



Institute of Chinese Studies

WEDNESDAY SEMINAR

*Gender in Language and
Expression with Chinese
Language as a Point of
Departure*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Speaker:
Usha Chandran

9 April 2025

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Speaker: Dr. Usha Chandran, Assistant Professor, Centre for Chinese and South East Asian Studies, School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi; and Honorary Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.

Chair: Prof. Patricia Uberoi, Emeritus Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.

Date: 9 April 2025

Venue: Zoom Webinar

- The seminar focused on the relationship between language and gender, with specific reference to the Chinese language. Dr. Chandran highlighted how the pictographic nature of Chinese characters — especially those containing the female radical (女) — reflects entrenched patriarchal ideas. Her contention was that language not only reflects but also reinforces societal norms, especially with regard to how women are linguistically portrayed and addressed.
- Referring to Confucian philosophy and classical texts, the speaker demonstrated how gender norms were institutionalised through linguistic forms. Confucian ideas such as the “Three Obediences and Four Virtues” shaped women’s roles in familial and societal hierarchies, with language functioning as a principal tool to reinforce these structures. Proverbs, ritual texts, and naming conventions were highlighted by the speaker as examples of such embedded hierarchies.
- Adopting a social constructionist and performative framework, Dr. Chandran explored how individuals reinforce gender stereotypes through speech and social interactions “do” gender through speech. She explained how men tend to use assertive and affirmative language associated with power, while women are expected to be passive and indirect. These patterns are prevalent across both traditional and modern settings, and are mirrored in digital platforms through new forms of gendered abuse and expression.

- A central theme of the seminar was the contemporary relevance of gendered language, particularly in online spaces. Terms like “green tea bitch” (绿茶婊) “pseudo-feminist” (田园女权), and “scheming woman” (作女) are often used to shame or discredit women, and reflect a persistent discomfort with gender nonconformity. The speaker revealed how internet culture both reproduces misogynistic norms and offers a space for counter-narratives, especially among feminist users who employ gender-neutral or so-called subversive expressions.
- Dr. Chandran cited Nüshu, a script developed by women in Hunan province, as a powerful example of linguistic resistance. As a female-exclusive writing system, it has enabled women to narrate their lives outside the patriarchal framework. This was framed as a reminder of how marginalised communities often develop alternative modes of expression to challenge dominant narratives and reclaim agency.
- In conclusion, Dr. Chandran stressed the urgent need for greater awareness and reform in language education and use. She called on translators, language learners, and educators to identify and challenge gender biases within linguistic systems.

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