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A semiotic portrait of a big Chinese city

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Abstract

Urban communication studies is a growing field of research aiming to reveal the regularities of human interaction in an urban context. The goal of the present study is to examine the semiotics of a big Chinese city as a complex communicative system and its effect on the social development of urban community. The material includes over 700 units (toponyms, street signs, advertisements, memorials, local foods and souvenirs, mass media, etc.) mostly collected in Tianjin, China's fourth biggest city with a population of almost 14 million people. The research methodology is based on critical discourse analysis, ethnographic and semiotic methods, and narrative analysis. The study reveals the structure of communication in a big Chinese city and the integration of language into the city landscape. It indicates that urban historical memories are manifested in the form of memorials, symbols, historic and contemporary narratives. The physical context is associated with names of streets and other topological objects. Verbal and visual semiotic signs are used to ensure people's psychological and physical safety. Social advertising predominantly deals with the propaganda of Chinese governmental policy, traditional values and 'civilized behaviour'. Chinese urban subcultures, such as 'ant tribe, 'pendulums', 'shamate', etc., reflect new social realities. Food and foodways are defined by cultural values and different aspects of social identity. The image of a big Chinese city is also affected by globalization tendencies and the COVID-19 pandemic. The research framework presented in the study provides an opportunity to show a wide panorama of modern urban life. It can be extrapolated to the investigation of other big cities and their linguistic landscapes.

Keywords: *urban communication studies, linguistic landscape, semiotics, discourse, Chinese language*

Семиотический портрет большого китайского города

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Аннотация

Медиаурбанистика – стремительно развивающаяся сфера исследований, направленная на выявление закономерностей коммуникации в урбанистическом контексте. Цель настоящего исследования – анализ семиотики большого китайского города как сложной коммуникативной

системы и ее воздействия на динамику городского социума. Практический материал включает более 700 единиц (топонимы, рекламные объявления, плакаты, афиши, мемориалы, сообщения в местных СМИ, названия и оформление местной еды, сувениры, популярные коммуникативные практики и т. д.), собранных в Тяньцзине, одном из крупнейших китайских городов с населением около 14 млн человек. В качестве ключевых методов исследования выступают критический дискурс-анализ, этнографический и семиотический методы, а также нарративный анализ. В процессе исследования раскрыты структура коммуникации в большом китайском городе и закономерности интеграции языка в городской контекст. Выявлено, что историческая память представлена в виде мемориалов, символов, исторических и современных нарративов. Физический контекст ассоциируется с наименованиями улиц и других топологических объектов. Языковые и визуальные семиотические знаки применяются для обеспечения психологической и физической безопасности. Социальная реклама преимущественно используется для пропаганды китайской официальной политики, традиционных ценностей и цивилизованного поведения. Городские субкультуры, такие как «муравьиное племя», «люди-маятники», «шаматэ» и др., отражают новую социальную реальность. Гастрономический дискурс ассоциируется с культурными ценностями и различными аспектами социальной идентичности. На облик большого китайского города также влияют глобализационные тенденции и пандемия коронавируса. Разработанная концепция позволяет представить широкую панораму современной городской жизни и может быть экстраполирована на исследование языкового ландшафта других крупных городов.

Ключевые слова: *медиаурбанистические исследования, лингвистический ландшафт, семиотика, дискурс, китайский язык*

1. Introduction

Big cities are vibrant places where policies are made and the newest tendencies developed. They define the face of modern society, therefore different issues dealing with urban life are addressed by economists, sociologists, urban planners, architects, environmentalists, artists, communication specialists and linguists. Scholars announce the arrival of the "Age of Urbanism" associated with high density of population, close contacts between people and a great variety of communication practices. Proceeding from the social constructionist theories (Burr 1995, Pearce 1994, Spector 1977) and critical discourse analysis (Blommaert 2005, Fairclough 2003, Foucault 1977), researchers point out that communication reflects not only the patterns of interaction in big cities but also their ethnic composition, self-identification, social stratification, hierarchical structure, social visibility, etc. (Aiello 2016, Dickinson & Aiello 2016, Kvyat 2013, Kvyat 2014, Leontovich 2017, Leontovich 2020b, etc.).

The present paper summarizes the results of a five-year-long research of urban communication in China. It has an overall focus on the semiotics of a big city as a reflection of contemporary trends in Chinese urban communities. To the best of our knowledge, there has not been any comprehensive investigation of this topic by other scholars. The goals of the study are: 1) to outline the main approaches to urban communication studies, single out its constituent features and conceptual foundations; 2) to identify the semiotic signs, communication forms and linguistic

peculiarities which define the face of a modern Chinese city; 3) to compose a 'semiotic portrait' of a big city as a general representation of Chinese society. We address the following research questions: 1) How does communication work to form Chinese urban society? 2) What is the structure of communication in a big Chinese city and how do its elements interact to form a structural whole? 3) How does language integrate into the city landscape and reflect the newest tendencies in its sociocultural, political, ethnic and aesthetic development?

The paper consists of the following major parts. Section 2 deals with the theoretical framework of the study. Section 3 describes the research material and methodology of its analysis. In section 4 we provide a systematic analysis of Chinese urban communication along the following lines: the representation of historical memories; geographical space; publicity, privacy and safety; universal and culturally specific values in social advertising; urban subcultures; food and foodways; globalization tendencies; and the reflection of the COVID-19 pandemic in Chinese urban discourse. The choice of the topics was dictated by the empirical material we collected in the course of the research. It reflects different aspects of urban life forming the 'semiotic portrait' of a big Chinese city. Finally, in section 5 we summarise the results of the research and its relevance for the field of urban communication studies.

2. Theoretical background

The theories dealing with the life of big cities stem from the works by Simmel (1903), Weber (1922, 1923), Mellor (1977) and other scholars (see Hutchison 2010, Kvyat 2014, Parker 2015, for a review). The present work is based on the premises of urban communication studies – a growing field of research combining the achievements of urban and communication studies, which, according to Fornäs (1995), have recently been drifting towards each other. Urban communication studies propose a holistic approach to the city space viewed as a social product incorporating historic attraction, aesthetic qualities and new communication practices. Notwithstanding the scholarly interest for urban communication, we are not aware of any study clearly formulating its basic principles and summarizing its difference from previous approaches to urban discourse, such as onomastics, media linguistics, pragmalinguistics, etc. On the basis of the analysis of numerous publications and conference presentations (Aiello & Tosoni 2016, Kvyat 2013, Laundry & Bourhis 1997, Lotman 1992, Mellor 1977, Pavlenko 2017, Pütz 2020, etc.) we have formulated the following constituent features of urban communication studies as a research area (Leontovich 2020a):

- a city is viewed as a communicative system of its own, composed of different channels, forms and means of human interaction, a "text" in a broad sense of the term;
- the leading role in this system belongs to the social aspect of communication and its effect on the formation and development of urban community;

- the focus of the study is not on particular types of linguistic units and semiotic signs, but on a problem (multilingualism, peculiarities of migrants' languages, power relations, etc.);
- one of the key issues is the influence of communication on the construction of individual and collective identity of urban dwellers;
- the quality of urban discourse depends on the combination of symbolic, material and technological media;
- the factors which influence the modern city's image include: a) historical memories; b) cultural heritage; c) globalization tendencies; d) state, regional and local policy; e) new communication practices as a result of social activism, etc. (Leontovich 2020a).

A city can be interpreted as a real or abstract (imagined) community (for example, *citizens*, *municipal government*, *neighbourhood, power*). The interaction in an urban context happens on the level of interpersonal and group communication, an individual and the urban community, city administration, etc. On the one hand, the city's image is based on its inhabitants' collective identity; on the other, urban life affects each person's individual identity, making them proud of their city or, on the contrary, unhappy with its infrastructure, organization, tempo of growth and living conditions.

The city as a dynamic information medium, an open cultural space and a site of many people's interactions incorporates multiple discourses which interweave and form the urban language. The term *linguistic landscape* (LL) was introduced by Laundry & Bourhis (1997) who defined it as the language of advertising, street names, shop signs and other media using written language in a public space, "the visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs" (Ibid: 25). Scholars characterize LL as the totality of the language's visual existence: all signage, announcements, billboards, public road and safety signs, slogans, names of buildings, streets, shops, graffiti, etc. (Baranova and Fyodorova 2017, Gorter 2013, Pavlenko 2017, Pütz 2020, Yelenevskaya & Fialkova 2017). They emphasise its multimodal character and role in top-down and bottom-up communication (e. g., see Pütz 2020) viewing the study of LL as a promising area of research which reflects sociocultural and political reality, aesthetic perception, interethnic and intergroup contradictions. We will further apply the notion of LL and principles of its analysis to the study of Chinese urban discourse.

3. Methodology and data

The research framework is based on critical discourse analysis, ethnographic and semiotic methods, and narrative analysis, the combination of which allows us to implement the principle of triangulation (for a detailed description of the methodology see Chen & Leontovich 2020, Leontovich 2018). We proceed from the following basic assumptions: 1) discourse acts as a sort of intermediate formation situated at the intersection of the text *per se* and social context (Fairclough 2003: 37); 2) representational properties of discourse can be seen as a

vehicle for the exercise of power (Foucault 1977, Bryman 2008: 508); 3) discourses do not only reproduce the world as it is – they are also projective and capable of constructing the speakers' social worlds (Foucault 1977: 124); 4) scholars should not only provide a social perspective on language, but also use the research as a means of social impact (Blommaert 2005: 25); 5) a comprehensive understanding of communication in a big city can be achieved only through the study of the totality of the semiotic signs represented in its landscape, which include: toponyms; architecture; organization of public and private space; signs of racial, ethnic, age, gender and religious identity; places of interest; names of local celebrities; advertising, billboards, posters and graffiti; local mass media; local food, its packaging and decoration; local souvenirs; and names of popular communication practices (Leontovich 2019). The data for the study were mostly collected in Tianjin – the fourth biggest city in China with a population of almost 14 million people and one of the four municipalities reporting directly to the Chinese government. It is, on the one hand, a modern megapolis, and, on the other – a non-capital city preserving the uniquenness of traditional culture. For the sake of objectivity, some of the data were also obtained in other big cities including Beijing.

We agree with the scholars who emphasise the importance of small-data approach (e. g., see Defining small data) to the material selected from multiple sources including interviews, surveys, content analysis, etc. in order to get access to a wide spectrum of analytical information. Our research material obtained from ethnographic fieldwork, surveys, and mass media in 2018–2021 includes over 700 units acting as urban semiotic signs. We will further analyse urban discourse in Tianjin from multiple perspectives and generate its detailed 'semiotic portrait' reflecting different aspects of social life in a big Chinese city.

4. Analysis and discussion

4.1. Historical memories

The history of a city is represented through monuments, memorials, symbols, songs, poetry, literature, local media, historic and contemporary urban narratives (Leontovich 2019). They form the unique 'visual hypertext' which acts to preserve social memory and cultural information.

The historic individuality of a city starts with its name. The comprehension of a city as a name (Lotman 1992: 9) is part and parcel of the indepth reading of the 'urban text'. The history of Tianjin is commemorated in its three names. The first historical name was 直沽寨 (*Zhigu zhai*) originating from the settlement founded in the early 13th century on the territory of the Jurchens Jin dynasty. The second name 海津 (*Haijin*) meaning 'the Sea Ferry' is associated with the city's geographical position. The present name 天津 (*Tianjin*) denoting 'the Sky Ferry' dates back to 1404 when the third emperor of the Ming Dynasty Yongle started his victorious war for the crown (Chen & Leontovich 2020). All the three historical names are represented in Tianjin's contemporary topography (直沽街 '*Zhigu*

street', 海津大桥 '*Haijin bridge')* and infrastructure (天津市直沽酿酒厂 '*Tianjin distillery Zhigu'*, 海津大酒店 '*Haijin hotel'*, 老天津卫炸酱面面馆 '*Noodle joint "Tianjin noodles with fried bean sauce"')*.

"Present street names (the East Road, the South Road, the West Road, the North Road) still clearly define the old town in spite of very few relics or architecture" (Ibid). The Ancient Culture Street (古文化街) with several buildings from the Ming and Qing dynasties preserves the memories of the old Chinese Empire. Newer buildings imitate ancient Chinese architecture recreating the atmosphere of the past centuries. Numerous monuments, memorials and museums reproduce different periods of the city's history. Memories woven into Tianjin's modern architecture predominantly perform a symbolic function, emphasising the image of China as one of the world's oldest civilizations.

4.2. Geographic space as a physical context of communication

The physical context of urban communication viewed from the linguistic perspective represents the notion of 'geosemiotics' (Scollon & Scollon 2003, Pütz 2020) and incorporates names of streets, avenues and other topological objects, the notions of centrality and environment. Social segregation of the city space results in the formation of sociolects.

According to the approach suggested by Lefebvre (1974), a city can be seen as a live organism where space is not anything given by nature and permanent but constantly developing and reproduced on the basis of social change. He differentiates between physical, mental and social space and gives multiple definitions of space – geographical, economic, demographic, sociological, political, etc. On the basis of this delineation Lefebvre is trying to find out whether the language logically, epistemologically and genetically precedes the construction of social space or is produced by it. The analysis allows him to conclude that space functions as a sort of *surcodage*, *code des codes* (code of codes) (Ibid: 20–27). The notion of border is used by researchers to investigate the boundaries between communities, languages, dialects, cultures and subcultures (Leontovich 2020a).

Street names in Tianjin are based on Chinese toponyms (北京街 '*Beijing street'*, 哈尔滨道 '*Harbin street'*); names of provinces (河北大街 '*Hebei prospect'*); natural objects (泰山道 '*Mountain Taishan street');* water objects and their elements (海云街 '*Sea Clouds street'*, 小淀大街 '*Little Creek prospect'*); objects of infrastructure (天塔道 '*Sky Tower street'*, 电厂路 '*Electric Station street'*); military terms (北营路 '*North Fort street'*, 大黄堡路 '*Big Yellow Fortress street'*), etc.

Typical are the nominations with distinct positive connotation, especially those seen as symbols of well-being, such as: 安福道 '*street of Quiet Happiness'*, 富康路 '*street of Wealth and Health'*, 寿昌路 '*street of Longevity and Prosperity'*. Other semiotic signs belonging to this category are zoomorphic symbols denoting

sacred mythological animals: 赤龙街 '*street of the Red Dragon*', 凤鸣道 '*street of the Singing Pheonix*'. The formation of the Peoples Republic of China in 1949 was marked by the emergence of street names connected with revolutionary and communist symbols, such as: 自由道 '*Freedom street*', 红星路 '*Red Star street*', 新胜胡同 '*hutong New Victory*'. However, the nominations correlating with political symbols are scarce.

4.3. The city as a public and private space. Problems of linguistic security

The research of urban living deals with such issues as the correlation between "public discourse and people's private life; safety, sustainability, danger of intrusion; gated communities; surveillance practices and their semiotic representation, etc." (Leontovich 2019). We devoted a number of publications to the study of social visibility (Leontovich 2020b) and semiotics of surveillance (Leontovich 2018).

Similarly important is the role of language in ensuring people's safety. This includes *psychological safety* preventing the use of offensive language, insults, outrage and manipulation; and physical safety achieved by means of warnings about danger: 如遇火警，勿用电梯 '*In case of danger don't use elevators*'; 燃气设施，严禁烟火 '*Gas equipment. Smoking strictly forbidden*'; 减速慢行，注意行人 '*Reduce speed, pay attention to pedestrians*'; 禁止人力三轮车通行 '*Rickshaws not allowed*'. Nowadays strict imperatives coexist with mitigating formulas, such as: 温馨提示 '*friendly recommendation*', e. g., 温馨提示：前方坡陡, 小心摔跤 '*Friendly recommendation: slope ahead, beware of falling down*'.

Special attention is paid to the safety of foreigners who are regarded as a group at risk because they often do not know the language, are unfamiliar with local culture, can easily get lost, and are unable to communicate with the police or doctors in a critical situation. The creation of comfortable conditions for foreign guests presupposes the existence of signage, maps and guides in foreign languages as well as English-speaking personnel in airports, hospitals, police stations, etc. Though Chinese cities have significantly moved towards globalization, they still face the problem of adequate communication with foreigners.

4.4. Universal and culturally specific values in social advertising

The investigation of Chinese social advertising from the semantic and axiological perspectives demonstrates that it is polyfunctional and acts to promote the official policy, traditional values, ecological propaganda, a healthy lifestyle and norms of civilized behaviour.

Support of the Chinese governmental policy. Social advertising is widely used as a form of top-down communication between the authorities and the public. Numerous posters devoted to the 'Chinese dream' (中国梦) – a policy initiated by

Xi Jinping – promote the idea of the rebirth of the great Chinese nation. They teach the Chinese people: 讲诚信，有良心 '*to be honest and conscientious*' and 助人为乐 '*to help others with joy*'. They also claim that: 俭以养德 '*frugality breeds high character traits*' and that 宽容，忍让，和善 代表你内心的强大 '*gentleness, compliance and amicability display your inner strength*'.

Maintenance of family values. Demographic problems are among the key topics of Chinese social advertising. The policy "One family – one child" implemented for over 35 years helped to solve some demographic problems during the period of reforms but, on the other hand, brought about a serious disproportion in the population structure. Therefore, in 2016 the government launched a new policy "One family – two children" particularly aimed at city dwellers. By that time most of the urban families had developed a 'one-child culture' according to which the decision to have even one child was made only if the spouses were sure that they would be able to provide high standard of living for the whole family. Besides, there is a growing number of the so called *dingke* couples (丁克 > from Eng. *DINK – double income no kids*). Social advertising trying to change the attitude employs such slogans as: 实施全面二孩政策，促进人口均衡发展 '*Let's implement the policy "One family – two children", let's contribute to the harmonious demographic development*' and 男孩女孩都是宝，再生一个凑成好 '*A son and a daughter are real wealth, give birth to another one for full happiness*'.

Western influence on Chinese family ideology results in the departure from the traditional model of marriage and intergenerational relations leading to the emergence of numerous problems within a family. Authors of social ads are trying to remind citizens of the traditional Confucian principle of filial piety 孝 '*xiao*': 人小 孝心大 '*A man is small, filial piety is big*'; 中国孝辈辈传 '*Chinese filial piety is handed down from generation to generation*'. A switch from the 'father – son' to the 'husband – wife' key family relationship stimulates young couples to live separately from their parents. This causes the problem of 'empty nesters' (空巢老人) – older people who feel lonely when their adult children leave them. Numerous social ads urge citizens to give more attention to their elderly parents: 关爱空巢老人。别让老人的生活如此凄凉 '*Take care of the 'empty nesters'. Make sure their life is not so empty and lonesome*'; 回家是送父母最好的礼物 '*The best gift for your parents is your visit*'.

Social advertising also tackles the issue of the so called 'abandoned children' (留守儿童), mostly from rural areas, whose parents have left for big cities in the hope to earn a living. At present this category includes over 9 million children left in the care of their grandparents or other relatives (In 2018 the number…). A series of social ads with the appeal 关爱留守儿童 '*Love and care for abandoned children*' aims to remind labour migrants that it is necessary to remember about the emotional state of their children: 关爱留守儿童 倾听他们的内心呼唤 '*Love abandoned children. Listen to the cry of their souls*'.

On the other hand, children in big cities, especially from one-child families, suffer because of the high pressure resulting from their parents' ambitions in a very competitive environment. Social ads remind those parents of the value of childhood: 要关注孩子，不要关住孩子。合理布置学习任务，给孩子健康成长的空间 '*Give your attention to kids rather than lock them down. Be reasonable in setting their educational tasks. Give the child space for a healthy development*'. The visual component of such posters represents school supplies (pens, pencils, rulers, etc.) as cages with children locked in them.

Language policy. China officially includes 56 ethnicities (the domineering Han ethnic group and 55 ethnic minorities). According to different data, the number of languages varies between 80 and 300, and Han Chinese consists of ten dialects. Such a complex linguistic situation accounts for the necessity of language planning aimed at the preservation of political stability, territorial integrity and harmonious communication. Numerous posters and billboards call for the use of Mandarin as a bond between people: 普通话——13 亿颗心与心之间的桥梁 '*Mandarin is a bridge between 1 billion 300 million hearts*'; 56 个民族 56 朵花，56 种语言汇成一句话：请说普通话 '*56 nationalities, like 56 flowers, 56 languages merge into one phrase; please speak Mandarin*'.

Anticorruption policy. The beginning of the large-scale campaign against corruption was announced at the XVIII Congress of the Communist Party of China when Xi Jinping came to power. Social advertising is supposed to remind government employees about the inevitability of punishment for corruption (up to capital punishment) and to eradicate bribery: 贪腐——一根针，刺疼百姓心 '*Corruption is a needle that painfully pierces the hearts of common people*'; 金钱诚可贵，生命价更贵 '*The value of money is high, but the value of life is higher*'; 贪心一起 就是牢狱的开始 '*Greed is the beginning of the way to prison*'. Such slogans are supplemented by visual images of handcuffs, prison bars, cages, etc.

Ecological propaganda. According to official sources, pollution in China annually kills 178 thousand people (Li 2018: 287). Only in 5 out of 500 big Chinese cities (1%) air quality conforms to the international standards set by the WHO. Seven out of ten cities in the world with the worst ecology are situated in China (Kolpakova & Kapishnikova 2016: 93–94). Although Tianjin is not among them, its ecological situation is very alarming.

Since 60–70% of pollution (Li 2018: 287) and 70–80% of noise (Zheng 2017: 91) are caused by cars, social advertising actively promotes the use of 'green' (non-motorised or electric) transportation: 绿色交通·城市未来 '*Green transport is the city's future*'; 绿色出行·健康你我 '*Green mode of transportation is health for you and me*'. Because of the contamination of groundwaters, 400 Chinese cities nowadays suffer from water deficit. Tianjin is situated on the banks of the Haihe, one of the most polluted rivers in China. Social ads urge people to use the water frugally: 地球还有多少水让我们浪费？'*How much water is left on Earth for our*

wasteful use?'; 节约一滴水，地球更美丽 *'The economy of every waterdrop makes the Earth more beautiful'*.

Serious measures are also taken to preserve forests: 保护树木，让空气更清新 *'Take care of the trees that make the air cleaner'*; 多一份绿色，多一份健康 *'More green spaces mean more health'*. Ads also urge people to give up the use of disposable chopsticks. the production of which requires about a million cubic meters of wood (25 million trees) a year. Hence such social ads as: 保护森林，向一次性筷子说不 *'Let's preserve the forests, let's say "no" to disposable chopsticks'*.

Support of a healthy life style is associated with the prevention of drug abuse, smoking and AIDS: 珍爱生命，远离毒品 *'Value life, keep away from drugs'*; 为了你和家人的健康, 请不要吸烟 *'For your own health and the health of your family, please don't smoke'*; 拥抱健康生活, 学会对毒品说不爱心呵护生命, 行动抵御艾滋 *'Protect life, fight AIDS'*.

Promotion of civilized behaviour. Among other ideas, Xi Jinping's program stimulates the building of economic, political, cultural, social and ecological civilization. Our study indicates that in recent years the terms 'civilized' and 'civilization' have become fashionable: 创建文明城市。建设美丽天津 *'Let's build a civilized city. Let's create wonderful Tianjin'*. In order to make a city 'civilized', ads call on the people to behave accordingly: 文明排队 *'Stand in line in a civilized fashion'*; 请不要乱扔垃圾。请往前一步，把垃圾扔入桶内 *'Please don't throw trash around. Make a step forward, put it in a trashbin'*; 请勿随地吐痰 *'Please don't spit wherever you choose to'*; 便后请冲水，废纸扔纸篓 *'Flush the toilet after using it, throw toilet paper in the bin'*; 人与狗不同，请不要随意地小便 *'People are not dogs. Please don't urinate in inappropriate places'*.

Another problem is the waste of food due to which in 2013 the Communist Party of China initiated a huge campaign for strict economy and fight against luxury and waste: 文明餐桌从我做起。不剩饭，不剩菜 *'Civilized table starts with me. Don't leave unfinished food'*; 文明用餐，节俭惜福 *'Eat in a civilized way, be frugal, don't overindulge'*.

Verbal aspects of social advertising. To attract public attention and increase the emotional impact of social ads, their authors use a wide array of stylistic devices, such as parallel constructions: 吸食毒品，流失生命 *'You use drugs and lose life'*; rhetorical questions: 你的生命还剩几天？ *'How many days do you have left?'*; metaphors: 烟，是开启死亡之门的钥匙 *'A cigarette is a key opening the door to death'*; hyperboles: 一次吸毒，终生戒毒 *'Try a drug once – and you'll have to fight the addiction all life'*; rhyming: 垃圾分类，生活更美 lājī fēn*lèi*, shēnghuó gèng *měi* *'Sorting of waste makes the life more wonderful'*. An interesting example of allusion is the following slogan: 垃圾分类一小步，健康文明一大步 *'One*

small step towards sorting waste — one giant leap towards healthy civilization' associated with the precedent statement by the US astronaut Neil Armstrong when he first stepped on the Moon: *"One small step for a man — one giant leap for mankind"*.

Nationally specific language use is based on the peculiarities of Chinese, such as the existence of a great number of homophones and chengyus (phraseological units). Homophones create unlimited opportunities for wordplay, like in the following poster encouraging citizens to give preference to ecological transportation: 绿色出行·骑乐无穷 '*Green mode of transportation. Riding [a bicycle] gives endless joy*'. The second phrase is based on the idiom 其乐无穷 '*endless joy*', where the first character 其 qí (a pronoun) is replaced by the homonymous verb 骑 qí 'ride [a bicycle]'. The inscription 来也匆匆去也冲冲 '*Hurry when coming, flush when leaving*' often placed in public toilets is a reference to the famous song 《来也匆匆去也匆匆》 "*We hurry when coming, we hurry when leaving*", with the word 匆匆 *cōngcōng 'hurriedly'* replaced by 冲冲 *chōngchōng 'flush'*.

Chengyus are specific phraseological units which are easily identified and very popular due to their rhythmicity, expressivity and national flavour. For example, the ad 变废为宝，点铁成金 '*Let's use the waste for production purposes – by means of touch change iron into gold*' is based on the chengyu 点铁成金 '*by means of touch change iron into gold',* i. e. make good out of bad.

Another specific feature is the ideographic form of Chinese writing. The basic sources of creativity are pictograms (simple characters which originally were primitive drawings of objects) and ideograms (complex characters consisting of two and more pictograms). Due to their imagery, characters and their stylized forms can co-occur in the same context. For example, on a poster against corruption there is a loop for execution with a knot attached to the character 贪 '*greed*' accompanied by the inscription "死结" '*a tight knot*'. Another example is a poster containing two big characters 官 '*civil servant*', the first one represented with its lower part (吕) in the form of traditional Chinese coins, the second one – in the form of handcuffs. The first one is accompanied by the inscription: 如果这就是你的为官之道 '*If this is a civil servant's way*', the second one – 那么这就是你最后的结果 '*then this is its outcome*'.

4.5. Urban subcultures

The investigation of urban subcultures and the linguistic analysis of their nominations open up ways to understanding the diversity of Chinese society and new trends in its development. We have given a detailed description of this topic in previous publications (Bakumova & Kotelnikova 2019, Leontovich & Kotelnikova 2021), so we will briefly summarise the obtained results and their contribution to the present study.

The nominations reflecting specifically Chinese social trends include: 蚁族 '*ant tribe*' – young people, recent university graduates, who come to Chinese megacities from the province in order to climb the social ladder (Zhao 2014); they rent crowded apartments or old barracks reminding of ant colonies (Wu 2017); 月光族 (from 月 '*month*', 光 – '*completely*', '*to the last bit*') – people who spend their monthly income to the last mao; 钟摆族 '*pendulums*' – commuters who travel to work in the city centre from the outskirts with cheaper apartments (Zeng 2010); 杀马特 *shamate* (from Eng. 'smart') – young people with basic secondary education who come to big cities from rural areas and work in low-paid jobs at factories, hairdressers', grocery stores and delivery services. "They are conspicuous because of their flamboyant style, bleached or brightly dyed and teased hair, with lots of hairspray, bright make-up, nails and piercing, unusual loud clothes and plenty of accessories (Leontovich & Kotelnikova 2021, Wang Fushuai 2014); 小清新亚文化 *xiaoqingxin* (from 小 '*small*' and 清新 '*fresh*') – young educated women from well-to-do families, photographers and romantic dreamers with versatile interests, exquisite tastes and positive world perception (Leontovich & Kotelnikova 2021, Liu Lili 2013: 72–73), etc.

The modern tendencies in young people's lifestyles are also represented in such nominations as 辣奢族 *lashezu* (from Eng. 'luxury') – young people born in the 1980–90s, mostly with a good income, who want to enjoy a glamorous life and emphasise their social status by means of different accessories; 乐活族 *lehuozu* (from Eng. LOHAS 'lifestyle of health and sustainability') – people practicing a healthy lifestyle; 尼特族 *nitezu* (from Eng. NEET 'not in employment, education or training') – a 'no-no generation', young people who don't work or study; 飞特族 *feitezu* (from Eng. *free* and Germ. *arbeiter*) – 'free workers', young people who do not have a permanent job and live on occasional earnings (Bakumova & Kotelnikova 2019, Leontovich & Kotelnikova 2021, Xiao 2009, Wang Sini 2010, Liu Xiang 2014). The fact that such nominations are derivatives from English an other European languages indicates that the names are borrowed together with the lifestyle and social practices. The semiotics of subcultures changes the city's image making it more versatile and serving as a symbolic representation of the specifically Chinese combination of collectivism and individuality.

4.6. Food and foodways[1]

Food and everything connected with it constitute an important part of 'everyday discourse' (Rus. 'discurs povsednevnosti') acting as a link between daily routine and psychological, axiological and behavioural aspects of human life. The discussion below deals with different social aspects of Chinese urban gastronomic discourse. Whereas food is an integral part of people's lives in both urban and rural

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[1] The authors extend their thanks to Ning Huaiying (Tianjin Foreign Studies University) for contributing information for this paragraph.

areas, we focus on the specifics of food advertising, local and imported produce, cafés, restaurants and supermarkets as a reflection of urban life and their influence on the city's cultural image.

Power, status and standard of living. The factor of power is reflected in food regulations, prohibitions and control. In China, official documents ensure the quality of products, regulate advertising, labelling and packaging. It is forbidden to use particular chemical additives, sell alcohol to minors or circulate cannabis-related products.

Goods beneficial for health and longevity are becoming more difficult to afford. The Yaoshan (药膳) system of healthy eating was originally practiced by emperors, rich people and civil servants. Today expensive healthy products are associated with high living standards. Since ancient times, great value has been attached to ginseng (人参), donkey skin gelatine (阿胶), sea ginseng (海参), edible swallow nests (燕窝), seafood, and expensive drinks, like Chinese vodka «Maotai» (茅台). Other semiotic signs of high or low living standards include stores and markets where products are bought, level of restaurants and cafés, dishes for serving food, as well as traditions and rituals emphasising social status.

Ethnic and cultural values. Tianjin is proud of its famous baked twists (天津麻花), which have become its visiting card and are sold in touristic places, airports and specialized shops. Other signs of local cultural identity are restaurant names: 津菜典藏 '*Treasures of Tianjin Cuisine*', 津鲁饭店 '*Jinlu*', 哏都老院 '*Gedu laoyuan*'; names of local vodkas: 津酒 '*Jinjiu*', 大直沽酒 '*Dazhigujiu*', 津沽大曲 '*Jingu daqu*', juices and beverages: 津美源饮品 '*Jinmeiyuan yinpin*'.

Gender. In China, products which are traditionally considered to be 'male' include those which allegedly increase male libido, such as: 鹿鞭 '*antler deer penis*', 牛肾 '*bull kidney*', 鸽蛋 '*pigeon egg*'; particular fruits: 香蕉 '*banana*' and 苹果 '*apple*'; plants: 人参 '*ginseng*', 韭菜 '*leek*)', 莲子 '*lotus seeds*', 枸杞 '*goji*'; seafood: 牡蛎 '*oyster*', 虾 '*shrimp*', 乌贼 '*cuttlefish*' and 海马 '*seahorse*'. 'Female' products, in their turn, are considered to be good for the skin and have an anti-aging effect: 猪皮 '*pork skin*', 坚果 '*nuts*', 葡萄籽 '*grape seeds*', 南瓜 '*pumpkin*', 无花果 '*figs*', 桑葚 '*mulberries*', 牛奶 '*milk*', 燕窝 '*swallow nests*', 阿胶 '*donkey skin gelatine*', etc.

Physiological identity is associated with healthy food, dietary products for people with health problems or those intending to lose weight. While speaking about food, the Chinese tend to emphasise that certain products (vegetables, fruit, nuts and others) are good for health. The "*Yaoshan*" (药膳) health food system mentioned above emerged thousands of years ago. It is based on Chinese traditional medicine and is used for prevention and treatment of diseases, preservation of youth and longevity.

Age is also an important factor in food production, advertising and sales. It is reflected in the names of products aimed at children: 谷谷苏 '*Gugusu*', 娃哈哈

'*Wahaha*', 三只松鼠 '*Three squirrels*', 小鱼儿 '*Little fish*', 旺旺雪饼 '*Wangwang cookies*'. Age identity also influences communication practices. Young people prefer to order food online, which is especially conspicuous due to the boom of Internet trade.

The dynamics of food and foodways. Changes in the sphere of gastronomic discourse reflect the peculiarities of Chinese mentality and culture of a particular historical period. Modern café and restaurant names tend to include foreign words: phonetic borrowings: 吧 *bā* (from Eng. '*bar*'); 得来速 *dé lái sù* (from Eng. '*drive-thru*'), calques: (超市 '*supermarket*'); hybrid names: *VIP* 餐厅 '*VIP restaurant*'; foreign geographical names: 慕尼黑餐厅 '*restaurant "Munich"*'; positively coloured names related to Chinese traditional culture: 竹林餐厅 '*restaurant "Bamboo Grove"*', 莲花池饭庄 '*restaurant "Lotus Pond"*'; fictional names associated with pleasure: 天宫餐厅 '*restaurant "Heavenly Palace"*', 大福堂餐馆 '*restaurant "Abode of Happiness"*'. Some nominations allude to images rooted in history or classical literature, e. g.: 又一村饭店 '*restaurant "One More Village"*' – a phrase from the poem 游山西村 "Mountain Walk" by the poet of the Song Dynasty Lu You.

The dynamics of social and technological development lead to the emergence of new practices connected with food and its consumption, which produce new nominations based on puns and other forms of creative language use, e. g., 狗不理包子 '*Goubuli baozi'* (wordplay 'Gou'– name of the owner and 'dog').

4.7. Globalization tendencies

Tianjin's multilingual landscape incorporates numerous foreign languages and visual markers pointing to cross-cultural processes, ethnic diversity, and globalization tendencies. In 2018–19 we carried out an educational project "The City Speaks to You" with the participation of 24 graduate students at Tianjin Foreign Studies University. The students were asked to take photos of any signage in foreign languages they could identify in the city landscape. We also carried out a survey about the perception of foreign language use in the local context. Further analysis and discussion showed that, as in many other cities of the world, the most widely used language was English as a representation of fashion, prestige, and prosperous Western lifestyle. Since the use of English has already been widely discussed in numerous scholarly publications, we would like to focus on the Russian ethnic markers we managed to identify in Tianjin's landscape.

The Russian diaspora in Tianjin which originated in the late 19th century managed to create its national infrastructure preserving Russian Orthodox customs, national holidays and traditions. Unfortunately, the architectural monuments dating back to the times of the Russian concession and preserved until our days are scarce: the buildings of the Russian-Chinese Bank (华俄道胜银行) and the Russian Consulate (俄国领事馆) (Bazilevich 2017, Doroshkina & Stekhova 2018). The

streets on the territory of the Russian concession had Russian names: 莫斯科路 '*Moscow street*'. 伊尔库茨克路 '*Irkutsk street*', 罗曼诺夫路 '*Romanov street*', 阿列克谢也夫路 '*Alexeyev street*', 伏尔加路 '*Volga street*'. However, those names adapted to Chinese phonetics and writing were too cumbersome and difficult to remember. For example, Vladivostok street sounded as Fūlājìwòsītuōkè lù, and Kostromskaya street – as Kēsītèluōmǎ lù, so it is only natural that they were eventually renamed.

In 2014 the pedestrian street of Russian culture (俄罗斯文化创意风情街) occupying 8000 km^2 was opened in the new Binhai district. It is filled with verbal and non-verbal ethnic markers, such as the Russian signage: *Ресторан Арбат (Arbat restaurant)*, *Квас (Kvas)*, *Русский йогурт (Russian yogurt)*; Russian souvenirs; buildings imitating Russian architectural style (the Kremlin, St Basil's cathedral); and national costumes, all adapted for the Chinese perception of Russian culture. They often coexist with Chinese markers, such as Caishen (Chinese god of prosperity) or three-legged toad (Chinese symbol of wealth). Names of Russian dishes in restaurants are mostly given in the form of descriptive translations: "Herring under a fur coat" — 甜菜丝鲱鱼沙拉 '*salad made of herring and beets*'; "Vinegret" — 什锦甜菜沙拉 '*assorted salad with beets*'; "Shchi" — 蔬菜汤 '*vegetable soup*'; "Beef stroganoff" — 俄式烩牛肉 '*Russian-style stewed beef*'. However, sometimes the names preserve their exotic flavour, e. g., 阿克洛许卡冷汤 '*okroshka cold soup*', 欧拉季益厚煎饼 '*oladyi thick fried pancakes*'.

4.8. The reflection of the COVID-19 pandemic in Chinese urban discourse

In 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic changed the image of big cities and became one of the most important discussion topics all over the world. It produced a great amount of truthful and false information and was represented both verbally and non-verbally through different information channels. The significance of the problem has encouraged scholars to investigate not only medical, but also social problems, such as global health, transnational safety, surveillance of people's social behaviour, risks of different kinds, vulnerability of different population groups, implementation of civil rights, activism, solidarity, ethical norms during the pandemic and others. We have identified the following new topics and communication practices dealing with COVID-19 which prevailed in Chinese urban discourse in 2020–21.

Prevention measures which emphasise the necessity to wear masks, wash hands and observe the social distance of one meter (一米线). In China, in addition to instructions, social advertising often includes phrases appealing to individual consciousness and responsibility to contribute to the struggle against the pandemic: 疫情防控，我们共同努力！ '*Let's make joint efforts to prevent the infection!*';

为抗击新型冠状病毒尽自己的一份力！’*Contribute to the struggle against the new Covid infection!*’.

Unification in the face of the new threat: 战胜疫情！万众一心, 众志成城！‘*Let's unite to defeat the epidemic! Unity is great strength!*’;中国加油! 共舟共济, 共渡难关 ‘*Hold on, China! Let's unite in the face of common threat to overcome the trouble together*’.

Gratitude for the heroism of medical workers: 抗战疫情。致敬在危险一线的医务工作者 ‘*War on the epidemic! Our great tribute to medical workers toiling at the dangerous front line*’; 最美逆行者。致敬白衣天使 ‘*The most wonderful fighters! Our tribute to the angels in white robes*’.

The necessity to fight fake news about coronavirus: 不信谣 ‘*Don't believe fakes*’, 不传谣 ‘*Don't spread fakes*’.

Specifically Chinese public action included:

The support of Wuhan. After the closing of Wuhan for quarantine in January 2020, Chinese people started expressing support of its inhabitants. The popularity of this content became a powerful factor of patriotism and solidarity: 中国必胜 ‘*China must win!*’; "武汉加油！一定会赢的最后的胜利" ‘*Hold on, Wuhan! We are sure to win*’.

The rejection of bat, pangolin, badger, and porcupine meat as food: 我承诺！拒绝野味，从我做起！ ‘*I promise! The rejection of wild animal's meat starts with me*!’; 拒绝野味！向不卫生不文明的饮食陋习宣战 ‘*Stop using wild animals' meat! Let's declare a war on antisanitary, uncivilized food habits*’.

During the pandemic, the Chinese language acquired many new terms, such as: 居家隔离 ‘*home quarantine', 'self-isolation*’; 封城, 封楼, 封单元 ‘*to seal the city or building*’; 健康码 ‘*health code*’ (an option in WeChat messenger and AliPay wallet used for behaviour control); 逆行者 ‘*fighters*’ – medical workers who went to Wuhan on the rise of the pandemic. Some expressions became popular in political discourse: 病毒政治化 ‘*politization of the virus*’ (applied to the attitude towards the pandemic on the part of the US and Western Europe); 甩锅 ‘*shift the blame*’; 污名化 ‘*throw mud at*’ (about the accusations of China by the US). The main source of the COVID-19 metaphorization is military terminology: 举国战疫 ‘*state war on the virus*’, 主战场 ‘*main battlefield*’ (about Wuhan), 战疫一线 ‘*the frontline in the struggle against the virus*’ (about hospitals); 战疫群侠 ‘*knights in the war against the pandemic*’ (about doctors). We could also observe frequent use of wordplay; however, unlike in Russia, the Chinese practically do not make jokes about the pandemic.

The research indicates that Chinese urban communication related to COVID-19 is institutionalized, massive, consistent and uniform, which can be due to such factors as the Chinese political system, strict discipline and collectivism.

5. Conclusions

Our findings indicate that the Tianjin urban landscape acting as an important component of the national world model reflects historical, cultural, political and linguistic peculiarities of Chinese society. Multiple narratives provide for versatile interpretations of historical memories and can be used for political purposes to reconceptualize the past and the present. Chinese toponyms delineate the Tianjin geographical space reflecting different periods of the city's history and the newest tendencies in its development. The study reveals the role of media in dealing with security problems, a peculiar interception of public and private communication, and surveillance as an indispensable part of modern urban life manifested in a variety of semiotic signs. Social advertising in China is polyfunctional and acts to advance traditional values and contemporary political ideas, promote norms of civilized behaviour, environmental policies and a healthy way of living.

The existence of different urban subcultures and lifestyles is implemented in new linguistic nominations and urban advertising. Globalization, multilingualism and creative language use change the face of the modern Chinese city and discourse models connected with the emergence of a new generation, its perceptions and aspirations which influence modern urban life and its semiotic representation. Language constitutes an integral part of the Chinese urban landscape, reflecting the latest political and sociocultural trends and increasing the emotional impact of social advertising. This is achieved by means of different stylistic devices and nationally specific peculiarities of Chinese, such as the creative use of homophones, chengyus and the ideographic form of Chinese writing.

On a final note, it is worth pointing out that the research framework presented in this study comprises a number of parameters embracing different aspects of communication in a big city and providing an opportunity to present a wide panorama of modern urban life. It can be extrapolated to the investigation of other big cities and their linguistic landscapes. The ultimate aim of urban communication studies is to reveal the strengths and weaknesses of human interaction in urban contexts and contribute to the formation of a city's image, its atmosphere, degree of comfort and security.

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