

Leaving China

Why expatriates like me abandoned the futures we planned in China.

Mar 17

♡ 64

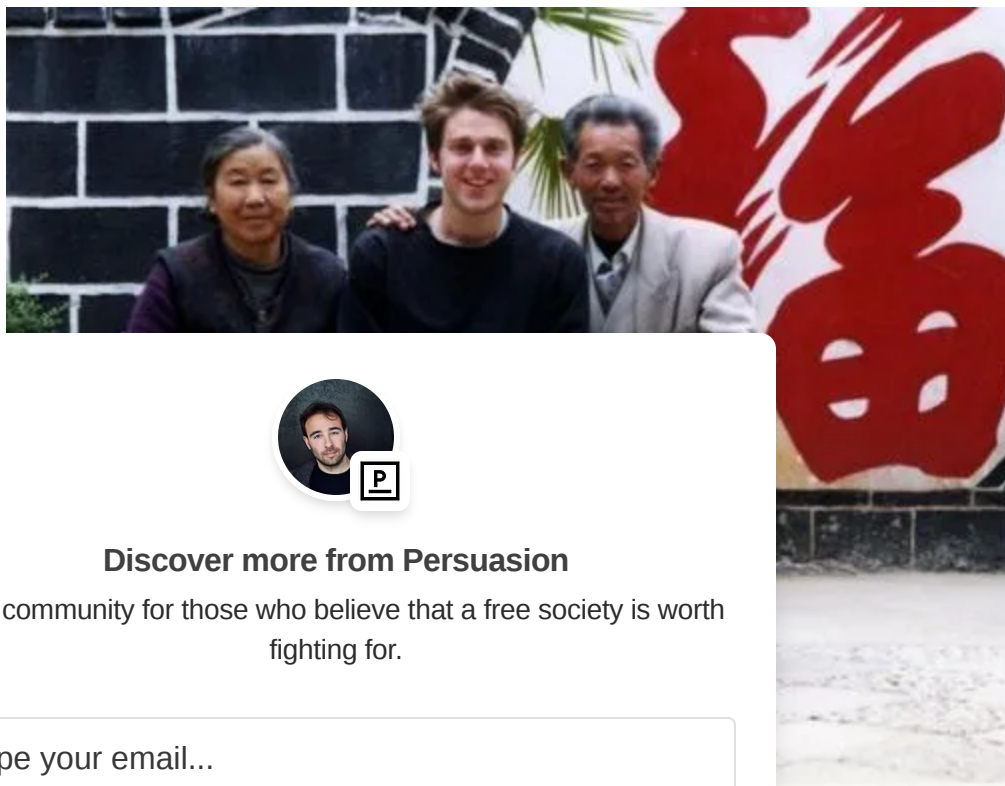


(Feature China/Future Publishing via Getty Images)

by **Blake Stone-Banks**

It's difficult for me to imagine a better place to have lived for the past two decades than China. The country's rise has been exhilarating, and I have no doubt its future will be as well. But as China opens from its harsh zero-Covid policies, I find myself, along with many long-term expatriates in the country, making my exit to return home to the United States due to political upheavals that have put into question the futures we have long imagined in the Middle Kingdom.

When I arrived in China as a student in 2000, none of my friends owned a phone—cell or landline. We used beepers and public phones for communication. Quickly, though, the technology we used would come to match or leapfrog the kind used by our peers in the Western world. My friends' first phones would be cell phones, not landlines; mobile payment would precede credit cards; and the social media application WeChat would transform the landscape of life, work, commerce, and governance in ways those in the West still don't grasp.



The
and
out
But
blind eye until it affects them directly.

ends woken in the night
forced to flee for speaking
China is real and effective.
and it necessary to turn a

That became impossible during the Covid-19 pandemic, when the force of China's technocracy was on full display. Families were torn apart and businesses shuttered. When the government stopped renewing citizens' passports, the claustrophobia of not

being able to leave and the paranoia about what might come next became unbearable. Almost everyone I knew who had a way out took it, even expatriate friends who had been living in China since the 1980s.

Although China hasn't released any updated numbers, the country's pre-pandemic census suggests that some had begun to leave even before the Covid crackdown. From 2010 to 2020, Shanghai's expat population dropped from 208,000 to 163,000. A survey by the European Chamber of Commerce in April 2022 [found that](#) 85 percent of foreigners living in China said the lockdown had made them rethink their futures in the country. And before I left, I would frequently walk around formerly expat-rich districts like Shanghai's French Concession or Beijing's Sanlitun and be the only foreigner on the street.

China's expat exodus is occurring during a precarious time for the country: In 2022, China's total population [decreased](#) by more than 800,000 — the first population decline in more than sixty years. Now that the failed zero-Covid policies have been lifted, China is desperately looking to win back both foreign investment and foreign professionals. But the question remains if foreigners will return, and what the lives they lead in post-Covid China will look like.

As then-Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi's plane approached Taiwan last August, I was attending a business dinner in Anhui, a province in eastern China, with several Chinese nationals. It was difficult to talk business as everyone was occupied checking their phones for news of Pelosi's plane.

Soon, the entire restaurant grew deathly quiet. Not just our table but every person in the restaurant was staring at the live stream of the radar tracking Pelosi's arrival. At the table next to us, a young couple on a date spent their entire dinner in silence, staring at the glow of their phones. The only sound in the restaurant was the bleep of the [radar on their smartphones](#).

"Don't worry. You'll be fine if there's war," the company's CEO comforted me. "You speak Chinese." The topic of war between America and China had come up with increasing frequency over the past year, often in business contexts, often when I was the

only American in the room. No one knew what that would look like, and no one wanted to know.

Back in Shanghai a week later, after another three-day lockdown for my family, I had dinner with a friend who was a Party member and former official who still had some connections. I told him I was thinking of leaving. As a father of two American citizens, I did not like to see kids in the park playing “war” or to watch the military propaganda frequently shared in WeChat groups. He reiterated what more than a few connected families had told me, that Xi’s zero-Covid policies had been unpopular, and that most people, even in government, thought it would be very bad for China to continue shutting the outside world out. Specifically, he reminded me that as we headed into the Party Congress in October, China’s government was not a one-man show.

“There are different contingents, and elders, and former leaders all of whom have a big say. Yes, Xi may get the third term, but when he walks out, look at who’s on his left and his right. Those will be their people, not Xi’s.”

At the Party Congress in October, however, Xi removed the old brass and installed only loyalists. By his side was Li Qiang, the new premier and Xi loyalist who had overseen the Shanghai lockdown earlier that year. Hu Jintao, China’s leader before Xi, was forcibly led out of the Congress in front of the global media.

Since moving back to the America from China a few months ago, I am often asked if I wish I had stayed to see China reopen, if perhaps I left too early. Now connected with former China expats and Chinese here in America, a common answer is it’s still too early to tell. At a basic level, I know several foreigners, myself included, who have no plans to move back until a successor to Xi is named. It is difficult to point to many countries on a positive trajectory under a leader with unchecked power and without term limits.

With my family, saying goodbye to China in 2022.

Foreigners returning to China or moving into China for the first time will find a vastly different landscape than that prior to Covid. China's leadership has made clear that they will prioritize unification and Party integrity over the economy and the well-being of their people. Although there is no leader yet in the wings to take over from Xi in the next ten years (let alone the next five), leadership does evolve and dialogue remains more important than ever.

Where expatriates of the past decades were drawn by the possibilities of China's growing openness, the new generation will live under tightening restrictions and greater uncertainty. Alongside heightened geopolitical tensions, this will likely stem the flow of expats from America, Europe, Japan and Korea. As a consequence, new expat communities from other countries like Brazil, Russia, and India may take root.

Regardless of where they are from, a new generation of expats will be good for both China and the world. Because the more engagement the country has with the rest of the world, the less likely it will be to isolate itself from the global community and turn inward. Though I'm not on my way back anytime soon, I hope that the next generation of expats finds a home, and a future, in China.

Blake Stone-Banks first moved to China in 2000. Following China's zero-Covid policies, he returned to the United States at the end of 2022.

Follow *Persuasion* on [Twitter](#), [LinkedIn](#), and [YouTube](#) to keep up with our latest articles, podcasts, and events, as well as updates from excellent writers across our network.

And, to receive pieces like this in your inbox and support our work, subscribe below:

<input type="text" value="Type your email..."/>	<input type="button" value="Subscribe"/>
---	--

Comments



Write a comment...