

China Research Seminar Series (Michaelmas 2020)

Please Don't Laugh

Learning to Speak the “Common Language” in 1950s China



Dr Janet Chen

(Princeton University)

**5pm, 4 November, 2020 (Wednesday)
via Zoom (pre-registration required)**

Register in advance for this seminar:

<https://zoom.us/meeting/register/tJAsc-msrz4iGNf5pID6nHFgiPrnrAJthSfm>

After registering, you will receive a confirmation email
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Abstract

In the winter and early spring of 1956, a series of articles appeared in nationally circulating publications, featuring an earnest entreaty: please do not laugh at those who are trying to learn *putonghua*, the “common language” of the socialist state. Beyond the headlines, permutations of the same refrain echoed in different forums. At the opening stages of a campaign to “popularize the common language,” the message was a curious one. What were people laughing at, and why? What was so comical about learning the language recently anointed as the spoken standard? This talk explores the vexing issues that emerged in the campaign for speech standardization in the early years of the People's Republic. From 1955-1958, Communist Party propaganda enjoined “everyone” to do their utmost to learn *putonghua*, while forecasting the achievement of linguistic unity in the near future. Yet in between the lines of such sanguine predictions, persistent allusions to confusion and mockery surfaced. Where did these attitudes come from? What did laughter signify about popular reactions to the ideological assumptions embedded in the project of unifying speech? I explore these questions by examining the social and political dynamics of learning to speak a new standard language in the mid-1950s.

Speaker Bio

Dr Janet Chen is Associate Professor of History and East Asian Studies at Princeton University. She received her PhD in Chinese history in 2005 from Yale University. Her first book, *Guilty of Indigence: The Urban Poor in China, 1900-1953* (Princeton University Press, 2012), is a study of the destitute homeless during a time of war and revolution. Focusing on Beijing and Shanghai, the book considers how the advent of workhouses and poorhouses in the early twentieth century represented a fundamental reordering of the relationship between the state, private charity, and the neediest members of society. It draws on local archival research to place “the poor,” rather than their benefactors and custodians, at the center of inquiry. Her new book project, provisionally titled *The Sounds of Mandarin*, investigates the history of China’s spoken national language.