



Institute of Chinese Studies

SPECIAL LECTURE

*Who is in, who is out?
Urban Redevelopment, Local
Identity & Vernacular
Proficiency in Shanghai*

REPORT

Speaker :
Fang Xu

4 September 2023

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Speaker: Dr. Fang Xu, Continuing Lecturer, Interdisciplinary Studies Field, University of California, Berkley.

Chair: Dr. Anand P. Krishnan, Fellow, Centre of Excellence for Himalayan Studies, Shiv Nadar Institution of Eminence, Delhi-NCR; and, Visiting Associate Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.

Date: 4 September 2023

Venue: Zoom Webinar

The lecture explored the impact of urban redevelopment on local identity and vernacular proficiency. The seminar was based on field research conducted by the speaker in 2013 and 2017, situated at the intersection of phenomenological concepts of place and non-place, the place-bound identity of individuals, and tropes of language ideology.

According to the speaker, Dr. Fang Xu, millions of Shanghainese have been displaced as a result of Shanghai's transition into a global city, which has caused the redevelopment of entire neighbourhoods, forcing them to be relegated to urban oblivion. She argued that the city's core has developed into an embodiment of the "China Dream," with a constructed environment mirroring what is seen in big cities across the world. Additionally, the city has seen an increase in internal migrants, which has necessitated state-implemented language laws, mandating the use of standard Mandarin, or *Putonghua*, in all spheres of public life in Shanghai. Consequently, the speaker argued that a new urban middle class has emerged, whose focus is more on education and income, against a focus on birthplace and political affiliation, in stark contrast to the Mao era.

The speaker employed personal lived experiences, in tandem with her detailed research, to substantiate the prevailing effects of the aforementioned factors on the city of Shanghai and its population. Born and raised in Shanghai in the 1980s, the speaker attended Tongji University before moving to North America. Dr. Fang Xu related an anecdote integral to the development of her research, where the staff at a popular event had displayed surprise at her usage of the Shanghai vernacular, which had been the *lingua franca* in Shanghai, as against *Putonghua*. This experience underscored the rapid change that Shanghai has undergone since the beginning of the Reform Era in China and highlighted the importance of understanding and respecting the differences between different dialects and backgrounds.

Dr. Fang Xu further noted the state-mandated employment of standard Mandarin as the national language and the sole medium of instruction in educational institutions from kindergarten to college. She highlighted how proficiency in Mandarin has become a sign of higher education and social status. The speaker also noted that the Shanghai dialect is a relatively new urban variation of the modern Chinese language, with little over a century of history. She further noted that 85% of the population of Shanghai has come to be represented by internal migrants. The lack of cultural elements that relate the Shanghai dialect with aspects of Shanghainese identity and the comparatively short history of Shanghai makes it difficult to articulate and weaponize the local identity for political purposes. The central government's approach to imposing a more national Chinese identity in Shanghai can be seen as erasing regional differences and promoting a more *national* Chinese identity.

Dr. Fang Xu also mentioned that the performing arts that employ the Shanghai dialect have become popular among local artists, who are now seeking a larger audience through a multitude of approaches. She further stated that the acceptability range and relationship between dialect fluency and *Shanghainese* identity suggest that the dialect still serves as a determinant of local identity. The speaker concluded by stating that a less discriminatory linguistic environment for migrants in Shanghai has been made possible by the widespread bilingualism among *Shanghainese* and the developing *Putonghua* monolingualism, also known as the Shanghai dialect incapacity, among its younger generation. Through vlogs or TikTok, the Shanghai dialect may continue to exist as an urban linguistic subculture online.

The seminar was followed by an engaging discussion, where the Chair, Dr. Anand P. Krishnan, reiterated the continued relevance of the speaker's findings and how urban development and the top-down approach of imposing a standardised language has impacted local populations, especially in Shanghai.

The participants raised various insightful observations and thought-provoking questions, including the imposition of *Putonghua* in Shanghai operating as a factor that may limit regional identity and promote a more national one, potentially resulting in a negative backlash from local communities with political connotations.

Disclaimer: This is a report produced for purposes of dissemination and for generating wider discussion. All views expressed here should be understood to be those of the speakers and individual participants, and not necessarily of the Institute of Chinese Studies. Since this is a summary, it cannot be used for citation without confirming with the speaker(s).