

Tanka Language: A disappearing language of boat people in Southeastern China



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The Tanka people, also known as the “boat people” and typically divided into two groups: Guangdong Tanka and Fujian Tanka, are primarily located in Southeastern China and officially classified as Southern Han (Anderson, 1970; Huang, 2008). They traditionally come from diverse regions such as Guangdong, Guangxi, Fujian, Hainan, Shanghai, Zhejiang, the coastal areas along the Yangtze River, and also Hong Kong and Macau (Chan, 2012; Zhuang, 2009).

Even though many Tanka have transitioned to land-based living, a segment of the older generation continues to reside in boats, maintaining their traditional fishing lifestyle (He & Faure, 2016). Historically, they have faced marginalization due to their maritime way of life, often being dubbed as “water gypsies” (Chen, 1954; He et al., 2022; Chen et al., 2022). Beyond China, a small Tanka population can also be found in Vietnam, where they are known as Đàn and recognized as a subgroup of the Ngai people (Hiroaki, 1967). However, the languages of the Tanka people have been severely under researched and is currently endangered. Our research team, funded by the ANR-RGC grant, spent nearly a year conducting fieldwork to study this unique language.

In this presentation, we will introduce the Tanka language as used in Hong Kong, examining it from the perspectives of phonology, lexicon, and grammar. We will also explore the origins of Hong Kong’s Tanka people and compare their language with another language, the “Holko,” which is also used by a portion of the boat people in Hong Kong.

Biography:

Corresponding Author: Dr. Cong WANG is an Assistant Professor at The Education University of Hong Kong. Her research interests include language contact, linguistic typology, second language learning, and language education. Recently, she has led two international grants as the Principal Investigator in collaboration with France.