

Institute of Chinese Studies

WEDNESDAY SEMINAR

*We Were Smart:
Shame, Memory,
and Migrant Youth
Experiences*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Speaker:
Snigdha Konar

7 January 2025

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Speaker: Dr. Snigdha Konar, Research Associate and Assistant Director, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.

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

Venue: Zoom Webinar

- The seminar examined *Shamate* (杀马特) as a social subculture that emerged in the early 2000s in China. This subculture rapidly spread among second-generation rural migrant youth employed in factory work. These were primarily teenagers and young adults who had dropped out of school early and entered industrial labour largely due to their financial conditions. The speaker noted that their flamboyant hairstyles, bold makeup, and fashion should not be seen as aesthetic excesses, but as expressions forged within constrained lives shaped by poverty, migration, and early separation from families.
- The speaker explained that *Shamate* identity was shaped by structural pressures such as limited education and early entry into exploitative factory work, and was not freely chosen. Many *Shamate* youth began working as early as 14 years of age. Their experiences reflect broader patterns of unequal urbanisation and systemic neglect, making *Shamate* a product of constraint rather than individual rebellion or lifestyle choice.
- While *Shamate* youth were highly visible in online platforms and popular media, this visibility largely functioned as ridicule rather than recognition. Mainstream discourse framed them as vulgar, tasteless, socially deviant, and culturally deficient, especially within urban middle-class narratives. According to the speaker, such representations ignored the lived realities of factory labour, dormitory confinement, humiliation, and emotional isolation that shaped *Shamate* life.
- Dr. Konar highlighted the role of QQ groups and online spaces as crucial sites of belonging for *Shamate* youth. These platforms functioned as protective virtual communities where members could gain recognition, emotional support, and visibility denied to them in physical urban spaces. However, even these spaces were eventually

destabilised by ridicule, infiltration, and commodification, contributing to the subculture's gradual dissolution.

- The speaker examined Li Yifan's documentary titled, *Shamate, Wo Ai Ni* (We Were Smart), which adopts a participatory documentary approach. Rather than observing *Shamate* from the outside, the film allows the youth to narrate their own experiences through interviews, factory footage shot by migrant workers themselves, and content posted in QQ groups. The speaker noted that this approach restores subjectivity and dignity to a group long relegated to caricature.
- Dr. Konar argued against interpreting *Shamate* as a form of rebellion, political resistance or organised labour movement. Unlike Western punk or anti-establishment subcultures, *Shamate* lacked a coherent political vision or agenda. Instead, its exaggerated aesthetics functioned as instinctive acts of self-preservation, offering temporary psychological protection against humiliation, exhaustion, and social invisibility.
- The decline of *Shamate* can be traced back to intensified economic pressure, workplace discipline, and social intolerance. Most members were eventually forced to abandon the aesthetic by cutting their hair to secure employment or social acceptance. While the subculture faded, its memories continue to persist, marked by pride, trauma, longing, and loss, revealing *Shamate* as a transitional “way station” rather than a stable identity.
- The speaker concluded by cautioning against mistaking individual success stories, such as Luo Fuxing's later media visibility, for structural empowerment. Such exceptional cases risk creating an illusion of progress while masking enduring inequalities rooted in *hukou* exclusion, labour uncertainty, and class hierarchy. Ultimately, *Shamate* is best understood as a symptom of exclusion, compelling reflection on how marginal lives remain hyper-visible yet persistently under-acknowledged in contemporary China.

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