
11. Foreign volunteers in China

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter investigates the experiences of young Western migrants undertaking volunteer work in China. While destinations such as Africa and India have long been popular choices for young Westerners seeking international volunteering experience, China has more recently become a desirable port of call, due to demands from both sides: the young people's thirst to gain work and travel experiences in 'new' and 'exotic' locations, and China's need for native English-speaking skills. This chapter explores this growing phenomenon, asking why China is shifting towards accepting the immigration of what are often unskilled young people to volunteer, and how the experiences of the young people themselves live up to their expectations of transformative work and touristic encounters.

A rise in youth volunteering has been a key consequence of the economic turbulence beleaguering Western labour markets over the last 20 years. Recurrent recessions and the global health pandemic have negatively impacted young people's employment opportunities at all levels, from school leavers to university graduates alike (Bell and Blanchflower 2011; Dietrich et al 2021). The labour market for graduate entrants has become particularly unpredictable, with the currency of a bachelor's degree increasingly being seen as 'not enough' (Wright and Mulvey 2021: 339). For a growing number of careers, particularly those which are highly competitive, such as the professions, some experience of temporary, short-term, unpaid or volunteering roles to demonstrate skills, flexibility, and enterprise is becoming an increasingly common entry-level requirement for work (Leonard et al 2016). Further, in an era of rapid globalisation and shrinking opportunities at home, volunteering in distant communities can add further capital to career biographies by demonstrating 'global citizenship' (Lyons et al 2012; McBride et al 2011). The more unusual, or politically strategic, the destination, the more this may add cachet to a personal biography (Elsrud 2001). As I have argued in other work, it can be conceptualised that unpaid work experience such as volunteering is forming a new level of credentialism: in short, a 'new degree', recognised by employers as a desirable additional component of a young person's Curriculum Vitae (CV) (Leonard et al 2016).

Further, despite the profound pressures on young people in Western labour markets, it is clear that their lives are not 'all about work'. Research (e.g. Hodkinson 2012) reveals how leisure, consumption, and style continue to be central, shaping youth identities and lifestyles (for more on lifestyle mobilities see Wang and An, Chapter 18). Many young people are engaged in a wide range of political and ideological causes, such as volunteering (Rochester et al. 2010), and the desire to travel to gain experience of other cultures and explore their identities and life choices (Johan 2009). Lesser developed destinations such as China are particularly popular, through which the consumptive hedonism of tourism is combined with the altruism of development work (Simpson 2004). As I will discuss in this chapter, the motivation to undertake

international volunteering in China is thus often driven by a combination of both work and lifestyle factors, while encouraged further by commercial brokerage organisations.

The desire to spend time volunteering in international contexts, such as China, has to be met by a reciprocal need to host young people. What are the motivations for China to open up to what are often unskilled migrants? I address this question in the next section.

INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTEERING IN CHINA

There are three strands underpinning the emergence of China as a destination for international volunteering: first, the expansion of ‘new wave’ foreign migrant communities in China over the last 20 years (Lehmann and Leonard 2019); second, the development of volunteerism in China, promoted by the Chinese Government (Wei and Cui 2011); and third, the English Language ‘craze’ which has swept across China from the late 1970s onwards (Lam 2005). I will discuss these in turn.

First, China’s ‘new wave’ of migrants is quite different from the small pool of foreigners who started to arrive in China from the 1970s onwards, when the process of ‘opening up’ to the outside world commenced. In these early days, migrants consisted mainly of foreign students, colonialist expatriates, returned overseas Chinese, and ethnic Chinese refugees (Pieke 2012). Since the early 2000s, a greater variety of migrants have responded to the new career opportunities offered by the rapidly expanding economy, labour market skills shortages, and shifts brought by an ageing society (Evandrou et al 2014). China’s largest cities have started to host semi-permanent foreign populations, which have expanded to include a broad mix of young professionals, traders and entrepreneurs, creatives, students, and people seeking adventure (Fielding 2016; see also Lü and Qiu, Chapter 19).

At the same time as this international expansion, foreigners have long been written into Chinese history and culture as a negative force. Characteristically seen as ‘greedy, crazy, reckless, shameless, unreasonable and inhumane’ (Callahan 2010: 41), suspicion towards the barbarians has never been lost. As a result, foreign migrants are subject to strict and rigorous controls through official bureaucracy, legislation, and regulations (Zhu and Price 2012; Liu 2016; see also Richter and Habicht, Chapter 3). Comprehensive immigration legislation passed in 2012 reflects this legacy of distrust and results in harsh penalties for *san fei* (the three illegals) ‘illegal entry’, ‘illegal work’, and ‘illegal residence’ (Carling and Haugen 2021; Haugen 2019). As I discuss more fully in the next section, this suspicious environment leads to some difficult negotiations by migrant groups, such as foreign volunteers, with the often hostile visa processes.

Second, since the initiation of economic reform and the open-door policy in the late 1970s, the Chinese Government has recognised the value of volunteerism in developing civic awareness, moral superiority, community cohesion, social welfare, and social capital (Wei and Cui 2011; Xu 2017). While this understanding of volunteerism has strong synergies with Western formulations, it is important to acknowledge how the concept is contextually and culturally specific. The Chinese context offers an alternative perspective to debates on the nature of volunteering and volunteers (Qi 2020). Both East and West see that volunteerism embodies a set of values, such as altruism and philanthropy, which emphasise giving time, services, money, and influence by personal choice and with no expectation of financial reward (Deng and Jeffreys 2021; Xu 2017). In addition, in China, the value of volunteerism is recognised

by the state as a route to achieve China's ambitions to shift towards a market economy while simultaneously maintaining a socialist culture (Deng and Jeffreys 2021). Indeed, the most important impetus behind volunteerism in China is the government (Qi 2020), as opposed to the individualised underpinnings of volunteering in the West.

As a mechanism to maintain political stability, the number of Voluntary Sector Organisations (VSOs) is strictly monitored and governed. At the same time, VSOs are encouraged to provide local-level social services, which is key to the Government's agenda to build 'modern cities' (Cartier 2016). In many provinces, there are rules that encourage government organisations and educational institutions to give priority to volunteers with substantial experience in their recruitment practices. In short, volunteers are highly regarded by the state as 'good citizens'.

Third, and also critical to China's modernising agenda (Hu 2021), is the mission to roll out English language skills across the Chinese population. While English language teaching is by no means a new phenomenon in China, with the earliest mission schools set up after the First Opium War in 1840 (Lam 2005), since the 'opening up' policy of the late 1970s, English language skills have come to be recognised as playing a vital role in China's modernisation efforts. The dominant goals are to prepare a new generation of Chinese with skills needed to advance scientific knowledge and to adopt technological knowledge from the West (Hu 2021).

With English being increasingly taught and learnt in a globalising environment where high standards of English language competence provide cultural and economic status, teachers who are 'native English-speaking teachers' (NESTs) have become a prized category, especially if they are also white and EuroAmerican (Leonard 2019; Litman 2022; see also Chan et al, Chapter 9). Coupled with the severe challenges presented by a lack of teachers with good levels of English language (Rao 2010), many Chinese schools have endeavoured to attract more NESTs (Rao and Yuan 2015) through a variety of schemes such as volunteering. The prestige of NESTs is boosted further by China's growing economic prowess and aspirations to play a leading role in global affairs (China Power 2023).

As such, the demand for NESTs in Chinese education remains buoyant, co-existing alongside the promotion of the Chinese language and culture internationally and the continued desire to exert soft power through engagement with foreigners.

As I have discussed elsewhere (Leonard 2025), the NESTs who come to China are an eclectic mix of experienced and new professional teachers, as well as unskilled young people looking for CV builders and adventure. In the next section, I explore the processes by which such young people arrive to volunteer in China in this capacity.

VOLUNTEERING IN CHINA: DECISIONS AND PREPARATIONS

Leaving home to volunteer in international contexts is typically undertaken by young people in the West as a year spent abroad either pre- or post-higher education; commonly coined as 'the gap year' (Simpson 2004). Research has highlighted that this form of international migration is more likely to be undertaken by young people from more privileged social and economic backgrounds, as a means by which economic advantage can be sustained through the accumulation of social and cultural 'cosmopolitan' capital (Heath 2006; Snee 2016). Volunteers are more likely to be white, especially from the UK and South Africa (Coetzee and Bester 2009). Volunteer projects in developing countries such as China are particularly popular (Simpson 2004) and are seen as offering value for biography construction (Prazeres 2019). However,

whether spending time volunteering in different global contexts *actually* promotes qualities of ‘global citizenship’ such as cross-cultural understanding, increased tolerance, and acceptance of diversity, remains an open question in contemporary research (Wilde 2016), and one which will be explored further in this chapter.

While highly sought after, for many young Westerners and their parents, travel to less developed nations such as China is also seen as ‘risky’ (Ansell 2008; Prazeres 2019). Opportunistically entering this space, therefore, are commercial and charity providers of gap year projects, whose functions are to mediate risk and provide easy access to CV-enhancing experiences. On the positive side, gap year organisations provide structure, security, and backup (Duncan 2004) for young people who may have little experience of travel without adult protection. Great virtue is attached to the projects and places offered, for instance, volunteering in contexts where specific Western skills are commonly seen to be ‘needed’, such as English language teaching. More negatively, these commercial organisations can be criticised as fortifying the consumption aspects of ‘volunteer tourism’ (Lyons et al 2012); as an elite opportunity to be purchased by those in a position to do so.

Typically, the process commences with young people applying while still in high school or in their final year at university to a gap year organisation specialising in voluntary projects in developing countries. In my own research on young British high school leavers (aged 18) volunteering to teach English in schools in rural China (Leonard 2019), the gap year organisation was a charity; that is, a not-for-profit organisation with a social mission to support skills needs in developing countries. This was an attraction for some of the young people, such as Alice, a young white woman who took a gap year before studying at an elite university in Scotland:

I heard about the charity through a friend and I was quite interested in volunteering overseas. I want to go into the third sector and work for a charity when I’m older. And then the charity I went with offered projects in Asia, Africa, and South America.

If selected for an online interview, applicants were asked to explain their motivations and expectations for their gap year. Upon being accepted to the next stage, they were invited to travel to the remote Scottish island (where the organisation’s headquarters were based) for a trial week. Here, they had to undertake a range of activities and interviews to demonstrate their capabilities for international volunteering. As is common with such schemes (O’Shea 2011), before final acceptance, the young people were required to raise sufficient funds to pay for their travel and living expenses over the year abroad:

The charity have quite a stringent selection process. So you go to the charity headquarters, you do this really fun week where you find out more about the charity and they sort of assess your suitability, and then you’re set a fundraising target of around £6,000. (Alice)

The expectation is that these funds are not simply supplied by relatives, but that the young people should show evidence that they have earned the money themselves through fundraising events as well as paid work. The assumption is that the young people will be more committed to the project – and staying in their host country – if the funds to get them there have been hard-won. The money is then paid to the organisation to be used for:

...basically everything except for your visa, but in my case that wasn’t too expensive. So it covers flights, it covers accommodation for the entire year. You get a basic living cost when you’re there that

just covers your basic food costs and toiletries and insurance. There's also a person in the country that will support you as well as the staff based in the UK. There's quite a big safety net with this charity, which is mainly why I chose it. It does cover everything except for your visa. (Alice)

After the fundraising, applicants return to the headquarters to choose their project and location from a range of options across the Global South. For those who selected China, motivations tended to include an interest in China and the 'Far East', as well as wanting to teach English:

I was quite interested in China because I definitely wanted to learn another language, I thought that would be quite useful, and I was also really interested in teaching English – I'd definitely like to work for an educational charity. So, it seemed quite applicable to go there. I couldn't say exactly why I chose China; it just seemed to appeal really compared to the other countries. (Alice)

I just had a particular interest in the Far East just because I kind of feel like now I could do more teaching English. It was just kind of one of those interest things rather than any particular draw to the East. (Fred, 18, white, on a pre-university gap year)

China differs from other contexts in that the project, English language teaching, is part-funded by the Chinese Government's Ministry of Education. This means that the young people do not have to raise as much money for this project as others, such as in Africa. Once selected for a country and project, the young volunteers are then given a final week of country-specific training, where they meet experienced volunteers who have recently returned from their own gap years. They are given country-specific 'tips' for 'basic survival' as well as a rudimentary level of teacher training. Alice admits she '*was getting quite worried before I went*', so fears are openly discussed. On completion of the training, flights are booked, cases packed, good-byes said, and the 'China group' assembled at London's Heathrow Airport.

EARLY DAYS AND SETTLING IN

My own research provides a lens into the experience of volunteering in China for young people from the West and the kinds of challenges and opportunities they face in what are often rural and remote parts of the country. This adds an interesting dimension to contemporary research on volunteering in rural China, which focuses on the internal migration of Chinese university students (Wang 2022). For the young volunteers from the West, their first destination is Beijing, where they spend a week acclimatising before heading off to their individual projects. The first few days are often experienced as a bit of a culture shock, which has been found to be a common challenge for international students as they move to and live in a new country (Presbitero 2016). Culture shock is the process of initially adjusting to a new environment and is experienced differently according to social and psychological factors, as my respondents demonstrate:

The first thing that hit me was the smell; it's quite smelly compared to maybe the other cities in China! It's also very busy. I'm from a small town in Scotland where it's quiet. And the heat as well, it was August. And the food was quite hard to adapt to because I didn't really know how to use chopsticks. You have to learn quite fast. It was really good just to spend time there and get used to a little bit more of the Chinese culture and just have a little bit of time to spend with the other volunteers as well who are also part of your safety net while you're there. (Alice)

Fred found the week rather less useful:

You're getting a culture shock and I feel like it's Chinese in the way that China wanted to present 'China'... So there was a lot of stuff on Chinese culture. So considering that it was five or six days of Chinese lessons. One of the days being entirely consisting of doing like a paper cut out cow. And considering that we all kind of arrived at our projects with very poor understanding of Chinese we kind of did like Chinese tongue twisters in Chinese.

After a week of trying to adjust, the volunteers travelled in pairs to their projects, which were in different rural locations all over China. Although they weren't clear on the details, they were aware that their gap year charity in China worked in tandem with the Chinese Ministry of Education (CME) to select the schools they were to be based in. The volunteers realised they were all in locations that were 'very unlikely to be able to pay a native English speaker. They were very small towns, quite rural – they did okay for themselves. They weren't very rich, but I wouldn't say they were very poor either; they were kind of in the middle' (Alice). For some, this meant a journey of over 40 hours to remote towns which '*nobody has heard of*'. Alice, for example, was based in a town 28 hours away from Beijing and three hours away from the capital of the province. The travelling arrangements were mired in confusion, as she explains:

We had a little bit of a mix up because the person who met us in Beijing booked our trains for the wrong day, so we turned up and nobody came to get us because they thought we were arriving the day after. So they eventually came and got us but because it was quite far away we had to wait maybe five or six hours in the train station. It was okay in the end. We did get a banquet when we arrived, which is typical Chinese culture, but I think it would've been slightly bigger had we arrived on the correct day. The volunteers before us had lots of fireworks and firecrackers when they arrived. (Alice)

Public displays of celebration and welcome, such as banquets and fireworks, were a common experience for the young volunteers, just as they were for the foreigners who first arrived in China during the 1970s (Brady 2003). However, once the welcomes were over, the young people then had to get to grips with China's complicated visa and registration requirements for international visitors (Leonard and Lehmann 2019). In my case study, their experiences differed according to the province. For Alice, this first involved visiting the local police station, 'to do lots and lots of fun tests and fill in visa forms etc'. The process was smoothed out by the fact that:

Our vice principal was very good at getting our visa done for us. He had a lot of connections. I think he had connections to the Communist Party or something; so he was very good. The volunteers near us had issues with their visa, but I was told unofficially that their school paid off the police so...

Fred, who was based in Qinghai Province, found that there were '*very strict visa laws*'. Even though he was a volunteer for the CME, he was only given a three-month student visa, which had to be constantly renewed to see out the year. At first, he was given the impression that renewal would happen automatically, but on his subsequent trip to the Qinghai Visa Office, he was '*given about two days' notice to literally go to Hong Kong to sort out the visa*'. It transpired that the regional law had changed midway through the year and that the regional-level bureaucrats were 'confused as to what we were doing there'. The solution of requiring the

young people to exit and re-enter the country continuously throughout their tour was expensive, tiring, and time-consuming.

Reflecting back on the visa process, Fred now feels uncomfortable about the position he was put in: 'I'd almost put it as high as 60 or 70% of foreign people living in China probably didn't have the correct visa'. While he sometimes feels that he would like to return to China one day as a (properly paid) English teacher, 'I'm just hesitant to kind of live and work in conditions that I view are kind of illegal. It is the way that they have always got leverage over any foreign person that's there'.

Research on young Chinese university students volunteering in schools in rural areas reveals that encountering struggles is salient to their experiences: they 'eat bitterness' in their volunteer labour (Wang 2022). Encountering structural inequalities in the state's education system, they find challenging the system personally transformative and ennobling. The findings from my research on international volunteers show that while they, too, 'eat bitterness', this is of a very different form. In Fred's case, his experiences led to a diminishing sense of self-worth and a reluctance to return. In contrast to research findings which demonstrate the importance of welcome and support to successful volunteering outcomes (Fee 2021), the uncertain, ambiguous, and often hostile nature of China's visa system risks diluting the benefits of its international volunteers. If China would like to continue to attract foreign skills in the future, the visa system needs to be removed as a challenge.

EXPERIENCING CHINA'S 'UPS AND DOWNS'

Settling into their lives in China, the volunteers faced multiple vicissitudes. On the one hand, they all very much enjoyed their immersion into Chinese culture through teaching the children and working with teachers at their schools, which led to many friendships. Their 'foreignness' led to high levels of attention and symbolic gestures of welcome (Brady 2003). As in the 1970s, most were regularly treated to banquets, displays of dancing and martial arts, and fireworks (albeit, as one young volunteer, Fred, noted caustically, that they were 'launched near the power lines'). Not so welcome were the expectations of public performances of their foreignness: 'we were dragged up on the stage in front of several thousand people and told to speak some Chinese' (Fred). Overall, real gratitude was expressed for their presence, and some found that they were even given 'elite' status, as Alice found:

I was quite impressed. Our school was very welcoming; they'd made a lot of effort for us. We were given nicer accommodation than the other teachers which we felt a little bit guilty about. Our apartment was originally two apartments that they'd made into one so it was really nice. We have TV, we had our own en-suites, we had a washing machine each; it was really nice inside.

For some, however, once the public displays were over, 'we were kind of sent off by ourselves'. This meant that Fred and his partner volunteer, Seb, entered an apartment which was 'filthy and not furnished', and a lengthy period of hassling ensued to secure furniture.

The young people were pleased to find that their skills in the Chinese language and teaching English improved over the year, and by the end of their volunteering work, they were communicating well in both languages. In their admittedly very limited leisure time, they were able to wander freely around their cities, visit coffee shops and gardens, and make short trips

to neighbouring areas. Many were invited into homes to enjoy local food and hospitality. At the end of the teaching year, they grouped together to make longer journeys all over China, exploring the far reaches. Their abilities to negotiate these journeys grew, and many came to love China, although not all.

For all the volunteers, their foreignness and Western appearance also brought challenges (Lan et al 2022; Leonard 2019). As my respondents were white and from the UK, the experience of being a member of a very small ethnic minority community was new to them. Fred commented that they saw very few Westerners in their city, 'and the way people act towards you made you think they didn't see a lot of foreign people'. Alice also found that:

...because they were a very small town they had a very interesting view of foreigners, they wanted to take pictures of us and stuff. It was a little bit uncomfortable to start with. They used to point at us and shout 'Foreigner', but in Chinese obviously.

The experience of being 'different' meant that they came to see their nationality and whiteness in new ways. In common with the social networking experiences of other migrants across the globe (Ryan 2023), their physical appearance became a badge of belonging: 'In the beginning, if I did see another white person I'd go and tell my housemate I had done that', Fred tells me. As they got to know the city better, they found 'pockets of foreign people', such as a group of American volunteers. The first time they saw one of these, a 'white guy coming towards us on a bicycle', they

were just like 'Oh God, he can probably understand us!' And then he stopped, and he went, 'Hey, guys!'

The foreigners found that they gravitated towards each other, keen to find out their stories of why they were in China. The concept of 'conviviality' (Gilroy 2004), from the Spanish *convivencia*, meaning shared life, accounts for how migrant communities 'stick together'¹ through practices of belonging. Senses of belonging are produced both through such brief or unpredicted encounters as described above, as well as through everyday rhythms and routines (Wise and Noble 2016), such as the volunteers living and working together and enjoying chats in coffee shops. Social engagements generate a sense of community, and while the concept has mostly been used to account for diversity in the Global North, it can be seen to have transportability, accounting for the notions of togetherness and shared belonging expressed in the volunteers' talk. Based on their shared Western cultural background and white skin, they made immediate connections with the Americans, even though they were older: 'like, say mid-20s and 30s'. They found out that they were also volunteers: members of the US Peace Corps, and this added to the conviviality. The Peace Corps is a volunteer organisation which, as Seb explained, trains and deploys volunteers to provide international development assistance and 'promote American interests'. On further discussion, it was revealed that there were strong fears of Islamic terrorism in the region, and the Peace Corps were there in their mission to 'keep the peace' (Schoolenberg 2021). As such, they were 'shocked' to find the young British volunteers had been placed in that location.

This was of particular relevance to Seb, who, as he described, had 'dark brown eyes, dark hair, and a beard'. He explains the implications of this in the region in which they were living:

I am white, but I actually resemble the Uyghur, a Uyghur person? And they're the people who are quite often blamed for a lot of what goes on in Xinjiang, but they're the biggest minority.

Seb found that many Chinese people assumed he was local and Uyghur and would start to speak to him. At one point, while travelling in Xinjiang, there was an ethnically motivated incident: 'an explosion and a couple of stabbings'. Seb found he was treated with high levels of suspicion by the police while boarding a train; his bag was searched, and he was singled out for questioning. As he remembers:

By that point I was absolutely in love with China, and I was completely settled in, I was so happy, and then I remember we were sat there and I said, 'I want to go home'.

For Alice and her partner volunteer Emily, another pre-university student from England, being white women brought some unwelcome degrees of attention. Sier (2022) notes how white women are racialised in the Chinese context: routinely objectified, sexualised, and not taken seriously. On the other hand, a *yangxifu* (white, foreign wife) is admired and can help a (Chinese) man's social status to climb. Alice and Emily were the only two foreigners in the whole of the city, where it was only the second year of foreign volunteers ever having visited. Although Alice and Emily made some very good Chinese friends, the sense of being racially different led to feelings of isolation, 'but for the most part it was okay because the other two volunteers were only an hour away from us' (Alice). The staring, pointing, and picture-taking never stopped, leading to some frustration, as Alice exclaims: 'I've lived here for nine months; they should be used to me by now!'. As their confidence in the Chinese language and culture improved, they learnt to become more robust in their response to these behaviours:

Because they used to point at us and shout 'Foreigner!' in Chinese so we did the same, we shouted 'Chinese person' back at them. Like they weren't grossly offended; they sort of laughed.

Some of the attention they received was not so benign, however, with Chinese stereotypical assumptions about white women's sexualities (Sier 2022) having to be challenged:

We were propositioned once by two police officers who invited us to the hotel with them, it was interesting. I was quite offended because they were supposed to be police officers. They were quite young so I guess... well, that wasn't that fun.

The young people's talk about volunteering in China reveals how their own social and personal subjectivities are central to the framing of their experiences. Race, gender, and nationality became salient determinants of their practices, the complexities of which, as members of the (white) majority at home in the UK, they had not previously been required to negotiate with such visibility. As I discuss below, the unique context of China contributes important nuance to discussions of global citizenship and the benefits of volunteering.

CONCLUSION

Young people from the West/Global North often set out to volunteer with vague notions of gaining new work experiences, learning another language, and seeing more of another

culture. It is through these rather inchoate perceptions that their acquisition of global citizenship is imagined. Among my participants, little reflexivity was demonstrated at the beginning of their journeys as to how their social identities and biographies might mediate their encounters. This chimes with current research on North to South international volunteering, which notes how the legacies of colonialism and subsequent discourses of ‘development’ still infuse discourses and practice (Baillie Smith and Laurie 2011; Chen 2021). While the aim of global citizenship – as a sense of belonging to a global community – is integral to international volunteering, the mission to undertake ‘development’ relies on long-established assumptions of unequal power relations, (white) privilege, and superior skills (Roth 2015). For the young people, over the course of their time in China, they are provided with what is sometimes a sharp stock take of these longstanding embedded assumptions. China stands out as a major world power which developed ‘coherent theories and explicit policies that sought to actively undermine the Western racial worldview’ (Kowner and Demel 2012: 13). The ways in which young volunteers must learn to negotiate new racialised frameworks of minoritised otherness adds important complexity to debates on global citizenship and the experiences of white, ‘expatriate’ communities where colonial power relations are routinely reproduced (Leonard 2010, Kunz 2023).

In China, the concept of ‘foreigner’ for most people is bound up with state discourses of fear, suspicion, and hostility, and discrimination and dislike can be overt (Bartoš et al 2021, see also Speelman, Chapter 21). At the same time, this is tempered to some extent by alternative emotions of desire, envy, and respect for Western culture and skills. The volunteers in my research encounter both the negativity that can be expressed toward migrants by a host community, as well as overt fascination with their differences. They must negotiate this complexity, and these findings add nuance to debates about self-development and self-reflexivity about difference (or lack thereof) produced through gap year migration discussed at the start of this chapter. The young volunteers *did* express a thoughtful engagement with their experiences of difference, perhaps due to the challenges presented by Chinese constructions of ‘foreignness’, and these were recognised by the young people as valuable lessons. Concepts such as ‘conviviality’ can be used to better understand the strategies developed to cope with the resulting feelings of isolation and difference as part of a very small migrant population.

These findings have implications both for emerging work on the multiple and changing meanings of whiteness and Westernness in China (Lan et al 2022) as well as for global scholarship on migratory contexts. Studying how migrant communities behave in complex political environments where distrust towards them is demonstrated both at the state and citizen levels has been dominated by research on migration from the Global South to multicultural contexts in the North. This chapter suggests the need for research in other global contexts, including the Global South, where foreign migration is only just starting to grow in significance and multicultural communities are a newer phenomenon. In a world of continuing ethnic conflict, how countries transition from mono- to multiculturalism, and the role of the state within this, are important areas of research. China’s history of being predominantly a country of emigration helped establish it as a nation-state within the global migration system (Chan 2018). How, and if, it now transitions to being a receiving country for immigration, not least in a world of increased political tensions and human displacement, are critical questions for the future.

NOTE

1. I am grateful to Rachel Ayrton for introducing me to the concept of conviviality.

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