Precarious privilege in the time of pandemic: A hybrid (auto)ethnographic perspective on COVID-19 and international schooling in China

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Abstract

Although the impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic in terms of school closure and the sudden shift to online learning has started to be explored, little has so far been written about the impact on teachers. This paper addresses this gap by drawing on the first author’s autoethnographic experiences of working in the growing body of ‘non-traditional’ international schooling in Shanghai, China, during the first wave of the pandemic in early 2020. These experiences are complemented by insights from other teachers from the author’s school site, leading to a hybrid (auto) ethnographic perspective. By utilising and developing the emergent concept of ‘precarious privilege’, we can see that whilst the pandemic has restricted teachers’ movements and agency in a physical sense through lockdowns and travel restrictions, this immobility also fosters new symbolic and physical spaces, which in turn give rise to new forms of privilege. The privilege in this context is not financial, as is often the case, but rather existential (reclaiming a more authentic self) and spatial (the school offers teachers security) in nature. This fresh, nuanced approach to discussing precarity is timely and necessary. Given the novelty of the situation we now find ourselves in, new positionings are required to orient the individual
and the researcher to a post-pandemic world. This paper offers one such positioning in the form of autoethnography for (re)imagining precarity and privilege in international schooling within the context of an emerging new world.

**KEYWORDS**
autoethnography, COVID-19, international schooling, precarious privilege

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**Key insights**

**What is the main issue that the paper addresses?**
The paper explores the impact of COVID-19 on international school teachers' lived experiences.

**What are the main insights that the paper provides?**
Whilst the pandemic has restricted teachers' movements and agency in a physical sense through lockdowns and travel restrictions, this immobility has created new symbolic and physical spaces, which in turn give rise to new forms of privilege.

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**INTRODUCTION**

**The context of ‘precarious privilege’**

A growing arena of globalised private education is that of ‘English-speaking international schooling’, with schools delivering a curriculum in English largely outside an English-speaking nation. By 2019, mainland China had emerged as having the biggest bloc of ‘international schools’, almost 1000 out of the 12000 worldwide (Stacey, 2020). The arena globally was educating some 5 million children being taught by 560 000 teachers (Stacey, 2020), most of whom are still largely British and North American expatriates (Bunnell & Poole, 2021). Recent comment (Bailey, 2021, p. 31) describes them more closely as a self-initiated ‘middling expatriate’; that is, international school teachers share features of self-organisation-assigned expatriates (individuals assigned to work abroad by their company) and self-initiated expatriates (individuals who chose to work abroad of their own volition).

The arena involved just 90 000 teachers in the year 2000 (Stacey, 2020), and globally the arena attracts about 35 000 extra teachers each year, of whom about half still emanate from Britain (Robertson, 2018). Working in the arena offers numerous benefits, including a relatively light teaching load, a competitive salary, free housing, medical and tuition waivers for children’s education. One commentator (Weale, 2019) remarked about the arena that: ‘The benefits include small classes, capacity to save, private healthcare, free flights home and no Ofsted.’ As the last point implies, private international schools also offer teachers a way to escape from working conditions (in Britain especially) that they have experienced in their home countries, including ongoing standards-based reforms, intensified accountability, performance pressure, de-professionalisation and a lack of opportunities (Bailey, 2015). A
recent study (Rey et al., 2020, p. 361) had identified international schooling as offering a ‘carefree, privileged environment’. Amidst the continuous growth, the once-neglected expatriate ‘international school teacher’ (IST), as a ‘middling’ actor, has become an object of much more concern and interest. The flipside of the carefree, low-performativity lifestyle is that ISTs often find themselves in precarious workplace situations due to employment instability (e.g. short-term contracts, often 2–3 years), workplace politics, micro-management and high levels of school leadership turnover (Kostogriz & Bonar, 2019). Within this complex framework of vulnerability and insecurity, and personal and professional freedom, researchers are identifying a high and increasing degree of precarity and insecurity (Bunnell, 2016) amidst a more positive notion that they enjoy privileges (Rey et al., 2020). Consequently, the concept of ‘precarious privilege’ has recently emerged as a new, fresh lens of inquiry. Here, precarity needs to be understood as a condition, or situation, a lived reality, which can be coped with rather than being seen as a static classification or typology of a person; we see that the ‘privileged precariat’ is not so much a ‘class’ or ‘type’ of teacher but rather a lived condition, and one that can change and be adapted to. This gives the notion of precarity a new, positive twist. Our paper uses an autoethnographic approach to develop this increasingly significant concept, in particular by adding more nuance to the rather negative-sounding notion of ‘precarity’.

‘Precarious privilege’ (Rey et al., 2020, p. 10) describes a situation wherein teachers are able to ‘combine the privileges of emancipated globetrotters and the precarity of contractual employment in the neoliberal age’. The advent of the global pandemic caused by COVID-19 has added to a sense of ‘precarity’, and partly undermined the notion of ‘privilege’. In a recent paper, Bailey (2021) analysed social media posts by ISTs made during May 2020 in order to ascertain the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on their sense of precarity and their initial ability to cope with the changes necessitated by the pandemic (e.g. travel restrictions and moving from face-to-face to online learning). The findings showed that the pandemic had eroded the teachers’ sense of agency that they had over their precarity, but certain privileges, such as a tax-free salary, remained intact.

One emergent perspective identifies ISTs as being very resilient in the face of critical incidents (Savva, 2015) and personal struggle (Savva, 2017), which helps to make sense of the continuous growth of the international school arena. Inspired by studies that explore the development of resilience during the pandemic in the Chinese context (e.g. Gong et al., 2020; Yang, 2020), this paper re-imagines the notion of precarious privilege in the time of pandemic from an original angle, via an (auto)ethnographic perspective. It will show, via an (auto)ethnographic account, which is complemented by ethnographic interviews with ISTs from the same school site as the first author, that whilst the pandemic has undoubtedly exacerbated the precarious nature of the arena as discovered by Bailey (2021), the reactions by international schools to the pandemic, such as the moving from face-to-face teaching to online learning (Li & Lalani, 2020), has also potentially created new opportunities for teachers to exercise, and regain, agency and develop new identities. The movement from face-to-face to online learning is significant, as it represents a paradigm shift for teachers, which has also yet to be addressed in the international school literature.

Precarity and the COVID-19 pandemic

As Bailey (2021) shows, COVID-19 has exacerbated the existing precarity, whilst also creating new forms of precarity. A recent study (Kelly, 2021) of 700 senior leaders of international schools found that COVID-19 was having a major impact on stress levels and burnout. The
majority of senior leaders reported that their stress levels had increased, whilst just over half admitted that they were ‘close to breaking point’. At the same time, the international school arena, as part of the wider ‘global education industry’, has appeared to have weathered the storm of the pandemic fairly well (as it has with other major shocks, such as the 2008 global economic crisis). Despite the pandemic, pupil numbers at international schools globally continued to climb in 2020 (Stacey, 2020), showing that international schools are not just ‘recession-proof’ (Waterson, 2015) but perhaps even ‘COVID-proof’. Recent waves of regulation in China, however, have seen private international schools (the most numerous type in China) restricted in terms of operations, curriculum and financial management (Koty, 2021). Therefore, international schools in China may be ‘recession-proof’ but they are by no means ‘policy-proof’.

Whilst international schools have managed to weather the COVID-19 storm relatively well, the pandemic has had a bigger impact on teacher applications, which fell in 2020 due to teachers responding to the virus and becoming more risk-averse (Jacoutot, 2021). For teachers in what are perceived to be low-risk COVID-19 countries, such as China, the biggest impact of the virus appears to have been on wellbeing, fear of racism and restrictions placed on their mobility (Edvectus, 2020).

In order to understand the relationship between precarity, privilege and the pandemic, it is necessary to offer an alternative articulation of the IST and precarity. Whilst previous studies have theorised the IST as part of a white-collar ‘global educational precariat’ (Bailey, 2021; Bunnell, 2016; Poole, 2021), our paper focuses on the situational characteristics of precarity and how teachers make sense of their experiences (i.e. lived experiences) within their own context. As argued above, international schools have always been described as inherently precarious in nature, partly due to the commonalities of insecurity caused by short-term contracts and a lack of strong, global governance (Bunnell, 2016). However, sociocultural approaches to experience (Vygotsky, 1994) are a reminder that experience is mediated by contextual factors that are personal, cultural and psychological in nature. In relation to ISTs, contextual factors include the type and location of the school; personal factors include an individual’s experiences; cultural factors include teaching and learning traditions and notions of epistemology; psychological factors include the development of resilience (an individual’s ability to bounce back from adversity).

Therefore, it is necessary to reorient analysis of precarity from narratives that reify teachers (e.g. teachers as types or a ‘precariat’, a ‘class’) to teachers’ lived experiences of precarity. Accordingly, ISTs do not necessarily represent a unified educational precariat, but rather can be said to be in a situation or condition of precarity (Frase, 2013). This shift in focus suggests the notion of ‘differential precarity’ (Phillips & Petrova, 2021); that is, teachers’ differential experiences of being in the same situation of precarity. Rather than being unified or singular, precarity is both spatial and temporal in nature (Phillips & Petrova, 2021). Precarity is also ontologically complex—it is both structural and phenomenological in nature. Structural precarity refers to types of precarity that one might expect to find in the international school arena, where there is a lack of regulation and inspection coupled with problematic contractual conditions (Bunnell & Poole, 2021). These forms of precarity include short-term contracts, a lack of labour protection and micropolitics, all of which can negatively impact teachers’ wellbeing. Phenomenological precarity, in contrast, refers to how teachers experience, make sense of and deal with their experiences of precarity. For example, short-term contracts might appear to be inherently negative, as they lead to instability and uncertainty, but it has been found that some teachers perceive short-term contracts positively, utilising them as a strategy to transition to a new school and escape from difficult or traumatic experiences (Poole & Bunnell, 2021). It would appear that teachers thrive not just despite the precarity but paradoxically, because of it.
METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

In order to illustrate how the pandemic has transformed precarious privilege in the context of the IST, the first author draws upon his experiences of living and teaching in a growing yet still largely unreported sub-arena of international schools that are termed ‘non-traditional’ (Hayden & Thompson, 2013). Unlike the ‘traditional’ model that caters almost exclusively for the elite, globally mobile expatriate community, the ‘non-traditional’ types of school offer some form of international curricula to middle-class host-country nationals who are unable to attend a ‘traditional’ school due to legal requirements (Wright et al., 2021). Also, unlike the ‘traditional’ type, the majority of teachers are often not (Anglo-Saxon) expatriates, but are trained and recruited in the local area.

Numbering at least 700 and catering for almost 250,000 children (Keeling, 2019), these ‘international Chinese-owned private schools’ now form the majority in China (Gaskell, 2019). Subsequently, they have begun to attract research attention, emerging as a seemingly remedial setting for some local children (Young, 2018), largely segregated from the local (national and private) schooling context (Kong et al., 2020).

Forming an increasingly strong unit of research inquiry, the ‘non-traditional’ type in China arguably ought not to be seen as inferior but assessed on its own merits as newer, more regionalised variants (Poole, 2020). Whilst many of these schools are profit-driven and operated as networks, the school in question (henceforth referred to by the pseudonym SOUTH) was a non-profit K-12 bilingual school in Shanghai that offered an international curriculum, which was integrated with the Chinese national curriculum. This fusion of international and national curricula seems common in many of the ‘non-traditional’ types in China, where a form of ‘cosmopolitan nationalism’ (Wright et al., 2021) is on display, and manifests in daily norms and rituals such as the raising of the Chinese flag and the singing of the Chinese anthem. Although many are fast appearing amidst the growing cities of the Pearl River Delta (Quinn, 2021), the majority of ‘non-traditional’ schools still reside in major cities, such as Shanghai and Beijing. Like many of the emerging ‘non-traditional’ types in places such as Shanghai, SOUTH is increasingly catering for Chinese parents deliberately seeking out, as a form of middle-class educational strategy, a distinct and potentially advantageous pathway for their ‘cosmopolitan children’ (Soong, 2021). Evidence is also emerging in other contexts in Asia, such as Malaysia (Bailey, 2015), which suggest that many of the features of the ‘non-traditional’ types in China are becoming more common across the wider region.

SOUTH, along with other international Chinese-owned private schools in China, was forced to close in early 2020 due to the pandemic, only opening again in June later in that year. During the school closure, learning moved online, with teachers pre-recording lessons or delivering regular classes via Zoom. The majority of expatriate teachers (approximately 70%) lived on the campus, and most remained in China during the pandemic or were able to get back into China before the school reopened.

This study adopts an autoethnographic lens, drawing on the first author’s experiences during the outbreak of the pandemic in January 2020. Autoethnography as a method uses a researcher’s personal experience to describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices and experiences; balances intellectual and methodological rigour, emotion and creativity; and acknowledges and values a researcher’s relationships with others (Adams et al., 2015). According to Crawley (2012, p. 146), autoethnography also works ‘to breach the positivist edict of objective distance from the data’ and involves ‘using the researcher’s own life experiences as data for theoretical analysis’.

Although autoethnography has been critiqued for being self-indulgent (Anderson, 2006), it is appropriate for this study for a number of reasons. The effects of the pandemic on teachers are so new, unpredictable and unprecedented that their investigation requires a range of approaches to render the complexity meaningful. (Auto)ethnography has thus
become an ‘alternative’ method for researching the pandemic (Markham & Harris, 2020; Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, 2020; Yang, 2020; Zheng, 2020). Whilst there has yet to be an (auto)ethnographic study on the pandemic in relation to international schooling, a number of (auto)ethnographic studies exploring the lived experiences of ISTs have been undertaken, which serve as inspiration for our paper (e.g. Blyth, 2017; Burke, 2017). Blyth’s frank (auto) ethnography explored ‘the teacher’s position in an international school as subordinate and how [the teacher] is wronged on three counts; epistemically for being wrongfully mistrusted, ethically for being wrongfully excluded and ontologically for being wrongfully positioned as a lesser human being’ (p. xv). Burke’s study, meanwhile, focused on her experiences of being an expatriate teacher by utilising a postcolonial lens in order to probe the power imbalances of intercultural teaching and learning contexts. (Auto)ethnography enabled Burke to deconstruct her western-centric assumptions about learning and her students in order to expose hidden power relations.

These two studies formed a blueprint for this paper, persuading the authors that (auto)ethnography could capture the nuance and ambivalence of precarious privilege within the context of the pandemic. However, whilst the aforementioned studies both cast a ‘critical eye’ (Burke, 2017) on the teacher and the school, that criticality did not extend to interrogating the nature of the knowledge created by international schooling scholars. Researching lived experience requires new conceptions of what counts as knowledge, to embrace and nurture the teacher as both expert and interpreter of his or her experiences. Insisting that the researcher is the one to interpret a teacher’s experiences implies that the meanings ascribed to a teacher’s experiences are unknowable to the teacher. Moreover, assuming that researcher knowledge is more valid than teacher knowledge reproduces an ‘asymmetry of power’ that positions the researcher as the (active) knower and the teacher as the (passive) known (Poole, 2021).

Rather, what is required is a re-imagining of what counts as knowledge within the paradigm of qualitative research, particularly when lived experience is the unit of analysis. In order to do this, it is necessary for researchers to adopt a reflexive position in relation to positionality. Rather than something to be negated, the teacher side of my (henceforth, ‘I’, ‘me’ and ‘my’ refer to the first author) identity was an untapped source of knowledge, one that I had neglected as I did not consider it to have any value. On reflection, I have come to view the teacher and researcher sides of my identity as inherently hybridised in nature. Rather than being a teacher and a researcher, I am a teacher-researcher. This hybrid identity gestures towards a new ontology, one where lived experience is an indissoluble unity of multiple identities jostling for dominance. This hybrid ontology informed my analysis of international school precarity during the outbreak of COVID-19 in China and helped to offer a more nuanced perspective on what it was like to be a teacher during this time.

This study utilised the self-interview (Keightley et al., 2012) as the main method for eliciting my experiences as an IST in China during the early stages of the pandemic. The self-interview involves the participant responding to research questions on their own and in their own time, without the researcher being present. Self-interviewing overcomes some of the limitations of in-depth interviewing. For example, the absence of a structured interactional response format allows the respondent a greater degree of discursive freedom than is found in conventional face-to-face or researcher-led interviews (Keightley et al., 2012). This was important as we were aiming to capture the nuance of lived experience, which by its nature is messy and complex. Whereas the self-interview typically involves both researcher (albeit at a distance) and participant, this paper necessitated a different approach. The first author was both participant and researcher. The teacher may have been the one speaking, but the researcher remained an ‘imagined presence’ (Keightley et al., 2012). Crawley (2012) situates autoethnography as a self-interview, which is seen as the pursuit of recording marginalised ideas and voices. The self-interview thus became a space in which I could give voice to the
marginalised teacher side of my identity and also claim my teaching experience as a valid form of empirical evidence, leading to the construction of a teacher-researcher identity.

In focusing on one individual and his or her subjective experiences, generalisation and applicability beyond the local context would be impossible. In order to address this limitation (and to assuage the doubting researcher in me and the anticipated response of other researchers), I drew upon interview data with other ISTs in SOUTH, collected since 2019. These data were drawn from an ongoing research project examining teachers’ lived experiences in international schools in China. Specifically, this paper makes use of additional data from three expatriate teachers (Tarquin, Jack and Eva) and one Chinese teacher (Sandy) who also worked at SOUTH. The teachers were asked to talk about why they decided to become ISTs, their prior teaching experiences, their reasons for moving to China and their experiences of living, working and teaching in SOUTH. Although the interviews were conducted before the pandemic and used different interview questions than the self-interview, they were drawn on as they helped to illustrate and illuminate my (auto)ethnographic account. What emerges is a hybrid form of (auto)ethnography. The foundation is still very much (auto)ethnographic in nature, but the (auto)ethnographic is complemented by ethnographic interviewing.

The (auto)ethnographic data were analysed both inductively and deductively. The recorded interview data were transcribed and coded using thematic analysis, defined as a method for identifying, analysing, organising, describing and reporting themes found within a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The codes were initially derived from my engagement with Bailey (2021) and Rey et al. (2020). Bailey’s paper suggested two initial codes: existing forms of precarity and the pandemic’s impact. Rey et al.’s (2020) notion of precarious privilege was also used as another code. Eventually, three main themes were established: precarious privilege before the pandemic; precarity during the pandemic; and precarious privilege during the pandemic.

However, in practice, the codes and emergent themes served to structure the data, rather than to give it meaning. To a large extent, interpretation had already happened, as I had lived through the experiences I was recounting in the interview. I had also started to interpret the data before the self-interview, in the formation of the interview questions, as well as during and after the interview, with the researcher side of my identity listening in curiously and already starting to analyse the data. The interview, and data analysis, became a strategy for translating my lived experiences into something concrete and tangible. Seeing my experiences on the page in transcribed form also helped me to gain some distance from them.

Precarious privilege in the time before the pandemic

Previous research has highlighted how micropolitics, cronyism and clique formation are endemic to the international school (Caffyn, 2018). This was certainly true of my experiences in a ‘non-traditional’ setting at SOUTH:

> When I first joined the school, the teachers were not welcoming at all. I do not mean the Chinese teachers, I mean the expatriate teachers. So in the English department, I remember a few occasions when I walked by some teachers and said ‘hello’, and they just did not say anything back, which I found very peculiar. On other occasions, other teachers would just blank me when I passed them and said ‘hi’. There was this one time after I had just started, when I was in the canteen at the dinner table, some of the teachers were talking about where they did their PGCE [Post Graduate Certificate of Education] training and all of that. I actually told them I did mine through the University of Nottingham, the PGCEi.
And they were kind of like, ‘Oh, you don’t have QTS (Qualified Teacher Status). I thought that was very interesting because I had a doctorate. You know, we’re in the context of an international school, but the doctorate didn’t seem to carry as much weight as, say, the PGCE. That was a real eye-opener for me, because I thought, ‘all right, this is how it is’. So there’s a sense perhaps that I was inferior. I kind of internalised that a bit. I always tried to avoid talking about my PGCE after that.

The PGCEi is designed for experienced teachers who do not possess a teaching qualification. The PGCEi is an academic qualification, not a teaching qualification, and does not offer QTS or a licence to teach in the UK or elsewhere. This excerpt reveals a number of forms of precarity. The first relates to being excluded from the department clique, which can be understood as a form of status precarity. Significantly, within the context of international schooling, QTS as a form of cultural capital is imbued with more value than a doctorate. Lacking QTS is not just an issue of status, but also mobility. Whilst I could find employment in some international schools, the PGCEi would not allow me to work in so-called ‘premium’ schools or most state schools in the UK, where holding QTS is a prerequisite for employment. Therefore, my options for finding employment in the future were restricted, something exacerbated by the pandemic, which made global mobility more risky and problematic (Bailey, 2021).

In order to deal with the micropolitics and cliques, I positioned myself on the periphery, adopting the guise of the ‘lone wolf’. This was also a strategy employed by other teachers I worked with, such as Tarquin:

I do identify different cliques in the school. But that doesn’t bother me. I’m not worried about that because I don’t want to be a member of any clan or clique. I’m not offended when I’m not invited to certain social events or certain this or that. I am genuinely not offended because I’d refuse the invitation anyway.

Another teacher, Jack, also identified self-destructive behaviour as another form of precarity in the school:

How many alcoholics are there on average on international school campuses in China? I would say probably it’s pretty significant. And what happens to them when they are actively drinking or actively using or both and yet still holding down their job? I also find it interesting how the leadership team are the top Kowtowers. They’re the first ones that are willing to open their butt cheeks. And they’ll turn right around to us underlings and they’ll just put you up on a platter, serve you, your head on a platter if necessary. That’s because of the money they are getting paid, but it’s also because of the responsibility that they have. Having said that, nobody here cuts your head off. Nobody here throws you under a bus willingly. I don’t know what they do behind closed doors. I suspect they’re a little bit disingenuous. But it’s not brutal. There’s worse. I know that there’s worse out there. So I find that interesting that we’re all kind of on a knife’s edge here because the money’s good and the amount of work that we do is very small compared to the amount of money that we get paid. We all know that. Nobody wants to admit that but we all know that that’s true. So that’s why it’s such a good gig.

Jack’s excerpt suggests that alcoholism is endemic to the international school context. The precarity exacerbates teachers’ alcoholism, yet alcoholism perhaps becomes a coping strategy for dealing with insecurity and precarity. The notion of ‘site ontology’ (Schatzki, 2012) can help
to clarify this paradoxical situation of coping with precarity by a precarious means. Site ontology is understood as the relationship between material entities and social practices (Kostogriz & Bonar, 2019). The material and cultural space of the school can be described in terms of an enclave (Rey et al., 2021) or an atoll (Allen, 2002), which is separated from the local community. Jack’s excerpt also highlights destructive leadership as a feature of precarious privilege (Rey et al., 2020). The leadership, who should be the backbone of the school, are portrayed as disingenuous, untrustworthy and fickle, prepared to sacrifice their staff in order to ensure their own survival. This is in line with much of the literature on school leadership (Caffyn, 2018; Lee & Walker, 2018), which paints international schools as ‘messy’ and ‘tense’ places (Bunnell, 2021). Jack’s metaphors—’open their butt cheeks’, ‘head on a platter’, ‘on a knife’s edge’—also convey a sense of violence and unease.

From my perspective, living in the ‘expat bubble’ normalised and perhaps even enabled certain problematic practices (such as drinking) that otherwise would be considered taboo. Whilst teachers drinking excessively on a Friday night might not be that different from any UK or US city, teaching in China is still underpinned by Confucian values that emphasise moral excellence.

There were certainly a number of teachers who struggled with alcoholism. Jack, for example, observed that

We had other practicing alcoholics who left last year and they were sick [i.e. ill] people. And everyone knew it. I mean, how horrible that is. And it’s kind of horrible for us too that we have to be in denial of that. It wouldn’t be that way in England.

Tarquin was open about his struggles with alcohol. He would periodically abstain from drinking only to, as he would say, ‘fall off the wagon’ again. As a result, Tarquin chose to avoid social gatherings, where drinking to excess was par for the course. Such a survival tactic may have helped him to keep his drinking in check, but he had to endure a kind of self-imposed exile in order to maintain stability.

Teachers may be in a precarious situation, but the very nature of that situation (being expatriate teachers in the self-contained enclave of the international school) gives rise to certain problematic privileges. Privilege also has its dark side, and has consequences on multiple fronts. Although it is not stated explicitly, excessive drinking would impact negatively on teachers’ health as well as their overall wellbeing. This in turn might feed into the quality of the students’ learning. If the teachers are struggling with alcohol-related issues, it has to be asked to what extent they are able to deliver quality learning to the students. Moreover, if teachers do not feel that the leadership has ‘got their back’, as Jack suggests, they are less likely to approach their teaching innovatively, perhaps choosing to ‘play it safe’.

At the same time, working in international schools in general provides teachers with more acceptable privileges that would normally be unavailable to them in their home countries. These privileges, which include increased mobility, higher salaries and relatively light teaching schedules, are evident in SOUTH. For Jack, these benefits compensate for the precarity, or at least make the precarity bearable. Whilst Jack suggests that teachers are primarily motivated by money, other teachers I have interviewed and worked with were motivated by the desire to change the lives of their students, as illustrated by Eva:

I think it’s just part of my personality to want to latch on and want to help people to become their best selves. I think that’s always been a part of me. And then I think once I became a teacher, I was like, ‘Okay, well the next group of people I can help are these little people in my classroom’ … I would say that I’ve been so
lucky. The majority of the teachers I’ve worked with are really passionate about teaching. They’re not in it for the money. They’re there because they do want to impact the kids and make a change. A good majority, are professionals, you know. They want to do a good job. They want to help the kids. They are there from passion and from love.

Interestingly, Eva did not talk about cliques, cronyism or alcoholism in her interview or during our day-to-day conversations. Her depiction of the school and being an IST in general is completely at odds with the reality of the school as depicted by Jack and Tarquin. This may be because she was relatively new to the school, or because she did not want to associate with teachers whose cynical attitude towards teaching clashed with her own more altruistic and positive view of teaching.

My experience of the school fell somewhere between Eva’s and Jack’s perspectives. I was aware of the precarity but was also able to gain some satisfaction from teaching, although that satisfaction would diminish in my third year of teaching in the school as I struggled to balance my identities as a teacher and a researcher. Eva is a reminder that despite the precarity, some teachers are ‘in it’ for more than financial gain. They gain satisfaction from helping students and viewing their role as a calling or a vocation.

Precarity in the time of pandemic

My family (my wife, her two parents and my young son) and I were aware that something was happening in Wuhan in late December. At that time, the term COVID-19 had yet to be coined. Instead, the word ‘pneumonia’ was being bandied about. Although slightly concerned, I and the other teachers were not overly troubled. The upcoming Chinese New Year holiday was still scheduled to go ahead, so the situation was clearly under control. Come mid- to late January 2020, well into the holiday, when many of the expatriate teachers were outside of China, Shanghai and the rest of the country was swiftly put under lockdown. It was not until the school sent out an email clarifying the situation that the full nature of the outbreak hit us.

In the wake of the pandemic, many ISTs were reluctant to change jobs due to uncertainty concerning restrictions on mobility, creating a situation that Bailey (2021, p. 31) terms ‘elective precarity’. The swiftness of the lockdown meant that many ISTs across China who had returned to their home countries during the long Lunar New Year holiday (often 2–4 weeks) were caught off guard and unable to return to China (South China Morning Post, 2020). Some lost their jobs, whilst others had to work remotely (Stacey, 2020). It was reported by the South China Morning Post that four teachers working for one large school network had their contracts terminated, as they travelled overseas without telling management and conducted their classes from abroad (Ho-him, 2021).

Whilst lockdown measures in other parts of China appeared to be overly draconian (there were reports of apartment doors being welded shut), the situation in Shanghai (or at least SOUTH) was less extreme. Whilst we were told to stay inside as much as possible, we were able to leave the campus, but had to inform the school guard where we were going and also to report to them when we returned.

Despite this communication and the relative safety afforded by the school, it was a tense and uncertain time. Should I leave China or stay? On the one hand, staying would increase the precarity by potentially exposing me and my family to the virus, but it would mean the continuation of privileges such as salary, benefits and protection (to be discussed below). On the other hand, leaving might decrease the chances of exposure (albeit, with hindsight, only temporarily) but would mean the loss of privileges. This was something that I had to wrestle with:
I have to say we even made plans to leave China. I rang up the British Embassy and registered our details, just in case things got really bad. We didn't leave in the end, and I'm glad we didn't, as history will prove that China actually had a pretty effective response to the virus compared to other countries, such as the UK, and we were going to go back to the UK. And I do recall on the news seeing things about foreigners leaving Wuhan and going back to the UK, but they couldn't get back to China. So we stayed put, and I'm glad we did. We just waited and assessed the situation, and then decided it was best to stay where we were. My brother and his family [wife and two children] went back to the UK. He just left. He didn't even tell me he was leaving. He just went back to the UK, and that was pretty sad. So that was quite hard. I got over it, of course, because I was with my family, but that was quite difficult. He had a really terrible time. He didn't have a regular income because his employer in China wouldn't pay him, so he had to live with our mum.

My brother's experiences persuaded me that staying in China was the best option for me and my family. Even though being an IST is regarded as insecure, the pandemic forced me to re-evaluate the meaning of the short term. Compared to other forms of precarious employment, such as zero-hour contracts or working in language schools, the short-term, 2-year contract provided a great deal of security, at least during the pandemic. Whilst the pandemic has created new forms of precarity, as well as exacerbating existing forms of precarity (Bailey, 2021), it has also created new modalities of privilege. Within the context of the pandemic, the notion of 'precarious privilege' (Rey et al., 2020) takes on new meanings and configurations. If teachers are willing to stay where they are and take a calculated risk, they may also be able to enjoy benefits that are harder to obtain under normal circumstances. The next section explores these privileges.

Precarious privilege in the time of pandemic

The lockdown created a number of new forms of temporary privilege that only existed during the duration that the school was closed and teaching was conducted remotely. Firstly, the lockdown enabled me to escape from the existing precarity discussed in the earlier section:

In terms of how it affected my wellbeing, strangely enough, it enhanced my wellbeing. I didn't feel depressed, I didn't feel sad that I wasn't around other teachers. In fact, I found being around some of the teachers really stressful, because I found them to be disingenuous. I found them draining to be honest, so it was actually nice not to have anything to do with other people, just to be on my own.

Being in lockdown in the school also offered comfort and protection. Whilst lockdown has been compared with a jailhouse experience or being under house arrest (Yang, 2020), for me, it was more akin to being in a protective bunker:

We were in this compound, very self-sufficient. The school provided accommodation and had everything we needed. It had a playground, a sports track, a canteen, so obviously we could take our son out and he could run around. Even before the lockdown, I would go from maybe Monday to Friday without leaving the campus, because you do your normal teaching and you come back in the evening. In a sense, we were living in semi-lockdown anyway because we lived
in the school. It wasn’t that bad, and we felt quite secure because we were in this gated compound.

Whilst everyone in China during the first wave of the pandemic was at risk, and therefore in a situation of precarity, spatial separation played a significant role in decreasing the threat of the virus for ISTs in China. For example, Shanghai was relatively unaffected compared to other cities, such as the epicentre, Wuhan. Moreover, ISTs were more sheltered than other (business) expatriates, as many lived on campus.

The physical separation of the growing body of international schools from the local community in China is largely seen as problematic. Wood and Kong (2020), for example, show how the spatial separation from their local communities effectively subverts attempts to develop global citizenship and can enforce exclusionary attitudes and behaviours, which in turn can undermine the imagined inclusions of global citizenship. However, from the perspective of precarity and the pandemic, the physical separation of the school from the local community offers teachers a certain level of protection and security. Under ‘normal’ circumstances, the isolated nature of the school would be highly problematic, exacerbating and/or creating precarity. Jack referred to living in the school as akin to ‘living in a space station’, which resonates with my experiences of working in international schools in China. This metaphor connotes a sense of extreme isolation in a restrictive environment from which you cannot escape. However, the emergence of a new, and potentially more destructive, form of precarity—the pandemic—had the effect of diluting the existing precarity in the school. One teacher, Sandy, even described the protection the school provided as ‘a shelter, a box, food, housing for my five cats. And it’s safe in this box’.

Freed from face-to-face teaching and other duties, I was able to forge new routines and ways of being that were difficult to realise under ‘normal’ circumstances:

I’d wake up at 8 o’clock every day, have a cup of tea, take my time, play with my son and then—because we were living in the dorm with the students, and obviously the dorm had no students at that time, there was this little communal room on my floor at the end of the corridor. So I would just go down to the communal room at about 8:30, with my laptop and my earphones, my tea and milk, make myself a nice cup of tea, sit down, check my emails, and then take my time. It was really nice. Because when you’re teaching to the timetable, it’s like being Prometheus chained to a rock or Sisyphus rolling that rock. You have to be at the class at a certain time, and you have to be able to perform, day in, day out, wearing a mask. So being able to go into this room on my own with my music was fantastic, and I am by nature an introvert, so I really prefer being on my own.

The classroom is the panoptic public space of rules, regulations and restrictions, and is associated with inauthenticity and performance. ‘Performing’ takes on multiple meanings. In one sense, it is a form of performativity (Ball, 2016)—that is, in an age of neoliberalism, teachers struggle to deliver the right performance, which can create feelings of anxiety and permanent agonism (Ball & Olmedo, 2013). In another sense, teaching is a form of dramaturgy (Goffman, 1959), an ongoing performance. The image of the mask suggests that the performance is inauthentic. In order to convey the emotional labour (Day, 2018) of teaching inauthentically, I draw upon the myths of Prometheus and Sisyphus. Prometheus was condemned by the Gods to be chained to a rock where he would have his liver eaten out by an eagle, only for the same fate to befall him over and over again. Eventually, Prometheus was freed by Hercules. Meanwhile, Sisyphus, due to his trickery, was condemned to forever roll a boulder up a hill in the
depths of Hades. These myths symbolise the kind of ‘existential vacuum’ (Yang, 2020) I found myself in before the start of the pandemic.

In previous years, I had found teaching rewarding and pleasurable. What had changed? Teaching in the school had become a struggle due to the precarity. There was the precarity created by the micropolitics of clique formation that made socialising difficult. There was also the precarity associated with being an IST without QTS. Mai (2017, p. 102) describes this situation as ‘living in limbo’. Limbo, or an ‘existential vacuum’, nicely describes the liminal space between precarity and privilege. Perhaps precarious privilege (Rey et al., 2020) is a form of limbo? The privilege sustained me, but also effectively imprisoned me. As the only breadwinner in the family at that time, I could not afford to give up the benefits that being an IST offered. Whilst my professional and cultural capital made transitioning from international school to international school relatively easy, I lacked the necessary ‘transition capital’ (Poole & Bunnell, 2021) to break out of the closed loop of the international school circuit.

Freed from the inauthenticity of teaching, the communal office became a private space where a more authentic self could be (re)claimed. Not being chained to the rock of routine also created new spaces where I could reflect on my role as a teacher and what I really wanted from my career. Previously, I had mainly engaged in ‘reflection-in-action’ (Schön, 1984), that is I reflected on my actions while in the classroom, but due to the frenetic nature of my schedule I had few opportunities to reflect on my actions otherwise. However, with more time to think, I was able to engage in ‘reflection-on-action’ (Schön, 1984). I realised that teaching for me had become inauthentic (Ball, 2016); one long performance. When teaching is authentic, it allows for the development of ‘emotional work’—investment in authentic selves and the capacity for professional empathy (Day, 2018). When it is inauthentic, it becomes ‘emotional labour’—the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display (Day, 2018). However, the lockdown enabled me to forge a new space in the communal office and engage in ‘care of the self’ (Ball & Olmedo, 2013).

I would go on to leave international school teaching at the end of the 2020 school year and forge a new career in academia. Whilst I had always planned to make the leap from teaching to research, the pandemic helped to clarify and justify why I was taking that leap.

CONCLUSIONS

Our paper has explored the lived reality of working in the growing ‘non-traditional’ international school setting. It adds to a burgeoning body of literature that has appeared regarding the experience of being an expatriate teacher in international schooling, and in mainland China, helping to shift the discussion about ‘precarity’ from involving a type of person or ‘class’ (the white-collar ‘precariat’) and viewing it as more a condition that can be dealt with.

Here in China, the expatriate teacher from North America or Britain finds themselves as a minority among Chinese nationals teaching mainly ‘local’ children. It presents, within the increasingly important research context of mainland China, a new and surprising phenomenon. It suggests that the global pandemic beginning in 2019 and the resultant school closures as part of the economic and social lockdown in China have created a number of unexpected positive outcomes, or privileges, for expatriate teachers. Our report builds on Bailey’s (2021) findings by showing that being in lockdown within the overseas space of the private English-speaking international school has started to create new forms of ‘precarious privilege’ (Rey et al., 2020) that typically would not be available to teachers under ‘normal’ circumstances.

It has to be stated that the experiences presented in this paper are not designed to be conclusive and are not necessarily generalisable across what is increasingly becoming a very diverse sector of schooling. The reactions to the pandemic, as we write, are ongoing
and may yet take differing forms, especially across mainland China. Generalising from one autoethnographic case, in one specific context, the ‘non-traditional’ international school setting in the Tier-1 city of Shanghai, is clearly problematic. What can be asserted tentatively, though, is that whilst some teachers may be in a COVID-19 ‘existential vacuum’ (Yang, 2020), it does not necessarily follow that they will all experience the pandemic the same way.

As suggested by the notion of ‘differential precarity’ (teachers’ different experiences of being in the same precarious situation) and illustrated by the autoethnographic account in our paper, a teacher can exploit seemingly negative events, such as the lockdown, strategically in order to deal with the existing precarity and in so doing exercise agency and develop resilience. This nuanced approach to discussing forms of precarity thus answers the call to develop a more positive lens of sociological enquiry, showing how teachers in very adverse conditions might adopt strategies to cope and even thrive. Given the novelty of the situation we now find ourselves in, new positionings are arguably required to orient the individual and research to a post-pandemic world. This paper offers one such positioning in the form of autoethnography for (re)imagining precarity and privilege in international schooling within the context of this new world.

Our paper adds to the emerging discourse on COVID-19 and international schooling (e.g. Bailey, 2021) by exploring the tensions between the assumed disempowerment ascribed to COVID-19 and its related forms of precarity (such as restrictions on mobility, isolation and a lack of face-to-face interaction) and the (auto)ethnographic evidence that, despite the restrictions imposed by lockdown, teachers are still able to find self-fulfilment and develop resilience. Through taking a less conventional hybrid (auto)ethnographic lens, it has been possible to show that the emergent notion of ‘precarious privilege’ (Rey et al., 2020) is beginning to take on new configurations during the pandemic, and is thus a fluid and complex concept. Whereas Rey et al. (2020) adopt a largely sociological lens to examine international school teachers by focusing on precarity in terms of short-term contracts and privilege in terms of mobility and capital accumulation, this paper examined precarious privilege from the perspective of lived experience. In emphasising the lived aspects of being an international school teacher (i.e. the subjective and the affective), alternative configurations of precarious privilege were identified, taking on temporal, spatial and existential dimensions. The privileges explored in our paper (such as escaping from the existing precarity and having time to reflect on past experiences) could be described as ‘mayfly privileges’ that only exist because of the unique situation of the pandemic and, as such, are short-lived—once schools reopen, they will largely cease to exist. The image of the mayfly also suggests the potential for transcendence and freedom (Yang, 2020).

As already stated, we had noticed how (auto)ethnography in particular has become a popular research method (e.g. Blyth, 2017; Burke, 2017), and one that offers the IST a means to self-reflect on both the negative experiences and the positive coping strategies that were adopted. This sort of pragmatic/practical research would arguably be difficult to carry out with external researchers, given the ethical implications of recalling the upsetting and emotive conditions of precarity and insecurity. We advocate its use for further insights into how the growth paradox of international schooling can be explained in other arenas of precarity for expatriate teachers, such as the Middle East (Dubai, for example, has emerged as a major market). In particular, the self-interview method might offer a means for delving into the gender and sexual nature of precarity that has hitherto been neglected by (conventional, i.e. normative) research into the growing arena of international schooling. It has been noted that the literature has tended to reify teachers’ experience through the construction of normative teacher typologies (Poole, 2021). The approach here offers a corrective to this tendency. The juxtaposition of emic (insider) and etic (outsider) provides additional context details, whilst allowing the lived experience to retain its raw authenticity.
It is hoped that the approach offered here will inspire teachers (and researchers) to embrace the value of their voice.

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ETHICS APPROVAL STATEMENT
The authors confirm that the ethical policies of the journal, as noted on the journal's author guidelines page, have been adhered to. BERA's ethical guidelines were followed. We anonymised all participants' names and gained informed consent before data collection.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Data sharing is not applicable to this paper as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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ENDNOTES
1 It has to be noted that these numbers likely refer to traditional international schools. In other types of international school, such as private bilingual schools, increasing numbers of teachers are Chinese nationals who have returned from overseas study.
2 My brother and his family lived near me and my family in Shanghai.

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