

Argentinian linguist springs surprise with seminal Shanghai dialect research

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Buenos Aires and Shanghai are widely considered a near antipodal pair, meaning that if you dug a hole from Argentina's capital you would reach somewhere pretty close to the bustling metropolis on China's east coast.

Federico Demarco, in a figurative sense, is well on his way to digging deep into the roots of Shanghai: its dialects.

Over the past four years, the 33-year-old Buenos Aires native has been researching local dialects in Shanghai's southern suburbs, such as Songjiang, Jinshan and Qingpu, which are considered as the origins of Shanghai.

His research into Jinshan dialect is prominent.

On Douyin, or China's version of TikTok, he posted eight videos of him speaking in Jinshan dialects and received 28,000 likes. He's also working with his research partner Feng Xuanxin to compile a register of Jinshan dialects, which is probably the most comprehensive of its kind to date.

"Dialects make you always remember where you are from, while nowadays many young people just know very little about their hometown dialects," he said. "If such a trend continues, dialects may be lost. Through our researches, we hope to leave records of these dialects and the cultural roots of the city."

Demarco has a gift for languages. After English, German, Italian and Latin, he fancied Chinese at the age of 19, and later he became the first in Argentina to pass HSK6, the highest level of an internationally standardized test for non-native Chinese speakers.



Federico Demarco (center) and Feng Xuanxin (left) engage in a discussion with Jinshan resident Chen Jinmao to delve deeper into the nuances of Jinshan dialects. — Ti Gong

Marriage to a Shanghai woman triggered his interest in Shanghai dialects.

After they moved to Shanghai in 2018 for more career opportunities, he took a master's degree in linguistics at Shanghai University, and found a niche in Shanghai's suburban dialects.

"At that time, I had no problem with speaking in Shanghai downtown dialect with my wife, but I knew nothing about suburban dialects," he said.

By chance, he befriended Feng, a Jinshan native and dialect researcher, in a WeChat group. After following him to his hometown in Zhujing Town in April 2019, Demarco decided to research Jinshan dialects.

Though it was almost a four-hour round trip, he visited Jinshan at least once a week.

"It's not easy to find elders

who can speak very precise Jinshan dialects and explain cultural connotations behind the language," he said.

To fit in with their schedule, he had to get up early in the morning.

His efforts have paid off.

He can now speak fluent Jinshan dialects. He remembered that one day when he was wearing a mask and walking and talking with Feng in Jinshan dialects, he heard two elders mutter: "Is he a Chinese man but looks like a foreigner?"

"It's funny," Demarco smiled. "Like I have been integrated to become part of them."

According to Feng, they make a perfect pair to research Jinshan dialects. "He's a scholar who knows a systematic and scientific way to record a language. He has recording equipment and he uses phonetic alphabet to mark the

pronunciation of dialects.

"For me, I don't major in linguistics. But I know more about local customs, practices and dialects. So, we clicked immediately," Feng said.

Over four years of study, they have made some progress.

"Downtown Shanghai has five tones. Zhujing, Fengjing and Xingtai dialects in Jinshan have eight tones. Other dialects in Jinshan have seven tones," Demarco said. "There's very few documents of Jinshan dialects. Now, we are working on a book to record our four years of research. We hope it can be published this year."

Concurrently, Demarco is conducting research on the Jiading, Nanhui, Songjiang, Qingpu, and Fengxian dialects, and he encourages others to join him in preserving these local linguistic treasures.



Federico Demarco promotes Jinshan dialects on his Douyin account.