

Fang Xu, *Silencing Shanghai: Language and Identity in Urban China*

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Between 2000 and 2010, roughly 5.5 million people flowed into Shanghai, sanctioned by reforms to the system of urban resident permits that long kept China's population movement in check. Whether poor migrants destined for manual labor in the construction sites raising a new global metropolis or wealthy and highly educated migrants attracted by employment opportunities, these new urban citizens brought with them languages from all over China. In *Silencing Shanghai*, author Fang Xu notes that contrary to both popular belief and official policy about a unified national language, China is a linguistically diverse nation. One of the most prominent examples of that diversity is Shanghaiese or, as Xu calls it, "Shanghai dialect." The use of that term might cause some confusion for the uninformed reader, because while speakers of different northern Mandarin Chinese dialects can often understand each other, Shanghaiese is actually unintelligible to speakers of the national language, Putonghua.

The impacts of this massive population influx on Shanghaiese are paired with a more overlooked internal migration as residents of Shanghai's urban core, whom Xu labels "native Shanghaiese," have been displaced into the suburban periphery to make way for the gleaming skyscrapers, opulent shopping malls, and luxury apartments that are part of Shanghai's transformation into a "global city." Therefore, even as millions of non-Shanghaiese speakers have flooded the city, the core of the Shanghaiese-speaking population has been dispersed among them, minimizing the language's imprint on the urban imagination. Xu's book is, in a sense, both a paean to the legacy of Shanghaiese as a language of place, intimacy, and familiarity, and an autopsy of the language's demise at the hands of urban planning and state policy.

That policy is the 2001 Language Law that codified Putonghua as the national language of China—and not simply in an abstract way. As Xu documents, the full power of the state's propaganda has been dedicated to twinning national unity with linguistic unity. Celebrations are held each year for Putonghua Promotion Week, while signs and voices throughout public space regulate the recognition of certain speech as legitimate and other types of speech as illegitimate. This leads to a predominant language ideology that associates Putonghua with social mobility, sophistication, nationalism, and modernity. "Public measures are seeping into private life, as adoption of the dominant language ideology increases in native Shanghaiese's homes, where they pass it down to their children" (74).

The introduction and subsequent two chapters outline the issues and concepts at the core of Xu's argument along with a history of the region and recent state efforts at linguistic homogenization within the city. Xu then turns to the linguistic consequences of the government's relocation of the core population of Shanghaiese speakers away from the city center to the suburban periphery. Chapter 4 discusses how native Shanghaiese encounter and interpret the motivations of newcomers, particularly wealthy migrants, often critiquing their apathy—and sometimes outright hostility—toward the city's vernacular. The final chapter contrasts the perspectives of natives with those of the newcomers themselves, who often feel marginalized through the use of Shanghaiese as the basis of local identity, forever outsiders in their new home. The conclusion summarizes the arguments of the book while reflecting on the language's future.

Studies of Chinese linguistic diversity written in English are sparse, and Xu's book does an admirable job of recording the aspirations and anxieties of Shanghairen toward this ongoing language shift. Methodologically, Xu conducted a large-scale survey of language attitudes among Shanghai residents, but later chapters also make extensive use of interviews and ethnographic observations as Shanghairen reflect on the sociolinguistic context. The book also draws upon and interprets some of the vast Chinese scholarship on this topic, bringing new Chinese perspectives to linguists studying language change in other settings. The discussion of Shanghainese itself is, unfortunately, relatively brief; what counts as Shanghainese (its phonology, lexicon, and syntax) is limited to a few examples provided throughout the book.

Recent sociolinguistic research on China highlights the hybridity of everyday discourse and strategic use of various languages and registers as speakers shift among different conversational stances and identities in various settings (Dong 2017). In this sense, the book is somewhat more static in its approach. Xu sets up a distinction early in the book between native Shanghairen, who speak Shanghainese, and non-native Shanghairen, who speak other Chinese languages. The natives "have been displaced from the urban center, their linguistic right to the city threatened, and they have experienced relative deprivation of privileges in terms of once exclusive access to top-quality social services" (202). Yet the language itself, despite its roots in the Yangtze Delta region, really only came into being in the 1920s, when many of the "native" Shanghairen families migrated to the city (34). By tying nativeness to dialect proficiency, Xu effectively delegitimizes the claims of more recent migrants in terms of belonging in the city.

Compare that perspective to the one offered by Chu Xiao-quan, who characterizes the linguistic situation in Shanghai as one of intense diversity: Shanghaier are often fluent in multiple languages, including Putonghua, Shanghainese, other regional Chinese dialects, and, increasingly, English too. "Boundaries between these varieties are not fixed and the evolution of these varieties in practical use appears to be the most noteworthy sociolinguistic phenomenon in contemporary Shanghai" (Chu 2001, 19). Even the data collected in Xu's survey (despite self-reporting being a notoriously unreliable guide to how speakers actually use language) show up to two-thirds of speakers mixing languages in various settings. In that sense, more attention to how Shanghaier speak, and how they blend and shift among available linguistic resources, would have been welcome.

Xu is pessimistic about the future prospects of Shanghainese. Most households are already shifting away from the language, and the speech of children is almost entirely dominated by Putonghua, despite the efforts of some dialect preservationists. The native Shanghairen have lost their attachment to the dense urban neighborhoods that shaped both their language and experiences in the Maoist era. The voices recorded and analyzed by Xu in this book poignantly attest to the grief of that passing and counter the dominant narrative of Shanghai's economic and cultural renaissance.

REFERENCES

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