences of the phenomenon – short-term contracts – under investigation.

The Schools
Data comes from two CISs in a major city in China. Tyron worked at the first, WEST. WEST was a newly opened K-12, for-profit, private boarding school, which offered the Chinese National curriculum (until grade 9) and international curricula (from grade 10). Although the school served families who were well off economically, they lacked other markers of elite, such as high levels of education or household registration (Young, 2018). Although the school advertised itself as elite, it might best be described as ‘remedial’ (Young, 2018). Many of the students had been enrolled because they had struggled to succeed in the fiercely competitive local school context. The majority of teachers in WEST were Chinese nationals. Turn-over was high.

The other participants all worked at EAST. EAST was a well-established K-12, non-profit private boarding school, which also offered the Chinese National curriculum (until grade 9) and international curricula (from grade 10). In contrast WEST who served parents who were part of a precariat, EAST served an elite middle-class. Moreover, in contrast to WEST, the school exhibited a more Anglophone culture and management structure. The school exhibited an almost even split between Chinese and expatriate teachers with the majority of expatriate teachers hailing from the UK. Turn-over was not high, with many teachers choosing to stay for an extended amount of time. Both schools offered similar contracts (2 – 3 years, renewable on negotiation).
Findings of the Study

The Emergent Framework

In terms of the participants’ negative experiences of short-term contracts, emotional difficulties and insecurity emerged as the most salient. The participants also identified many positive aspects of being employed on short-term contracts. The interview data suggested three main themes: flexibility, agency, and the notion of a metaphorical safety valve. As data analysis progressed, we also found that notions of the negative and positive were not simply polarized experiences, but were interconnected, which resulted in the emergence of another theme, resilience.

The study revealed that the short-term contract, in a China-based ‘non-traditional’ context, creates two inter-linked sets of precarity. On the one hand, the contractual situation considerably affects teachers’ status giving rise to much unpredictability and uncertainty, as well as creating divisions and tensions between expatriates and the more permanent Chinese labour-force. On the other hand, the short-term contract causes much turbulence and transition, as postholders and leadership constantly change. We next discuss this ‘status precarity’, and ‘relationship precarity’, and offer examples of how our teachers responded through creating coping strategies, which offered them a degree of comfort and hope. This resultant accumulation of resilience offers pointers as to how and why our teachers stay within the arena in China, in spite of the precarity.

The nuances of precarity

Status Precarity

The interviews alluded to some of the difficulties created by short-term contracts. One problem identified is how expatriate teachers’ contracts in CISs can change after a certain number of years, as they transition from ‘overseas-hire’ to ‘local-hire’. In this instance, the issue is not with the short-term nature of the contract itself, but rather with the status conferred by the contract. The removal of ‘expat privileges’ such as housing and insurance means that most expatriate teachers will be forced to move on, thereby making it difficult for them to settle down or to feel secure. Nora explained that job-descriptions can also change, leading to uncertainty:

Changes in job descriptions. It is difficult to communicate all aspects of a job in a contract or the posted information, but I find that many of the “extra” duties piled onto international teachers can be very frustrating...
and sap energy. For example, a position I had in China added on boarding school duties that were not mentioned in the hiring process at all.

It is also possible for a teacher’s status in a school to change over time, as post-holders transition to new roles and responsibilities. This was illustrated by Tyron, whose status in west oscillated over time, involving promotion, demotion, and then re-promotion, revealing a very precarious career setting:

I started off as head of department. I soon found that it was too disorganised. They brought in someone else for a year. But it didn’t work out for him, and he left. So, I went back to being head of PE.

Status is further complicated in the CIS by the disparity between expatriate teachers and Chinese teachers. Although expatriate teachers receive a higher salary and more benefits than their local counterparts, they nevertheless considered their experiences and culture to be marginalised. Nora revealed this sense of marginalised status within the school when talking about communication between the school and the teachers:

I think one of the problems is this school doesn’t know how to cater to international teachers, and how to attract and keep good international teachers. So, I think they need to study a little bit more, especially if they are doing exit interviews, surveys, really look at what makes somebody stay. And that’s usually if they are contributing to the school. They are valued, but also if they feel like they aren’t part of this school then they can contribute and make a difference, not just in the classroom, but beyond the classroom.

Another layer of status precarity involved being an expatriate teacher in another nation where the ‘culture’ is very different. Sam had lived in China for eight years, yet still felt like an ‘outsider’. This was a constant frustration:

Me and my friend have a theory that we developed. It’s called micro-frustrations, they build up. Name your poison. The frustrations of having to go to the immigration department. The frustrations of having to have HR do all of your paper work for you. The frustrations of going to the supermarket and not being able to speak. These little everyday things build up, build up, build up.
Another difficulty related to the emotional difficulties of having to renegotiate contracts every two to three years. These emotions include anxiety and uncertainty. Although he did not directly refer to the short-term by name, its presence was clearly felt in Tyron's interview:

You have to try to perform. People like me, I think they like me because I don’t complain a lot and work pretty well with the kids. They kind of like me. And I do work pretty well too, so. There is that down side to it that if you don’t perform, they might ask you to leave and that would be bad. My whole thing in China is to get that experience – it would be beside the point. It’s still pretty stressful. If you don’t perform, they’re going to send you home.

Tyron had to contend with the ever-present threat of being let go or not having his contract renewed. He felt that he is constantly having to perform in order to ensure that his contract will be renewed. This anxiety also led to a loss of self-efficacy. Tyron believed he was liked by the students and was working ‘pretty well’ but still qualified this belief with hedging (‘I think they like me’; ‘they kind of like me’).

At the same time, short-term contracts do not offer much job security. Here we see a complex picture of the short-term starting to emerge, which is illustrated by Tyron, who considered the flexible nature of short-term contracts to be a potential difficulty:

But I think if you stay at the school for only one or two years you can get experience, but the disadvantage is you can’t get into a routine. It’s good to be in a routine. I like to stay at school quite a bit because it helps me to keep focused on my work [...] A disadvantage is the homesickness [...] missing my family.

For teachers like Tyron, who are separated from friends and family, the familiarity of routine is a strategy for distracting them from feelings of homesickness. Therefore, the prospect of having to negotiate a transition to a new school effectively undermines the coping strategy that they had worked so hard to create.
Relationship Precarity

Tyron expressed a large degree of loneliness, separated from family and friends:

I would definitely say that emotional difficulties are the biggest difficulty you face when working in international schools overseas. I would say the emotional: missing friends, missing my family.

Sam also talked about the need to develop resilience because there was a lack of support. He presented a situation where ‘everyone is out for themselves – willing to just scramble on top of each other’ and where expatriate teachers are akin to servants:

I can say with certainty that you’re on your own, nobody cares about you if you get sick. We don't have the protections that we have in our home countries. I find it particularly interesting how colleague teachers are willing to just scramble on top of each other. As soon as there's an opportunity, you need to get out of the way. I find it interesting. The dynamic that we’re basically servants to the rich Chinese.

This seems to intersect with other comments on International School teachers as mobile ‘middling actors’ (e.g., Tarc & Mishra Tarc, 2015). The short-term contract for expatriates creates a situation where one group are constantly transient, whilst the other (host country national teachers) are frequently more permanent. In this situation, dissonance opens up between the two very different groupings. Norman neatly summarised the differences between expatriate and locally-hired teachers:

The national staff are all seconded. They are here for life. I think it amuses them when these foreign people come in and they just see the changes and whatever. I don't think they actually change. They do their own thing because there is different governance anyway. They still need to maintain their national training, all these other things. So, for them, it’s irrelevant. The ups and down don’t matter. They just do the same thing.

Further, it appears as though leadership in cis is even more transient than in ‘Traditional’ types of international schools. This is illustrated by Tyron who reflected that:
This is the fifth principle I’ve had in the past five years in this school. For some reason, the principals don’t last that long. There’s never really been consistency at our school. The management style is changing all the time.

The Accumulation of Resilience

Status Resilience

At the same time, the participants viewed the short-term nature of their work has having a number of benefits. For example, short-term contracts afforded the participants greater flexibility to be able to move on from a school if they did not like it. This was illustrated by Sam:

So, having two years is copacetic for the employer and the employee. From my perspective, it doesn't offer protection and job security but it does give you the flexibility to search around if you don't like the school.

Short-term contracts also offered teachers some choice, which could also be empowering. This was illustrated by Nora:

Part of it is, when you go into international teaching you know you have a bit of control over it. Like you can move somewhere new every two years. So some of it is in your control and part of the job. I mean, some international teachers fall in love with a country or a place and end up staying. But I think the majority of them might not be there for two years. They move on to greener pastures.

Nora was aware that the control teachers have is limited (‘a bit of’), yet at the same time they can still choose where they want to move on to next, thereby exercising some agency. According to Nora, many teachers are lured by the irresistible draw of something new (‘greener pastures’), which suggests the possibility for reinvention. Nora went on to say that: ‘As an international teacher, part of the appeal for me is to see more of the world and to move onto new challenges and new countries.’ This was echoed by Eva, who talked of the need to ‘squash this travel bug’:

So the goal at this point I guess would be experience a different culture, learn more, and then have a good savings. I usually feel it in my soul, my heart, when it's time to move on and I can see myself being here for at least another two years.
The short-term nature of teaching appears to be a way for (mostly younger) teachers (i.e., under 35) to hop from school-to-school in order to see the world and also to save money for the future, anticipating a time when they will settle down. Nora showed how her precarious status had forced her to ‘toughen up’, and accept the situation, perhaps a form of pragmatic compromise. Coming to terms with the situation appeared to be a coping strategy:

I’ve become a lot tougher. I saw that it was a pretty tough situation and just figure out what I can get out of it – you know, what training, different opportunities that I can do. And, just really thinking about going back to basics: what am I interested in? Things like that.

Tyron was also able to secure his status in the school by starting a kind of contractual ‘bidding war’:

I did go to some job fairs, got job offers and then showed it to the school’s Human Resources. Then they will make me a counter offer. That’s basically what I did. I am still the head of the department, after five years.

The short-term nature of contracts also provided the participants with a ‘safety valve’ of sorts, a way to escape from a school whenever things got too difficult. Norman, for example, noted that Non-Traditional schools seem to move in ‘cycles’, a bit like a business-cycle. If teachers are lucky, or strategic, they will be able to join a school ‘on the up’ or choose to leave a school when it is ‘on the down’. The notion of short-term contracts functioning as a kind of safety valve also echoes Sam’s view that short-term contracts are ‘copacetic’ for both teachers and schools.

The prospect of release (as suggested by the metaphor of short-term contracts as a safety valve) can also help teachers to build resilience, as noted by Nora:

It is easier to put up with difficult situations since they are temporary. I can work anywhere for two years. Personally though, I would prefer to stay at least four years at any school.

Sam also observed about his time in China:

You have to just be a survivor. In the case of nutrition, you have to find a way to feed yourself. For the case of medical care, you have to be willing to persevere and take the extra time to get the correct diagnosis or the
correct care. Being up in north-east China, you have to go to these incredibly brutal hospitals. You know, and deal with these incredibly brutal crowds.

The word ‘just’ gestures towards a kind of pragmatism where teachers need to accept and adapt to their situation if they are to survive. This sentiment was also echoed by Nora who talks about how she had developed tenacity as a result of working in several international schools in China:

I have enough international experience that I know to be tenacious. Teachers need to keep asking questions and looking for the right person to get some help or to clarify information. A good school will not see this as being ‘difficult’ but rather as being a good teacher and coworker. Some teachers will just walk with their feet though and not renew contracts. I think these situations always have made me stronger and better at navigating new schools.

New or inexperienced teachers may not possess the necessary resilience or tenacity to be assertive or to ask questions until a satisfactory answer is given. Ultimately, Nora had come to understand that the difficult situations she had encountered had made her stronger, that is, she had developed reserves of resilience capital, which had made her better at navigating new situations, such as transitioning to new schools.

Relationship Resilience
A final strategy that emerged from our interviews for dealing with precarity (specifically short-term contract precarity) was that of cultivating relationships or, as Rizvi (2010) calls it, ‘in-transit sociality.’

Nora talked about how she simply ‘goes along with it all’ and turns herself into a ‘team player’ in order to ensure that she can get a good reference when she leaves the school:

‘Yeah that’s kind of a tough – um because you don’t want to, if at some point if the school don’t want to invite you back you don’t want also want to be labelled as someone who is difficult and who wants things to change. Because these are the people who are going to be doing your reference. So, you want to be a team player.'
There was also evidence of teachers forming cliques, a tight-knit grouping of expatriate teachers who might share an office, or be part of similar cohort, such as the ‘newbies.’ These cliques appeared to function as a strategy for dealing with the short-term nature of the teachers’ contracts. Tarquin had observed this type of ‘friendship clique’ although preferred to not get involved:

‘Really the main cliques I’m thinking of are each cohort of teachers...And I really didn't want to socialise with anyone when I arrived because that was my thing, to save money, meditate, don't drink. So, I sort of sequestered myself from any group.

Norman, on the other hand, had made himself seemingly ‘indispensable,’ so even though he was hired on a short-term contract, he considered himself to be ‘safe’ as if the school were to let him go, the programmes he had created would fall apart. The transition of educators means that he quickly became the only one who understood how it all worked:

Schools want your experience. They want the white faces, which would be the other people in the department, but they needed someone to actually create the programme we were teaching. The department two years ago, it was a joke. But we now have processes in place. They can't get rid of me now.

Discussion and Conclusion

Our paper has focused on a new area of activity, the ‘Non-Traditional’ schooling experience in China. This setting, in 2022, is a growing one and hence worthy of research attention. Taking the usual short-term contract experience, lasting 2–3 years, we have begun to interrogate the complex reality of the condition. Our study found much evidence of pragmatic compromises occurring, in the knowledge that the contract involves a short-term situation. Our respondents had also each developed, though their experiences, a very ‘thick skin’ which helped them to negotiate the short-term nature of their work.

Our study contributes to the growing literature that examines the lived experiences of international school teachers (Brady, 2022; Bright, 2022; Budrow, 2021; Estaji & Tabrizi, 2022; Johnson, 2022l Poole, 2022; Tarc & Budrow, 2022) as well as literature on international schooling in China (Bunnell & Poole, 2022; Poole, 2021; Teng & An, 2021; Wright et al., 2022; Wright & Mulvey, 2022; Wu & Koh, 2022a, 2022b; Ying & Wright, 2021). Specifically, this paper has sought to
examine the seemingly precarious experiences of international school teachers in a more positive light. Whilst our participants’ narratives described the short-term nature of their work in terms of uncertainty and anxiety, the findings also suggest that something subtler and more nuanced is at work. Despite the short-term being portrayed as failure or a temporal state of risk, our participants repeatedly stressed the positive aspects of being employed on short-term contracts in a school in China (agency and flexibility). The findings from this study therefore gesture towards an emergent ‘precarious privilege’ (Rey et al., 2020).

By offering a more nuanced interpretation of ‘precarity’ we have begun to build upon, and advance, the concept of ‘positive sociology’ (Bunnell, 2019), a form of ‘humanistic sociology’, which seeks to inquire into how agents deal and cope (which is positive) with precarity and insecurity (which is clearly negative) and precarious privilege (Ret et al., 2020). We believe there is a need overall for a nuanced view of the social reality of working in the arena which reflects how teachers cope. Whereas ‘positive sociology’ explores the macro-social reality of International Schooling, the inspired approach presented here focuses on the micro-psycho-social reality of teachers, that is, their lived experiences. Rather than viewing teachers in deficit terms based on what they do not possess (e.g., security, stability, fixed-status), precarious privilege re-orientates our attention to what teachers do in fact possess (e.g., flexibility, opportunities, agency) and how they deploy these in order to negotiate precarity.

Of course, we must be aware of the limitations of a study involving only six people, across a field of at least 600 similar schools in China, and we are careful not to over-exaggerate the findings. Further, our study involves two schools in one major city, and we cannot be certain that the reality of being an expatriate teacher in another setting in China might be the same, or different. Future studies might want to consider teachers’ perceptions of their short-term work in other contexts (i.e., countries, types of international schools). It is also important that more research is under-taken on host country national teachers in international/internationalised schools (i.e., teachers who are Chinese citizens), who remain under-researched and under-theorised. For example, it would be necessary to understand how they perceive their contracts and if they are indeed as place-bound as the participants in this study perceived them to be.

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