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Shanghainese in Media and Academic Discourses: Symbolic Construction and Reproduction of Urban Identity

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Abstract— *As a highly symbolic urban-identity label in modern China, "Shanghainese" is shaped by multiple discursive forces. From a constructivist perspective, this paper examines two major production systems: traditional mainstream press media, as well as academic and elite cultural discourses. It analyzes how the urban identity of "Shanghainese" is constructed and reproduced through journalistic debates, literary narratives, historical interpretations and symbolic processing. The study finds that newspapers from the Republican era to the turn of the century forged multiple identity narratives such as "shrewd versus wise" and "new Shanghainese within an immigrant-city framework", demarcating cultural boundaries between insiders and outsiders. Academic and elite cultural discourses endow urban identity with theoretical legitimacy by refining core urban symbols including shikumen, Old Shanghai and "Magic Metropolis", while generating implicit identity-screening criteria based on lifestyle and cultural memory. The interplay between media and academic discourses constructs a collective imagination of urban community, yet also creates invisible cultural barriers for migrant populations. Urban identity is not an objective given fact, but a symbolic product continuously negotiated among media narratives, academic interpretations and popular social practices.*

Keywords— ***Shanghainese; urban identity; discursive construction; media narrative; symbolic reproduction***

I. INTRODUCTION

In modern urban societies, urban identity is a social phenomenon continuously constructed and disseminated across diverse discursive systems. As a highly symbolic urban identity, the image of "Shanghainese" has gradually taken shape and been reinforced through media communication and public interactions. From the constructivist perspective, urban-identity formation relies on the shaping of institutional discourses and continuous reproduction within public-cultural spheres. Traditional mainstream media assign specific personalities and value connotations to Shanghainese via news reports, commentaries and cultural columns. Academic scholarship further symbolizes and theorizes these images through historical narratives and conceptual construction, forming a body of knowledge concerning urban culture and localism. This paper elaborates the production mechanism of Shanghainese-identity discourse jointly shaped by mainstream media and academia, and reveals how urban identity is constructed and reproduced across different media spaces.

II. TRADITIONAL MEDIA AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE SHANGHAINESE IMAGE

As a key carrier for mainstream-ideology communication, traditional media play a critical role in constructing urban images and group identities. Due to differences in readership and discursive strategies, various

newspapers emphasize distinct dimensions of the Shanghainese image. Early-period traditional media began to shape Shanghai-related imagery. Kang Youwei remarked: "Shanghai gathers books, artifacts, erudite scholars and intellectuals from all parts of China for intellectual exchanges."[1] When Cai Yuanpei called for cultivating the Shanghai spirit, he argued that Shanghai ought to nourish the whole nation: "Shanghai belongs to Shanghainese. Endowed with favourable geographic conditions, Shanghainese shall forge a distinctive civilization, spread it nationwide along Shanghai's tides, and enable people across the country to absorb the nourishment of Shanghai civilization."[2] This marks the first emergence of "Shanghainese" as a cultural concept. During the 1920s, expressions such as "New Culture" and "New Shanghai" prevailed in newspapers, together with frequent terms including "civilization", "youth" and "progress". "Against the backdrop of national crisis and the enlightenment of modern-nation-state discourses, newspapers conveyed developmental ideas of old versus new through East-West binary oppositions. By shaping public spheres and civil-society imaginations, newspaper discourses facilitated the production of Shanghainese civic identities."[3]

In 1927, Jing Bao published serial stories about newcomers arriving in Shanghai[4]. By depicting outsiders' embarrassment when encountering modern facilities such as trains and electric lights as well as urban public norms, the newspaper constructed a typical narrative of "country folk making fools of themselves". Through comic effects, the series reinforced cultural boundaries of Shanghai urban identity: those familiar with modern facilities, urban rules and public-space order were positioned as Shanghainese or urban insiders; by contrast, outsiders ignorant of rules, languages and urban experiences were framed as urban "others" to be observed, corrected and educated. Hence modern-period newspapers transformed Shanghai's modern experience into an identity threshold, making "understanding Shanghai" a symbolic standard distinguishing urban subjects from outsiders.

In the early 1990s, Shanghai entered the initial stage of globalization. Nearly all local mass media participated in constructing the Shanghainese image, constituting a unique national-level media phenomenon. This media campaign centring on "Shanghainese" covered all social strata and developed into two-way public dialogue. Local-media construction of Shanghainese imagery signalled the initial awakening of the subjective consciousness of the Shanghai urban community. From December 17, 1991 to December 31, 1992, Jiefang Daily launched 28 thematic discussions, including three expert forums and two foreign-investor symposia[5]. Themes involved Shanghainese values, shrewdness versus wisdom, Haipai style, and the pioneering spirit. Meanwhile, Wenhui Bao, Xinmin Evening News, Youth Daily and Social Sciences Digest continuously published articles concerning Shanghai urban images and the Shanghainese ethos.

As a major newspaper targeting urban residents, Xinmin Evening News largely narrated everyday civic life. In its reports and columns, "shrewdness" became the most salient personality label for Shanghainese. This shrewdness contained multiple layers: economic rationality in calculation and efficiency, pragmatic life-wisdom amid complex environments, and urban adaptability with acute perception toward market and social shifts. In other contexts, this trait could be reinterpreted pejoratively as calculating and philistine, whereby media inadvertently solidified regional stereotypes. "Shrewdness" functioned both as a source of urban pride and an identity label magnified by external discourses. Its editorial The Pride of Shanghainese, published on September 13, 1986, stated: "Shanghainese feel proud of Shanghai. Shanghai has contributed tremendously to the nation, with advanced technologies and top-tier products, and many of Shanghainese's innovations exert nationwide influence. Nevertheless, our attitudes toward non-local compatriots have never been fundamentally improved."[6] Meanwhile, some newspapers criticized this trait: "Shanghainese are notorious for being shrewd-minded. Shaped by history and context, most Shanghainese excel at calculating and improvising. To outsiders, they appear overly calculating and petty. Transactions with Shanghainese seldom benefit outsiders and may even cause losses. Consequently, in many parts of Jiangsu, Zhejiang and Anhui, children are told 'do not do business with Shanghainese'."[7]

As an official mainstream outlet, Jiefang Daily consistently emphasized the connections between urban development and national missions. Along with Pudong's opening-up in the 1990s, Shanghai shifted from a backward position in reform-era China[8] back to a leading developmental engine[9]. Local newspapers set public agendas regarding Shanghainese. After launching its column "Overseas Persons Talk about Shanghai", discourses concerning Shanghainese shrewdness shifted: "Generally speaking, foreign investors prefer dealing with shrewd and capable enterprise cadres."[10] In 1990, Press Digest republished a report entitled "Shanghai Ranks First in National Population Quality": "According to China Statistical Information News, a Chinese Academy of Social Sciences survey shows that Shanghai ranks first in national population quality, scoring 17.1 against the national average of 9.9. Tianjin and Beijing follow with 16.8 and 15.3 respectively; Liaoning, Jilin, Shaanxi,

Jiangsu, Heilongjiang and Zhejiang all score above ten."[11] Within this framework, Shanghainese were framed as pioneers of reform and modernization. Initiated by Jiefang Daily and widely covered by mass media, the "Shanghainese of the 1990s" public discussion still bore traces of the planned-economy era, centring chiefly on the "shrewd or wise" debate. After a decade of opening-up, Shanghai took off once more and marched toward becoming "a new-type international metropolis"[12]. Haipai spirit in this context denotes openness, pioneering courage, Sino-Western integration and alignment with national development. This discourse embedded urban character within national-modernization narratives, symbolizing Shanghainese as subjects of reform and opening-up, strengthening their historical sense of mission and generating normative expectations of progress, innovation and leadership.

On August 5, 1989, Wenhui Bao reported the publication of the book series Shanghainese and Shanghai Bund, highlighting old-Shanghai history and Haipai heritage[13]. The next day, it covered One Hundred Real Shanghainese[14]. Local newspapers constructed urban-identity communities around the theme of Shanghainese. Wenhui Bao prioritized cultural expression and intellectual deliberation. Its supplements, urban columns, literary works and social-issue debates presented diversified Shanghainese images: nostalgic narratives of old Shanghai and lilong daily life, depictions of new middle-class lifestyles, and youth reflections upon local identity. Literary writings repeatedly invoked symbols including shikumen, lilong, cafés and the Bund, tightly associating Shanghainese with specific spaces. Media narrations of urban life constructed imaginable and imitable lifestyles. In this process, "Shanghainese" gradually transformed from real-world social groups into cultural symbols. Citizens participated intensively in discussions concerning the question "What spiritual outlook should Shanghainese embrace facing the new century?"[15]. After the dramatic urban transformations of the 1990s, citizens reflected on how moral quality might be improved accordingly. Discussions acknowledged Shanghai's historical identity as an immigrant city featuring mobility and inclusiveness, whose open ethos had once been stifled under the planned-economy system. At the turn of the century, the concept of "Shanghainese" was reconstructed. At an expert forum convened by the newspaper on November 29, 2000, scholar Lu Hanlong pointed out: "From the 1950s through the planned-economy period, Shanghai remained largely closed, altering Shanghainese mentalities. The old judgment 'shrewd but unwise' largely reflects planned-economy influences. Between 1958 and the early 1990s, strong regional consciousness prevailed. Today's 'Shanghainese' should be understood in a broad sense. Its iconic national reputation originates from Shanghai's historical identity as an inclusive immigrant city."[16]

The revival of its immigrant-city heritage reshaped Shanghai's demographic imagination, and the meaning of Shanghainese identity changed accordingly in newspaper discussions. Zhou Jingcheng's speech at the entrepreneurs' forum hosted by Wenhui Bao was representative: "I arrived in Shanghai in the early 1990s. This dynamic, opportunity-rich city offers platforms for talents from all backgrounds. Those of us who have devoted ourselves to Shanghai's reform and opening-up deserve to be called Shanghainese."[17] The essay Improving Civic Quality: Forging the Soul of the City described Shanghainese as follows: "Facing challenges from the information age and economic globalization, a new pattern of modern civilized society and a de-regionalized order of social interaction are unfolding before people today. This mirrors the tremendous transformations in social production and ways of life, alongside active independent choices. More and more people argue that new-century Shanghainese ought to cultivate patriotism and dedication, the pursuit of excellence, scientific rationality, law-abiding integrity, fair-competition ideas, willingness to communicate and participate, resilience, pragmatism, open-mindedness, self-improvement, courage to uphold justice, care for the vulnerable, environmental awareness, self-discipline, reverence for life and a global vision."[18]

Near the end of this media discussion, Wenhui Bao published a front-page concluding article: "Shanghai has always been an immigrant city defined by mobility and inclusiveness. 'Incorporating a hundred rivers' describes precisely the socio-cultural mentality Shanghainese formed over a long history, once suppressed when Shanghai became a stronghold of the planned economy. Reform and opening-up has brought unprecedented opportunities and expanded people's choices. While reshaping the city, Shanghainese reshape themselves … As all participants perceived, at the turn of the century the spirit and vitality of Shanghai as an immigrant city and international metropolis have returned … Nowadays, all contributors to Shanghai's construction, whether non-locals or foreigners, are regarded as 'new Shanghainese' of the new era."[19]

In solicited essays for Wenhui Bao's "Shanghainese of the 1990s" column, Lu Deming further interpreted the Shanghainese ethos: "Old Shanghai was an immigrant city and a paradise for adventurers, gathering Ningbo, Cantonese and Northern-Jiangsu people, Japanese and Westerners, people of all trades and merchants from everywhere. After the founding of the People's Republic

of China, long-term closure fostered complacency and parochialism. Shanghainese of the 1990s ought to embrace risk-taking and pioneering spirits. Shanghai should open its gates and absorb everything, letting people from home and abroad gather in Shanghai once again to take risks, seek profit, compete and strive."[20]

III. URBAN SYMBOLS AND THE PRODUCTION OF LOCAL IMAGINATION

If media furnish everyday-narrative frameworks, academic scholarship grants theoretical legitimacy to Shanghainese imagery. Through urban-history research, cultural studies and globalization theories, scholars elevate certain urban elements into classic symbols[21]. Shanghai's image is not merely shaped by state propaganda, media reports or external imaginations; it is also continuously constructed by local intellectual elites and cultural scholars. Leo Ou-fan Lee's analyses of 1930s Shanghai cinema, pictorials, advertisements, architecture and consumer culture position Shanghai as a vital cradle of Chinese modern urban culture, reinforcing its imagery of "modern", "contemporary" and "international"[22]. Urban historians such as Xiong Yuezhi and Luo Suwen adopt urban-history, migrant-history and social-history perspectives, emphasizing Shanghai's historical formation as an immigrant, commercial and public-cultural city. They shift its image from the external label of "foreign-concession glamour" toward narratives of an urban community grounded in institutions, everyday life and civic ethics[23]. Literary writers including Wang Anyi and Chen Danyan convert Shanghai into a nostalgic, aestheticized cultural space through depictions of lilong, shikumen, Huaihai Road, old villas and everyday memories[24]. Local elite-cultural discourses continuously produce answers to "what is Shanghai", "who are Shanghainese" and "what constitutes a Shanghai-flavoured way of life". While enriching Shanghai's cultural depth, such narratives may transform "Shanghai-ness" into symbolic capital, whereby language, taste, memory and lifestyle become implicit boundaries distinguishing locals from outsiders.

Local intellectual elites exert decisive impacts on Shanghai's image-building. Their authoritative narratives generate abundant cultural symbols such as cheongsams, vanishing cream and pocket watches that evoke old-Shanghai imagination[25]. Vanishing cream was one of China's earliest mass-produced cosmetics and was deeply favoured by women of the Republican era. During the 1930s and 1940s, advertisements for "Shanghai Lady vanishing cream" could be seen everywhere on Shanghai streets; it was praised as "the dressing-table companion most favoured by beauty-loving ladies", and its packaging bore the calendar-poster beauties fashionable at the time. Today, however, only non-local tourists enthuse about it; in their eyes this product best represents Shanghai and serves as a symbolic token of Shanghai culture in the broad sense. To satisfy tourists' imaginations of Shanghai culture, local scholars continuously excavate and sort out local cultural symbols.

As local historical traditions gradually solidified, scholars of local traditional culture produced locality-laden symbols and contents. Migrants come to identify with such local cultural symbols. Republican-era Shanghai became a symbolized "old Shanghai" in popular memory: films depicting old Shanghai frequently stage images of heavily made-up, cheongsam-clad Shanghai women and men in suits carrying pocket watches, displaying the glamour and extravagance of urban life at the time. Disseminated through film and television, these material symbols have become, in the minds of outsiders, cultural symbols of the city. To outsiders, Shanghai is the sentimental "Magic Metropolis", the cheongsam-clad beauty of old Shanghai, which precisely matches their imagination; this stereotype has thus become a classic symbol used to peddle urban traditional culture and constitutes the core image of Shanghai in the public mind. As a representative modern city, Shanghai has long been known for its fashionable and avant-garde lifestyle; yet as an immigrant city its indigenous local-cultural accumulation is relatively thin. To foreground cultural depth, many local scholars have participated in the construction of local culture. Shops at Shanghai's tourist sites sell mostly goods with local cultural characteristics: fridge magnets printed with iconic Shanghai scenery, ornaments, and original hand-drawn Shanghai postcards are themselves publicity for local culture; while brands directly marked with the word Shanghai—Shanghai wristwatches, Old Clerks, Alasiyu, Shanghai Lady, Shanghai Lady vanishing cream, old-Shanghai ice lollies, old-Shanghai sesame biscuits and the like—highlight Shanghai's cultural features with a strong retro flavour.

The city is an assemblage of physical spaces and also a symbolic structure that is continuously produced[26]. Academic discourse plays a key role here. Through historical narration and conceptual refinement, local scholars participate in the symbolic engineering of Shanghai's image. In this process, certain spatial memories and concepts are elevated into classic symbols that become standard emblems defining what Shanghai is. Shikumen, Old Shanghai and the Magic Metropolis are three representative symbol types, corresponding respectively to the construction of meaning at the spatial, historical and global scales.

Shikumen was originally an architectural form of modern Shanghai's lilong housing, and has gradually been transformed through continuous academic interpretation into a highly condensed cultural symbol. Researchers highlight its Sino-Western architectural features: the exterior absorbs design elements of Western terraced housing, while the interior retains the spatial logic of Jiangnan dwellings. This spatial structure is endowed with special symbolic meaning: it embodies cultural hybridity in the context of a colonial city and symbolizes Shanghai's historical position as a treaty port. In interpreting shikumen's cultural meaning, scholars connect it with the concept of civil society: the public alleys, neighbourhood interaction networks and semi-open living spaces within shikumen lilong are portrayed as one of the most modern civic-life arenas in modern China[27]; existing studies emphasize the interweaving of public and private space and the petty-owner and middle-class lifestyles formed through neighbourhood interaction. Within this interpretive framework, shikumen becomes the material carrier of Shanghai's civic ethos. From the perspective of the sociology of knowledge, this symbolization process carries an obvious character of selective elevation: vast shantytowns, workers' settlements and suburban slums were likewise important spatial forms of modern Shanghai, yet rarely enter the symbolic system of classic Shanghai; by stressing shikumen's typicality, academic narratives shape it into the representative image of authentic Shanghai. This typicalization completes two constructions: compressing urban history into displayable, consumable spatial symbols, and elevating the experience of the urban middle strata into the mainstream narrative of Shanghai's history. Shikumen is therefore both a material relic and a symbolic product filtered by the mechanism of knowledge production.

If shikumen represents the canonization of space, Old Shanghai represents the canonization of time. Academic and cultural narratives shape the 1930s and 1940s into the peak of Eastern modernity: the Paramount ballroom, Avenue Joffre cafés, modern-woman imagery, prosperous industrial and commercial capital, and a developed press together constitute a highly aestheticized urban panorama. Discussing this period, scholars tend to emphasize Shanghai's status as a Far-Eastern financial and trading centre, its culturally hybrid urban structure[28], and the rise of civic consumer culture and mass media; this narrative logic makes Old Shanghai the earliest modern-urban specimen in China. Yet Old Shanghai narratives carry obvious features of selective memory: slums, labour movements, wartime trauma and colonial inequality are weakened or marginalized in the classic narrative; the city is aestheticized and romanticized as a whole and tightly bound to the label of a "golden age", which is essentially the institutionalization of nostalgic imagination. Nostalgia is a collective-memory framework reinforced jointly by film and television works and urban-renewal projects. By repeatedly restating the prosperity of the 1930s and 1940s, Old Shanghai gradually becomes an important resource for contemporary urban-cultural reproduction, narrative capital for urban tourism, symbolic material for the cultural-creative industry, and a historical basis for local-identity superiority: it provides historical legitimacy for Shanghai's urban uniqueness and endows local-identity construction with temporal depth.

If shikumen symbolizes indigenous civil society and Old Shanghai a golden memory of the modern era, the Magic Metropolis is a product of re-symbolization in the context of globalization. The appellation "Modu" originated in the descriptions of Shanghai by modern Japanese writers and was reactivated and widely disseminated in the internet era. Academic discussion interprets it as a term with dual connotations: "mo" (magic) symbolizes mystery, complexity and desire, while "du" (metropolis) emphasizes urban scale and centrality[29]. Unlike Old Shanghai's emphasis on historical nostalgia, Modu stresses the contemporary global-urban temperament: skyscrapers, capital flows, the night economy, multinational corporate headquarters, the fashion industry and the digital economy[30]. Within global-city theoretical frameworks such as global city and world city network concepts, Shanghai is continuously placed in a context of international competition. The Modu symbol reinforces Shanghai's world-scale imagination, giving local identity a global reference frame. Such symbolic construction has three social effects: it reinforces urban uniqueness, with "magical" difference becoming a label of distinction; it blurs the boundary between the local and the global, integrating global capital and local culture into a single narrative frame; and it reshapes identity imagination, as citizens participate through the Modu concept in the symbolic sharing of global-metropolitan identity. Modu is a highly mediatized product: it relies on online platforms and digital communication for diffusion and forms self-reinforcing loops in popular culture. Academic discussion, in explaining this phenomenon, in fact participates in its legitimation, elevating it from internet slang to an urban symbolic emblem through theoretical interpretation.

Viewed macroscopically, the logic behind this symbol production is that shikumen, Old Shanghai and Modu are generated interactively among academic research, media communication and urban governance. Academic discourse supplies the framework of historical and cultural legitimacy, media and the cultural-creative

industry amplify symbolic influence, and policy practice translates symbols into visible landscapes. In this process, the urban image becomes a symbolic resource. Whoever can define the real Shanghai possesses a certain discursive power and the power to define identity; classic symbols are both cultural and power resources. Once established, classic symbols become cultural standards for judging who seems Shanghainese, profoundly affecting local identity, and generate an imagined Shanghai that is constantly interpreted, reproduced and re-symbolized. The formation of this imagination is the result of the interweaving of academic discourse and social practice, ultimately forming a logical chain running from knowledge production to symbol construction, and thence to the operation of power and identity formation.

Topics concerning the Shanghainese image and Shanghainese traits became a focus of heated mass-media discussion in the 1990s, and television dramas on Shanghainese themes were launched in concentrated fashion during this period. The series that provoked widespread discussion among citizens included Shanghai Family, Karmic Debt, Shanghai Customs, Shanghainese Facing the 21st Century, Shanghainese in Tokyo, the Our Shanghainese series and the Contemporary Shanghainese series. Besides such dramas reflecting the Shanghainese of the new era, literary works, books and magazines depicting Shanghai and Shanghainese also became increasingly active. In 1995 the book series Interpreting Shanghainese was published; responding to local audiences' taste for farce, the large-scale farce Our Own Folks premiered in 1997; and in 1999 the book New Shanghainese was officially published. Through specific narrative strategies and symbolic coding, these cultural products participate in the production of local imagination. In the interweaving of the visual and the textual, elements such as shikumen lilong, the Bund building complex, cheongsam, coffee and the soft Wu dialect are refined into highly recognizable urban symbols, jointly constructing an urban temperament that is refined, pragmatic, and at once open and exclusive. This symbolic local imagination, on the one hand, shapes Shanghai as a benchmark of modernization and internationalization and strengthens local residents' regional pride and cultural superiority; on the other hand, it implies a screening mechanism based on lifestyle, consumption habits and cultural taste. For outsider groups including Anhui migrants, this Shanghainese image produced under the dominance of mass media not only constitutes their frame of reference for understanding the city but also becomes an invisible cultural barrier. In attempting to integrate into the city, they must often confront and respond to this identity expectation solidified by the media, and thus continuously adjust their cultural performances and behavioural strategies in everyday practice in order to cope with the pressure and challenge emanating from local imagination.

Other art forms also depict Shanghai's image, such as films and documentaries: Lou Ye's Suzhou River, Wang Tong's Red Persimmon, Hou Hsiao-hsien's Flowers of Shanghai, Antonioni's documentary China, Xie Jin's Stage Sisters, Fei Mu's Spring in a Small Town, Wong Kar-wai's Days of Being Wild, and others. The scenes and figures appearing in these films—lilong, attics, small mahjong games, ferries, docks, the Waibaidu Bridge, Suzhou River, the Jiuqu Bridge, Shiliupu, theatres, cinemas, the big screen, cafés, ballroom dancing and the Shanghai "old clerk"—have become representative symbols of Shanghai in the imagination of countless outsiders. Old Shanghai is bound up with people's desire to enjoy bourgeois space safely; what it offers is a so-called "nostalgic phenomenon that alters the experience of time, dilutes historical memory and resembles a sense of history", an "imagined nostalgia"[31]. Through historical narration, cultural commentary, urban research and cinematic representation, the intellectual elite establishes certain historical fragments and spatial memories as mainstream memory. Such memory has three features: selectivity, stressing modernity and the tradition of openness; continuity, constructing a developmental line from the modern era to the present; and normativity, implying that Shanghainese should carry on a certain spiritual tradition. Once academic narratives enter the media and public discussion, they become the cognitive framework through which the public understands Shanghainese.

The formation of the Shanghainese image is the result of the repeated interweaving of multiple forces: the everyday production of media discourse, the symbolic elevation of academic knowledge, the external mirroring of others' evaluations, and the self-identification practices of local residents. In this process Shanghainese are both described objects and subjects reshaping this identity; between the gaze of others and self-imagination, urban identity is continuously reinterpreted and constructed.

IV. CONCLUSION

This paper examines the discursive construction of the "Shanghainese" identity through mainstream-media narratives and elite-led academic interpretations. Neither a natural demographic category nor a fixed cultural essence, Shanghainese identity is a dynamic symbolic product continuously shaped by newspaper debates, literary representation, historical reinterpretation and popular cultural consumption.

From the Republican period to the 1990s, Shanghai's newspapers constructed shifting boundaries between insiders and outsiders. They oscillated between celebrating local wisdom such as "shrewdness" and re-imagining Shanghainese as inclusive "new Shanghainese" who contribute to urban development regardless of native origins. Meanwhile, academic and cultural elites have produced powerful symbolic resources including shikumen, Old-Shanghai and the "Magic-Metropolis". These symbols enrich Shanghai's cultural heritage, yet they also establish implicit evaluative criteria based on lifestyle, aesthetic taste and collective memory. Such cultural yardsticks may turn into invisible barriers for migrant groups such as Anhui-origin newcomers, who must negotiate these pre-existing symbolic expectations in their everyday urban life.

Media and academia do not merely reflect what Shanghainese "are"; they actively define who can be recognized as Shanghainese. Selective memory and aestheticized nostalgia are embedded within these discourses, where certain historical experiences and social groups gain prominence while others are marginalized. Therefore, urban identity should be understood as an open site of social negotiation rather than a finished fact. Revealing these discursive mechanisms helps us better comprehend how migrant populations perceive and respond to established local identity boundaries in Chinese metropolis, and offers insights for building more inclusive urban cultures amid large-scale domestic migration.

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