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Does race matter? Insights into the professional experiences of foreign Asian English teachers in China

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the professional experiences of English teachers of East Asian descent (foreign Asian [FA] English teachers) in China, focusing on how these perceptions use race as a point of reference. To provide comparative accounts, the experiences of these FA teachers are examined from both their own perspectives and those of their colleagues. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with two FA native English-speaking teachers (NESTs), two White NESTs, and one White non-native English-speaking teacher (NNEST). Findings indicate that FA teachers in China are susceptible to inequalities in recruitment and salary compared to their White counterparts. However, these teachers also recognise the advantages of their shared racial identities as Asian, which facilitated stronger connections with their Chinese learners. These findings, analysed through the lens of critical race theory, highlight how racial identity impacts FA English teachers' professional experiences, revealing both the advantages and the challenges they face in their professional contexts.

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race; Foreign Asian English teachers; China; Critical Race Theory; English language teaching

Introduction

Working in English language teaching (ELT) often entails interacting with people across the racial spectrum and being immersed in diverse cultures (Norton, 2013; Von Esch, Motha, & Kubota, 2020). While this reality allows opportunities for different ELT partners (i.e. teachers, learners, schools, and policymakers) to engage in genuine cross-cultural communication and foster understanding (Kramsch & Uryu, 2020), it also gives rise to racial prejudices and inequalities (Kubota, 2023). Using critical race theory (CRT) as an analytical lens, this research aimed to unveil the influence of race on the professional experiences of foreign English language teachers in China. Specifically, it focuses on Foreign Asian (FA) teachers who consider English as their first language (so-called native English-speaking teachers [NESTs]¹) and are racially East Asian or East Asian passing.² Currently, there is an emergent body of academic scholarship and discussion focused on

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Whiteness in ELT (Ramjattan, 2019; Ruecker & Ives, 2014; Stinson & Migliarini, 2023), and some studies discussing the Black experience (Almayez, 2024; Charles, 2019; Seo, 2023; Seo & Kubota, 2023). However, little research has explored the experiences of FA teachers in East Asian countries like China. Although racially passing as the majority group is usually deemed positive and associated with higher levels of societal privilege, for FA teachers in a Chinese ELT context this may be the opposite, which is what this research aims to explore. This research contributes to the growing body of literature on race in ELT (see Flores & Rosa, 2023; Kubota, 2023), amplifying the voices and experiences that have historically been marginalised or overlooked.

ELT in China

As this article focuses on English teachers in China, it is essential that we first present the context of the establishment and development of ELT in China. English has had a long and complicated record of development in China's history. It was British invasion, that is, the 'Opium Wars' and colonisation of Hong Kong during the nineteenth century, where English first gained a strong foothold in Chinese society. However, for much of modern history, mainland China remained independent, and it is only since 1978 when China began to open up to the rest of the world that the English language has become increasingly important due to global links and economic growth (Bolton, Botha, & Zhang, 2020). This places China in the Expanding Circle of World Englishes (Kachru, 1985). In the Chinese education system, English is now compulsory from primary school to higher education, leading to the establishment of competitive English examinations at tertiary level like the College English Test which must be completed by all university students to graduate, regardless of their major (Bolton & Graddol, 2012). The demand for English proficiency continues even after university graduation, driven by a competitive job market (Kuo, 2006).

The strong desire for English education in China has resulted in the emergence of private language institutions, attracting foreign expats seeking employment (The Guardian, 2010). However, there is a significant staffing gap, with a limited number of NESTs compared to the large student population (The Guardian, 2010; Quinn, 2019). The imbalance between the number of English learners and NESTs has created a situation where approximately 1000 learners are associated with each NEST (Quinn, 2019). This reality has turned ELT into a business model in China, with private institutions and corporations capitalising on the market (The Guardian, 2010). Institutions often emphasise the presence of foreign-looking NESTs to attract more business, as the native speaker model reportedly remains favoured in China based on student and teacher perceptions (Liu, 2022).

Native speaker and native-speakerism and their implications for FA teachers in China

The term 'native speaker' is commonly understood as someone who learned a language as their first language (Cook, 1999). However, in the current globalised world, where individuals grow up speaking multiple languages due to cultural and socio-economic factors (Canagarajah, 2006), this conceptualisation becomes problematic. This holds particular relevance for FA teachers who have typically

grown up in bilingual households and may have acquired an Asian heritage language as their first language. While English is often learned later in social encounters outside the home context, these bilingual individuals often possess a high level of proficiency in English, and for some, their identification with English may even surpass that of their heritage language. In such cases, an alternative definition proposed by Lightbown and Spada (2006) becomes pertinent, which characterises a native speaker as someone who acquired a language from an early age and has attained full mastery of it. However, the term ‘full mastery’ is arguably open to interpretation and lacks precise definition. Having said that, one conclusion that has been widely supported by research is that bilingualism does not impede language acquisition or hinder attaining high proficiency in both languages (Paradis, Genesee, & Crago, 2011). In fact, it has been suggested that individuals do not necessarily need to achieve a high level of proficiency in multiple languages to be considered bilingual or plurilingual. Rather, they can have varying degrees of proficiency in different languages as long as they possess a sense of identification with those languages to some extent (Baker, 2011).

Closely related to the concept of native speaker, the term ‘native-speakerism’ was coined by Holliday (2005) to describe the belief that native speakers ‘represent a “Western culture” from which spring the ideals both of the English language and of English language teaching methodology’ (p. 385). Native-speakerism establishes a power hierarchy based on exploiting differences between native and non-native English speakers. This fallacy is particularly prevalent in East Asian countries, where NESTs from so-called ‘Inner Circle’ countries are heavily idealised (Kubota, 2023; Nguyen, 2017; Rivers & Ross, 2013). In the Chinese context, the native-speakerist ideology persists and has led to strong preferences for NESTs over their non-native English-speaking teacher (NNEST) counterparts in multiple aspects at both attitudinal and actional levels. Attitudinally, many Chinese parents and sometimes even learners often perceive NESTs as more effective teachers due to ingrained stereotypes and cultural biases that equate native-speaker status with superior language proficiency and teaching ability (Deng, 2024; Liu, 2022; Wang, Fang, & Khajavi, 2020). At the actional level, some language institutes in China have visa requirements that restrict teaching positions to passport holders of certain nationalities, thereby institutionalising a preference for White NESTs from the Inner Circle (Boonsuk, Wasoh, & Fang, 2023; Ruecker, 2011; Teach English in China, 2017). Moreover, Chinese employers have been found to be complicit in prioritising the recruitment of NESTs who are middle-class and upper-middle-class Whites from the UK and the USA, reinforcing a racial and socio-economic hierarchy within the ELT profession (Liu & Li, 2024). This practice not only marginalises NNESTs from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds but also perpetuates a narrow, Eurocentric view of English language education. In this regard, it is important to acknowledge that while existing discourse on N/NES issues primarily focuses on linguistic abilities, notions of race are often entangled with native-speakerism. NESTs are commonly associated with White individuals, whereas NNESTs are racialised as non-White (Curtis & Romney, 2006; Kubota & Lin, 2006).

Race and ELT

Although there is a connection between race and biological characteristics, social scientists generally agree that race is a socially constructed category (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). Wong, Su, and Hiramoto (2021) describe race as a ‘social classification based on presumed blood ties and/or putative phenotypic traits’ (p. 131). In other words, while biological differences are certainly the dominant societal notion of race, there is a socially constructed aspect that has created a societal hierarchy amongst different races.

Research on race in ELT has evolved significantly in the past few decades, highlighting the impact of racialised ideologies on the field. Earlier works by Kubota and Lin (2006, 2006) discuss the intersection of race, culture, and identity, and emphasise how racial and cultural biases shape perceptions of language competence and teaching effectiveness. Along the same line, scholars in Curtis and Romney’s (2006) volume combine CRT and narrative inquiry to document the experiences of ELT professionals of colour, revealing a contradiction in the existing work, where colour and race were only mentioned in passing or remained in the background. Later works by Flores and Rosa (2015, 2023) additionally provide a critical framework for understanding the racialisation of linguistic competence and advocating for a raciolinguistic perspective that addresses the intertwined nature of race and language. Their research challenges existing paradigms and calls for a more just and inclusive approach to the study of language in relation to race. Recent contributions by Ramjattan (2019, 2019) and Gerald (2020, 2022) further this critical examination through documenting the pervasive racial biases in ELT, particularly the privileging of White native speakers in the contexts of Canada and the USA. Their work highlights how these biases manifest in microaggressions and institutional practices that marginalise non-White professionals. Together, these scholars argue that native-speakerism is deeply intertwined with racial biases and underscore the necessity of an inclusive and equitable approach to language education that values linguistic and cultural diversity, challenges discriminatory practices, and promotes social justice within the field.

This existing body of work, however, has been mainly conducted in English-dominant contexts where the preference for NESTs is pronounced and racialised professionals often face overt and covert forms of discrimination based on native-speakerist ideologies. There is a gap in the literature concerning non-English-dominant contexts where similar issues may manifest differently. For instance, in countries like China, native-speakerism also prevails, but the dynamics can be influenced by local cultural and socio-political factors. In these settings, racialised ELT practitioners may face unique challenges that are not fully addressed in the current scholarship. Thus, expanding research to include diverse global contexts is essential for developing a comprehensive understanding of how native-speakerism and racial biases operate across different cultural and linguistic landscapes.

Racialised experiences of FA English teachers

A handful of studies have explored either directly or indirectly the actual and inferred experiences of FA English teachers in East Asian contexts, including China. A study examining 59 ELT recruitment websites in China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand

revealed a strong bias towards idealising young, White, enthusiastic native English speakers from predominantly White countries (Ruecker & Ives, 2014). Non-conforming candidates receive minimal attention, as evident in job adverts like the one from Jiangxi Vocational and Technical College in 2009 stating ‘white native English speakers only!’ In an article published in the *Los Angeles Times* titled ‘Where English Teachers Have to Look the Part’, Asian Americans with excellent qualifications face challenges finding teaching positions in China. The article even quotes a student saying ‘White people can speak better English’ (Ruecker, 2011, p. 410). Furthermore, many language schools in China require applicants to include a photograph, which would be considered discriminatory in countries with stricter anti-discrimination laws for recruitment (Ruecker, 2011). These observations highlight the influence of White privilege in the Asian ELT recruitment process. However, these findings solely address recruitment and lack experiential knowledge of foreign Asian teachers in their everyday work environment, limiting our understanding of how race impacts their professional experiences.

Despite the privileges that native English-speaking ELT professionals in Asia enjoy, FA NESTs may face marginalisation because of their racial/ethnic background. They may face prejudices such as not being recognised as members of the Inner Circle, particularly from countries like the USA or the UK, simply because they do not fit the stereotypical image of a White foreigner (Curtis & Romney, 2006). Comprendio and Savski’s (2019) research on the perceptions of NNES migrant teachers in Thailand demonstrated these prejudices as results showed that most student participants associated ‘nativeness’ with ‘Whiteness’ and ‘non-nativeness’ with ‘Asianness’. For example, one participant stated ‘native speakers have white skin and blonde hair, and for those who are non-native speakers, they look like Thais’ (Comprendio & Savski 2019, p. 678). The finding of this study is valuable as it gives us some insight into perceptions of Asian teachers, demonstrating that individuals who resemble the local race are not recognised as NESs in the eyes of some Asian communities. However, as this study focuses on the NNEST experience, it does not provide insights into the experiences or perceptions of FA NESTs.

The review of empirical research reveals significant gaps in our understanding of the experiences of FA English teachers in East Asian contexts, including China. While studies indirectly touch upon this subject, they primarily focus on recruitment biases rather than the lived experiences of these teachers. Existing studies also predominantly focus on perceptions rather than detailed experiential accounts of FA NESTs. This lack of focused research on FA NESTs limits our understanding of how their racial and ethnic identities intersect with their professional experiences and challenges in the classroom and beyond. Therefore, there is a clear need for research that directly investigates the day-to-day professional experiences of FA English teachers in East Asia to fully understand the impact of race on their roles and careers in this context.

Critical race theory as an analytical lens

CRT operates on six foundational principles that inform its analysis of the relationship between race, power, and racism. First, CRT acknowledges that race and racism are socially constructed rather than biologically determined. It recognises that race is a concept shaped by societal norms and beliefs, while racism is

a pervasive and systemic issue that permeates institutions and structures (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Second, CRT places a strong emphasis on social justice and seeks to challenge and disrupt systems of oppression and inequality. It aims to address historical and ongoing racial injustices within society (Crenshaw, Gotanda, & Peller, 1995). The third principle of CRT is intersectionality, which acknowledges that individuals possess multiple identities and experience intersecting forms of oppression and privilege. It recognises that race intersects with other social categories such as gender, class, and sexuality, influencing one's experiences of discrimination and privilege (Crenshaw, 2011). Fourth, CRT critiques dominant ideologies and challenges the notion of neutrality. It exposes how seemingly neutral laws, policies, and practices can perpetuate racial hierarchies and inequalities (Ladson-Billings, 2020). The fifth principle centres around counter-storytelling and amplifying the voices of marginalised individuals and communities. CRT values the narratives and experiences of those affected by racism, allowing them to share their perspectives and challenge dominant narratives (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Finally, CRT is committed to social transformation and advocates for activism and advocacy to challenge and dismantle racial injustices. It seeks to create a more equitable and inclusive society (Bell, 1995).

CRT serves as a valuable theoretical lens for analysing the radicalised nature of native speakerism within ELT. While CRT originated in the USA to address systemic racism and legal inequalities (Delgado & Harris, 2017), its principles are applicable to other contexts, including China, due to the universal relevance of its core concepts such as intersectionality, social construction of race, and the critique of liberalism (Crenshaw, 2011; Gillborn, 2006). In the Chinese context, CRT helps to uncover how global racial hierarchies and local socio-political dynamics intersect, influencing the perceptions and treatment of NNESTs (Kubota, 2002). However, while CRT is a powerful tool for exposing and challenging racial injustices, it is not without drawbacks. Critics argue that CRT can sometimes overlook socio-economic factors and cultural nuances specific to non-US contexts (Crenshaw, 2011). Therefore, this study critically engages with CRT's benefits – such as its ability to highlight systemic inequities and give voice to marginalised groups – while also acknowledging its limitations.

Following the practices of CRT, the present study explores how racial inequalities have affected FA teachers' experiences as English teachers in China. Additionally, we aim to do so from multiple perspectives, including those of FA teachers themselves and their colleagues. The ultimate goal is to develop a deeper understanding of how racial inequalities operate in the ELT sector, taking China as a case in point. Specifically, this study seeks to address the following question: How does race influence the professional experiences of FA teachers in a Chinese ELT context?

Methodology

Participants

Participants include five ELT teachers with experience teaching English in China at different times. They were chosen through existing connections with the researchers or were recommended by acquaintances in the ELT field. Among these five teachers, two

self-identify as FA teachers, two are White NESTs, and one is a White NNEST. Table 1 presents the participants' key background information.

Data collection methods and procedure

As this study aims to gain insights into teachers' different experiences and perspectives, semi-structured in-depth interviews were deemed most suitable. The participants were contacted through emails describing the nature of the project and the type of questions that would be asked if they chose to participate. If the responses were affirmative, the participants would be given an interview. Owing to many of the participants involved being spread out internationally, the interviews were carried out online through WeChat,

Table 1. Summary of participants' background information.

Pseudonyms	Evie	Diane	TJ	James	Michelle
Nationality	Canadian	British	South African	British	Canadian
Race/ethnicity	Filipino	Malaysian/ Chinese	White	White	White
Native language	English	English	Afrikaans	English	English
English proficiency	Native – Canadian accent	Native – British accent	Grew up speaking English in childhood, native fluency – South African accent	Native – British accent	Native – Canadian accent
Age during time of teaching (years)	22–23	57–58	39–44	23–24	23–25
Years teaching in China	2004–2006	2013–2016	2015–2021 (present)	2016–2017	2014–2016
Highest qualification during time of teaching	Undergraduate degree in education	Postgraduate degree in nursing	Undergraduate degree in sports administration	A-levels	Undergraduate degree
Possess ELT qualification during time of teaching?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Prior teaching job experience	Two years of teaching practice as part of degree	More than 20 years of teaching nursing in England	Taught English in Thailand for over a year	No prior teaching experience	Initially no but changed institutions during time in China so gained experience
Locations taught in China	Fujian province – southeast China	Henan province – central China	Sichuan province – southwest China	Shanghai – east China	Fujian province – southeast China
Institutions taught at (1 = main institution taught at)	1. Private language school 2. Primary school/ kindergarten	1. University 2. Private language school	1. Private language schools 2. Kindergartens	Private language school	1. Private language school 2. Kindergarten
Age range taught (years)	Mixed	18+	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed

a Chinese multi-purpose messaging and social media app. All interviews were audio-recorded and lasted between 45 minutes and an hour.

The first section of the interview was about the teachers' background information, such as their nationality, identified race, and teaching experience. The next questions were related to the teachers' experiences with students, parents, and management/recruitment. The final portion of the questions was related to their overall experience and general beliefs and attitudes towards race related to ELT in China. The factual questions were placed at the beginning as they allow the participants to personalise their responses, making them feel at ease and encouraged to continue. Questions related to personal experiences were placed afterwards as the participants would have felt more comfortable at this point after having already easily answered the factual questions. Finally, questions regarding their general experience and opinions of possible racial inequalities in the field were placed last. Placing these questions at the end allows plenty of time to establish trust with the interviewee, making it more likely for the respondents to provide honest answers and openly talk about potentially negative or sensitive matters.

Data analysis

The data were analysed by following the six steps of thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006). We began by reading through the interview transcripts and identifying excerpts where participants mentioned and/or discussed race-related aspects of their experiences. Coding was done in the second round of reading, where short names/labels was used to summarise these excerpts (e.g. lower salary compared to White colleagues). In the third stage, we reviewed and grouped these codes according to potential themes (e.g. issues with salary). Next, themes were refined and revised and their names were finalised (e.g. salary). Finally, each theme was written into narratives.

Findings

The interview data reveal four key areas of professional experiences in which FA teachers were observed to be treated differently based on their racial characteristics, including salary, management treatment, student treatment, and parental treatment.

Salary

The most apparent difference in treatment is in terms of salary. Evie, a Canadian FA NEST, recalled that she was paid less than her co-workers who were all White at the school she worked at. Despite her lower salary, she was still given the same workload as her White co-workers. She found this particularly annoying as she had 'the highest qualification'. In fact, she was the only teacher in her institution who had a CELTA, teaching experience, and a degree in education. Similarly, James, a British White NEST, observed that White teachers at his school were paid the most, while FA teachers were paid the least out of the international teachers. He acknowledged that other teachers possessed higher qualifications and were even better teachers than him, but he was paid more due to being White. He claimed that witnessing the inequality between races was the most negative aspect of his teaching experience, adding that 'it opens your eyes when

you see the inequality'. TJ, a South-African White NNEST, observed similar patterns regarding pay increases and promotions among his non-White colleagues:

What I noticed is that some teachers, particularly Black teachers, needed more time to reach the same level as me . . . They had to work longer to prove themselves, show they were trustworthy, and that they could teach . . . I feel a bit bad about it. I know they're as capable as I am, but they struggled to find jobs or had to move schools to get better opportunities.

Michelle, a Canadian White NEST, also observed a 'very clear hierarchy', as pay varied immensely based on race during her time working in China. She pointed out that White NESTs were paid the highest, earning several times the median local salary. This was then followed by other groups of foreigners such as White NNESTs, and then, finally, Black and FA teachers, making slightly more than local Chinese teachers. Michelle believed that this unequal pay system reflected the 'underlying racist system of value' in the Chinese ELT field. She clarified that White NESTs are 'most valuable' as they attract the most business. Collectively, these findings demonstrate that in the Chinese ELT context, pay and value structures for teachers seem race-based and unrelated to their level of education, experience, or teaching ability.

Management treatment and recruitment

According to the teachers' reported experiences, FA teachers could be mistreated as they could be mistaken as a local Chinese teacher because of their appearance. Diane, a British FA NEST, shared that once it was established that she was an international teacher, her treatment was noticeably different. The following is an example of one of these instances:

I went to the office once to ask for a key to go into a room that maybe I could have a rest in after dinner . . . and you know, looking as I am. A staff member was asking, who are you? And as soon as I say my [English] name, she was like, oh, come in! Sit down! So actually, yes. If you are white, they probably would have from the beginning been very welcoming. Whereas they weren't that welcoming, asking . . . why do you need the key? Who are you? Until I said my name and then they were like oh, yeah! Yeah!

In this respect, FA NESTs in China are disadvantaged as they are not 'overt NESTs'.

Additionally, according to Evie, the most racial inequality she experienced from management as an FA NEST was during the recruitment process. She reflected on how it took her roughly two months of applying to schools directly to find employment as she was turned down by recruitment agencies, one time being informed that 'schools aren't looking for Asians'. She recalled receiving positive reactions to her applications due to her credentials, but communication would cease after seeing photographs of her, presumably due to her Asian appearance. On the other hand, Diane experienced no issues in recruitment. However, she explained this was probably because had direct connections with the recruiters at the institutions where she was employed.

The three White teachers reported no problems in terms of recruitment. The White participants generally had fewer or less 'relevant' qualifications than the FA participants, but this seemed to cause no difficulties. James possessed the fewest qualifications, with no undergraduate degree and no prior teaching experience. However, he expressed the ease of finding employment, stating 'you could find a job in like a week if you wanted to'. Furthermore, Michelle shared that she has seen job advertisements at her school that

explicitly asked for White NESTs. She stated: 'I felt that was so racist. I think many people don't realise they're being racist'.

Parental treatment

James reported that the most significant difference he noticed in treatment between him and his FA co-worker came from parents. He recalled that his FA co-worker experienced more rudeness from parents, stating that parents would 'talk to her in a more aggressive way than they would to White teachers'. Similarly, Michelle spoke about an ethnically Chinese teacher who had immigrated to the USA during her adolescence and spoke English at a native level. Michelle explained that her co-worker 'experienced a great deal of negative scrutiny and outright rudeness from the parents'.

While other participants only observed negative treatment from parents, Evie, as an FA teacher herself, experienced this first hand. She reported parents expressing concern or issues to management, presumably regarding her race. She recalled parents displaying confusion and watching her lessons through a window:

They would turn to one another . . . there was one time I remember that someone grabbed the staff member . . . and at the door they're kind of just pointing [at me].

She then described another unsettling incident:

The other nerve-racking time was on Parents' Day when they would come to sit in the back of the class. Sometimes, when they first walked in, if their kid had not told them about me, they'd look confused. A staff member would usually introduce me, and after that, I'd invite them to sit beside their kids to see what they were doing. I could hear them ask their kids, 'Is this your teacher?' and say 'Canada.' They never asked me directly, but it was always indirect. That was the most negative experience, though it wasn't directed at me directly.

Evie also experienced a few cases of parents requesting their children to move class as they 'wanted a real teacher'; thus, they were assigned to a White teacher's class instead. As these requests were made directly to management, she said she cannot be sure of the actual reasons for these requests. However, she also received a lower salary than her White co-workers, and she had questioned the reason for this inequality. She explained: 'they [parents] didn't think it would be fair that they're paying the same for me, for my classes, when they could be attending other classes with White-looking teachers'. This magnified need for FA NESTs to continuously prove their right to belong reportedly caused psychological strain for these teachers. Evie articulated these feelings well:

There was a time when I thought nah, I'm done. Give up. I don't have to feel like I have to prove myself every single time I step into a classroom . . . I belong here. I am a teacher. I am qualified and I am experienced. And having to earn that right gets really tiring.

Evie's account provides valuable insights into the emotional pressure faced by FA teachers as a result of unequal treatment based on their race.

Student treatment

Both FA NESTs shared that students seemed to display confusion over their 'Chinese' appearance upon initial meetings as they were expecting a 'foreign' teacher. They

described being met with ‘apprehension’ and ‘suspicion’. Diane noticed students questioning her nationality amongst themselves; this confusion was heightened by their expectation of a ‘foreigner’ due to her traditionally English forename and surname. Diane, however, did not consider this experience to be negative, as her race never elicited negative treatment from students. Evie also did not report particularly negative treatment from students regarding race. Notwithstanding, she sometimes noted disruptive behaviour from mature male students, such as talking on the phone during the lesson. Evie believed this was due to various factors resulting in less general respect from them, for example, young age, gender, and ‘Chinese’ appearance. She presumed that these male students were not used to taking orders from someone like her, as young and female ‘didn’t fit with their worldview’ of authority figures.

Interestingly, the ‘Chinese’ appearance of the FA NESTs reportedly played a positive role in building rapport and trust with students after the initial confusion. Having a similar appearance may have given students a sense of comfort and familiarity. Evie reported some examples of positive feedback due to her ‘Chinese’ appearance, such as ‘we like her because she looks like us’, and being told she makes the students feel ‘relaxed’ despite being ‘a strict teacher’. She reported mature female students opening up to her and even confiding in her about domestic issues, but she never witnessed this with her White co-workers. Ultimately, Evie recognised her ‘Asianness’ as a ‘positive and as a strength rather than a limitation’.

Similarly, Diane noted that being Chinese ethnically may not have been a ‘hindrance’, as she could appreciate and understand Chinese culture. She felt that she became a ‘mother figure’ to some of her students. Diane reported going for picnics with students often and building a very close bond with them. She became a highly favoured English teacher at her university due to her teaching methods and her approachability. Several students in her classes were not officially enrolled on her course, and she explained that ‘because they’ve heard about my interactive teaching methods, they actually came and joined my class’ and shared she was still in regular contact with these students, despite having not taught in the university for a few years.

Discussion

In this section, we discuss the findings through the lens of CRT to examine the race-related aspects of FA English teachers’ professional experiences in China.

Racism as institutionalised and socially constructed

One tenet of CRT points out that racism permeates institutions and structures and views race and racism as socially constructed rather than biologically determined (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). In the current study, this tenet was prominent in recruitment practices and salary. The findings indicate that foreign-looking teachers, mainly Whites, are favoured by recruitment teams over FA teachers. This was supported by reports of White NNESTs receiving higher salaries than racialised NESTs (Appleby, 2013; Ruecker & Ives, 2014), displaying that the inequality was a racial issue rather than a ‘nativeness’ issue. Paradoxically, although White teachers recognised and felt guilt over the inequality, they still

accepted the privileges that inequality offered them. This passiveness, however, seems to also be due to the lack of power rather than just pure indifference, as the teachers referenced high turnover rates and binding contracts that rendered them powerless.

Furthermore, this research indicates that racial discrimination experienced by the participating FA teachers in China primarily stems from management decisions rather than schools responding to learners' demands. The study reveals that private schools in China may perpetuate racial inequalities by marketing Whiteness or foreignness as desirable qualities, thus creating a preference for White NESTs in the ELT industry (Gerald, 2022; Ramjattan, 2019; Ruecker & Ives, 2014). This suggests that racial inequalities in the Chinese ELT field are not a result of individual learners' preferences, but rather a consequence of institutions actively promoting and selling the image of ideal White NESTs (Boonsuk, Wasoh, & Fang, 2023; Liu, 2022). In other words, racial inequalities in the Chinese ELT field are arguably rooted in societal perceptions and market-driven forces rather than overt racism. Similar trends of market-driven racial inequalities have also been observed in other ELT contexts such as Japan (Lawrence & Nagashima, 2020; Rudolph, 2023) and South Korea (Seo, 2023).

Challenging neutrality: critique of dominant ideologies

Challenging dominant ideologies, CRT highlights the deeply ingrained nature of racism in everyday life and rejects superficial colour-blind policies as inadequate solutions (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). In the context of the present study, White teachers benefited from a higher degree of privilege due to their foreign appearance, being readily recognised and respected as NESTs (Almayez, 2024; Stinson & Migliarini, 2023). In contrast, FA NESTs faced constant scrutiny and may be perceived as less qualified, leading to a lack of belonging in the field despite their NES status, qualifications, and experience (Von Esch, Motha, & Kubota, 2020). The experiences of FA NESTs in the present study also reveal the additional emotional pressure they faced in continually having to prove themselves as 'good enough'. This points to a global issue rather than being exclusive to China, where racial preferences for native speakers are often justified as a mere preference. The issue here is that, generally, no one wants to believe that they contribute to a racist system, and many do not consciously or actively perpetuate racist ideologies. A disconnect also occurs in the mind of people owing to the depiction of racism in media. Many envision racism as overt anti-social behaviour from individuals in society, which is not associated with everyday actions (Nakamura, 2010). In reality, racism does not only involve extreme acts of bigotry or pure race ideologies. Mainstream manifestations of racist ideology often go unnoticed because they usually are not overt acts, but rather are engrained deeply in a historical system, that is, systemic racism (Flores & Rosa, 2023; Kubota, 2002, 2023). In a field like ELT, which has historical ties to colonial oppression (Howatt & Smith, 2014), systemic racism plays a significant role in perpetuating racist ideologies, most clearly in the preference for nativeness (Liu & Li, 2024). In other words, in ELT racial inequalities are often the result of native-speakerism (Curtis & Romney, 2006; Kubota & Lin, 2006). Therefore, it is crucial to address both racial inequalities and native-speakerism to ensure social justice and the future development of the ELT field.

Amplifying marginalised voices: counter-storytelling and intersectionality

The next relevant tenet of CRT emphasises counter-storytelling and amplifying the voices of marginalised individuals and communities. In this respect, the self-reported experiences of discrimination by FA teachers in the present study offer valuable insight into the nature of how racism operates within Chinese ELT institutions. Through their active participation and sharing of stories, the FA teachers in the study were able to legitimise their experiences and gain a platform to express their encounters with racial inequality (Seo, 2023; Seo & Kubota, 2023). However, a tenet that coexists in somewhat uneasy tension with this is ‘intersectionality’ or ‘anti-essentialism’. This means that rather than viewing a racialised society as homogeneous or static, it is crucial to recognise the different types of diversity within it (Delgado & Harris, 2017). Accordingly, this study involved two FA teachers with many individual differences to obtain more representative results.

A noteworthy discussion point arising from this research finding is the disparity in race-related difficulties reported by the two FA participants, Evie and Diane. Several factors can potentially account for this discrepancy, including age, institution, experience, and connections. Firstly, Evie and Diane had a significant age gap during their time as teachers in China. Evie, being a fresh graduate with limited experience, may have encountered more challenges related to race. In contrast, Diane, who had recently retired after a long teaching career, may have benefitted from the cultural emphasis on respecting elders in East Asian countries like China (Xie & Xia, 2005). This cultural factor could have contributed to Diane experiencing fewer issues or instances of disrespect. Secondly, Diane’s extensive teaching experience played a role in managing difficult classroom conditions, student behaviour, and workplace relations more effectively than Evie. Furthermore, the difference in the teaching institutions where Evie and Diane worked is noteworthy. Diane taught in a university setting, which typically has stricter rules and regulations compared to privately-owned language schools. The university environment may have provided additional support and guidance, contributing to Diane’s relatively smoother experience. Lastly, Diane mentioned her connections with recruiters as a possible factor that protected her from certain difficulties. This highlights the potential influence of personal networks and connections in navigating the challenges faced by FA teachers in the Chinese ELT field. These factors demonstrate the multifaceted nature of the FA teachers’ experiences and how various intersecting contextual and individual factors can influence the extent of race-related inequalities encountered.

Activism and advocacy principle: ‘Asianness’ as a strength

A final tenet of CRT relevant to the present study is related to social transformation and promotion of activism and advocacy to challenge and dismantle racial injustices, with the goal of creating a more equitable and inclusive society. In this regard, the findings were not all negative, as all teachers reported overall positive experiences in their teaching, no matter their race. While it may be challenging to look past the varying degrees of racial inequalities, it must be noted that no racial biases came directly from learners’ perceptions, and no overt racial discrimination experienced by our FA teachers were from learners. In fact, both FA teachers recognised the strengths

in their Asian race as it made them more relatable to students, which significantly aided in building rapport. These results suggest that 'Asianness' is not always a weakness in Chinese ELT. Traditional Chinese views on education are mostly embedded in Confucianism, which emphasises the relationships between students and the teacher (Jin & Cortazzi, 2013), as teachers are expected to take the role of 'authoritative parents' who 'love their pupils' and 'know them well' (Wang & Lin, 2018, p. 197). The advantage of forming stronger relationships with students based on shared looks, appearance, and, to some extent, culture can benefit FA teachers who wish to assimilate and fully embrace their role as educators in China. This is a promising result as learners are ultimately the core of any type of learning and education endeavour (Schweisfurth, 2013), including the ELT field (Bax, 2003; Phan, 2014).

Conclusion: moving forward

Adopting CRT, this study examines the experiences of FA teachers in China and highlights the impact of race on their professional journey. The findings reveal that race influences the treatment of FA teachers, resulting in both advantages and disadvantages. FA teachers encounter inequalities in terms of recruitment opportunities and salary compared to their White counterparts. Institutions perpetuate the notion of the 'ideal White NEST', leading to a higher demand for White teachers. FA teachers, especially those who do not fit the 'ideal' image, face initial apprehension and the ongoing need to prove themselves. Notably, both FA teachers acknowledged their racial Asianness as a strength, facilitating better connections with Chinese learners. Although the small sample size of interviewees limits generalisability, these findings offer valuable insights for relevant ELT stakeholders, which will be outlined in turn in the following.

First, the study emphasises the need for institutions and recruiters to challenge the bias towards 'ideal White NESTs' and value the diverse skills and experiences of all English teachers. Institutions should promote inclusivity by acknowledging the contributions of all teachers and addressing racial inequalities in hiring. Although dismantling the current hierarchy may threaten the privileges of White individuals from Inner Circle countries, embracing a more equitable approach will enhance the professionalism of the field.

Second, for English to become a truly international language we must dismantle the ideologies of native speaker superiority and Western-centrism in our teaching (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Kubota & Lin, 2006). Schools influence students' worldviews, making it crucial to challenge harmful stereotypes and promote decolonisation of English (Kumaravadivelu, 2016; Li, 2018). ELT professionals should actively fight against these biases and ensure that less powerful voices are heard. This involves speaking with marginalised groups, not for them. Teachers can use Sleeter's (2013) 'Teaching for Social Justice in Multicultural Classrooms' to help students understand different cultures and challenge inaccurate beliefs and hierarchies. Sleeter argues that social justice requires acknowledging cultural differences, similar to how CRT recognises that colour-blind policies do not address racial inequality. Her four hallmarks of multicultural social justice teaching are: using culture as a foundation for learning; incorporating diverse cultural content into the curriculum; facilitating dialogue about sensitive issues; and guiding students in analysing and addressing social justice

problems. Implementing these practices can cultivate open-minded learners and promote an inclusive, egalitarian field.

Finally, professional development and support play a crucial role in addressing the emotional pressure and continuous need for validation experienced by FA teachers in the face of racial inequalities. By recognising and addressing the unique challenges and experiences faced by FA teachers, educational institutions can provide targeted professional development programmes to enhance their pedagogical skills and cultural competence. These programmes should incorporate resources and strategies for navigating the complexities of race and diversity in the classroom (Kubota, 2023). Creating safe spaces for dialogue and reflection can also foster a supportive community where FA teachers can share their experiences, seek guidance, and engage in critical discussions about race and social justice in education. Such initiatives contribute to the overall well-being and professional growth of FA teachers, empowering them to navigate the ELT field with confidence and efficacy.

Notes

1. The term ‘native’ and ‘non-native’ is used in this context to describe individuals’ self-described language backgrounds. It is important to acknowledge that these labels can be limiting and may perpetuate biases and discrimination (Holliday, 2005).
2. East Asian passing refers to individuals who may not identify as East Asian but could be perceived as East Asian due to their physical characteristics.

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