

# Linguistic Expression of the Social Stratification of Chinese Urban Society

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**Abstract.** The purpose of the article is to consider newly-emerging Chinese nominations of social groups, largely reflecting the development trends of modern Chinese urban society. The investigation is done from the perspective of urban communication studies. The social structure of the modern Chinese urban space is a self-developing system, the transformation processes of which are determined by many social and economic factors. Consequently, the dynamic social modernization of Chinese megacities is undoubtedly reflected in the vocabulary, the most susceptible to any changes in the life of society. This is manifested in a significant expansion of the semantic class of words associated with social stratification. The material for this study was neologisms, which denote social groups differentiated according to their life style. As a result, recent appearance of a large number of such neologisms in Chinese speaks about the dynamics of changes in modern Chinese urban society, about diversifying the lifestyles of citizens. All of the neologisms under consideration, having first emerged in the Internet, became widespread in Chinese society due to their active use of the media, which are the first to respond to changes in the development of society, contribute to the assessment of the surrounding reality, introduce new concepts and names of phenomena into a wide circulation. The new nominations of social groups are distinguished on the basis of the life-style criterion reflect transformations in the lifestyle of modern citizens, based on changes not only in socio-economic conditions, but also in mentality, as well as value orientations. The study of these lexical units allows us to trace the influence of the processes of globalization, modernization and urbanization on modern Chinese urban society, to identify the main trends in its development

## 1 Introduction

Modern city is an open, dynamically developing system, a constantly transforming socio-cultural phenomenon that requires a comprehensive study of specialists in various fields of scientific knowledge. In recent years, the development of modern urbanism is becoming an increasingly obvious research trend aimed at a comprehensive study of the city as a cultural and communicative space. The city as a special information environment, an open communication space serves as a platform for the interaction of a large number of people, thus absorbing a lot of discourses that intersect with each other. These discourses form the language of the city.

## 2 Materials and Methods

This interest in the study of the language of the modern city provoked the emergence of a new direction of linguistic research, urban communication studies, exploring various aspects of human communication in the urban environment. In the framework of urban communication studies the city is treated as an independent communication system that combines a variety of channels, forms and means of human

communication and has a comprehensive impact on the formation and development of society. By urban communication discourse we mean a complex linguistic-semiotic and information phenomenon, a text (in a broad sense) placed in the urban environment, translating the meanings existing in this environment, reflecting urban communicative practices. When studying urban communication discourse, scholars investigate different media (street names, transportation, markets, cafés, restaurants, food, shops, supermarkets, events, music, etc.), as well as people's relationship, different forms of their interaction, social and cultural consequences of urban communication development. In our study, we proceed from the assumption that city life is largely dependent on national and global social dynamics, circulation of symbolic meanings, mechanisms of knowledge transfer, migration, travel, communal media consumption, etc. [1].

The interdisciplinary approach is elucidated through the use of the theoretical frameworks of the research instruments of sociolinguistics and ethnography of communication. Methods of sociolinguistics are a synthesis of linguistic and sociological procedures, among which there are methods of field research and sociolinguistic analysis of language material. The

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ethnographic method involves the immersion of the researcher in the social life that they study. In the context of this case, it includes combined procedures of reflection on the social processes taking place in the urban context.

### 3 Results

As noted by O. A. Leontovich, “urban communication discourse reflects the dynamics of the development of the modern city and the state as a whole, which determines the timeliness, relevance and social significance of the research conducted in this direction” [2]. One of the important aspects fixing dynamics of development of the modern Chinese city is social stratification of city society. The social stratification of Chinese society is directly affected by the process of urbanization, which is characterized by the rapid development of giant cities and “is currently the largest phenomenon occurring in the world” [3]. The social structure of modern Chinese urban society is a self-developing system, the transformation processes of which are determined by a variety of social and economic factors. Large cities, being a favorable environment for the differentiation of human activity, provide a wide range of ways and forms of organization of labor, life, leisure, consumption, which leads to the emergence of a large number of new social groups. Such a dynamic social modernization of Chinese megacities is undoubtedly reflected in the lexical content of urban communication discourse. This is manifested in a significant expansion of the semantic class of words associated with the display of social groups. The allocation can occur within society of certain social groups on the basis of different characteristics (profession, financial situation, age, gender, nationality, etc.). The analysis of Chinese language units, which are called social groups, suggests that at present the differentiation of modern urban society according to the stylistic criterion is particularly relevant. By lifestyle we mean a set of practices characteristic of a certain group of people, repeated in everyday behavior, the choice in favor of which is due to both social and psychological factors and depends on material and cultural resources. The emergence of a large number of neologisms that reflect social stratification based on lifestyle in the Chinese language in recent years speaks about the dynamics of changes in modern Chinese urban society, the diversification of the way of life of citizens.

### 4 Discussion

The vast majority of Chinese neologisms calling social groups are formed by the suffixal morpheme 族 (a group of people united by a common characteristic or occupation). Chinese linguists note that morpheme 族 in the meaning of “type of people with common characteristics” is borrowed from the Japanese language and has a high degree of productivity in the word-formation system of the modern Chinese language [4, 5]. Prepositional neologisms component of the field formed on the model of “X族” often represents foreign borrowing

that tells about the impact of globalization processes on the social structure of Chinese society. An example of neologism with foreign language inclusions is the word 辣奢族 the prepositive component of which (辣奢 lǎshē) is a phonetic tracing-paper from the English “luxury” (luxury). The word 辣奢族 which with a certain degree of conditionality can be translated as “brandomans”, in China means young people, representatives of the generation “born in the 80’s and 90’s”, mainly with a high level of income, fans of “beautiful lifestyle”, seeking to emphasize their social status with external attributes. Their consumer behavior is subject to an obsessive desire to acquire fashionable branded goods, even when such a “pursuit of the brand” is contrary to common sense [6]. Such neologisms, formed on the basis of phonetic borrowings of foreign words, include 乐活族 – people who adhere to a healthy lifestyle (乐 (lèhuó) from the English abbreviation LOHAS (lifestyle of health and sustainability); 尼特族 – young people, which due to various factors neither work nor learn (尼特 (nítè) from the English abbreviation NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training); 飞特族 – “free workers”, young people who do not have permanent employment, living on income from periodic temporary earnings (飞特 (fēitè) from freeter – a combination of English. free (free) and German arbeiter (worker)), etc. [5, 7, 8]. It should be noted that the Chinese language is poorly susceptible to phonetic borrowings due to the hieroglyphic nature of writing, which leads to a significant distortion of the original sound, the emergence of unnecessary semantic associations, which makes the borrowed word difficult to understand and remember. Therefore, some of the names of social groups, which include phonetic tracing foreign words are formed from the actual Chinese elements analogues, which are more widespread in society. For example, to refer to young people who do not work anywhere, do not study and live at the expense of their parents, instead of borrowed 尼特族 (NEET generation), the name 啃老族 is more often used, which literally can be translated as “gnawing old people”.

From “sitting on the neck” of their parents 啃老族 the way of life is significantly different when we consider the representatives of social groups, called 蚁族 – the “ant tribe”. This denomination is used in relation to young people, primarily aged 22 to 29 years old, recent college graduates, which often come from rural areas or small towns, and who arrive in major Chinese metropolises in order to achieve success [9]. Because of low income, they are forced to settle on the outskirts of the city in apartments with numerous co-tenants or old barracks, separated by partitions into tiny rooms. As noted by Wu Yao, they in all respects resemble ants: clever, hardworking, live in colonies in the “horrible social darkness” [10].

In recent years, a rapidly expanding social group of urban residents, called “月光族” (月 – month; 光 – clean, without a trace) has come into existence. This is a collective name for people who spend their monthly income to the full. A common specific feature of the representatives of “living from salary to salary” is not a low level of income, and the inability and unwillingness

to properly dispose of the earned funds. This social group consists, as a rule, of young people who grew up without brothers and sisters during the policy of birth control, representatives of the generation of “little emperors” – spoiled individualists who are not accustomed to deny themselves anything. These young people are extremely profitable consumers, spend all available funds without a trace, guided by the motto “赚多少上多少” (whatever earned – so much spent) and their consumer behavior is fundamentally different from the older generation of the Chinese, which is characterized by a very careful attitude to money and the habit of making savings. Currently, the popularity of a neologism 月欠族 (月 – month; 欠 – to miss, to owe) is growing, it used to refer to people who, being unable to control their “consumer appetite”, spend more money than they earn. This group of “living in debt” is regularly replenished by representatives of the group “living from paycheck to paycheck” due to the widespread use of credit cards and online loan systems in China [11, 12].

Denomination 奔奔族 (“rushing clan”) is used to describe hard-working and energetic representatives of the generation born in the period from 1975 to 1985, seeking in conditions of high socio-economic competition to make a career and to strengthen their social position by all means [13], often encumbered with a mortgage and a loan for the purchase of the car.

It is believed that the representatives of the social group called 夹心族 (“sandwich generation”) are in the conditions of the greatest “life pressure” (生活压力). These are middle-aged family people who have to overcome many domestic and financial difficulties. They are forced to take care of teenage children on the one hand and the elderly parents on the other, as it were “trapped” between the two generations [14]. At the same time, the high cost of education and the peculiarities of the Chinese pension system make the burden of social and material responsibility of the “middle generation” very heavy.

The high cost of living in Metropolitan areas, in particular very high property prices, led to the emergence of a social group 钟摆族 (“pendulum clan”). Representatives of this group, working in the central areas of the metropolis, make a choice in favor of buying housing in the most remote from the center of suburban areas or in nearby small towns. The use of the metaphorical image of the pendulum in the name of the social group reflects the peculiarities of the way of life of these people who have to spend a significant amount of time on daily moving from place of residence to place of work and back [15]. The expansion of this social group is also facilitated by the well-developed transport system in China, in particular the widespread use of high-speed trains, which make it possible to overcome such long distances on a daily basis.

The high rate of urbanization in China has led to an increase in migration flows from rural to urban areas, which in turn has contributed to an increase in the social group called 漂一族 (“drifting people”). The representatives of this social group are labour migrants from villages and small county towns, who have been working for a long time in large Chinese cities, who have

no local registration and a relatively low level of income, the temporary nature of their employment often forces them to change their place of residence. According to the “migration dynamics Report” published by the State health Committee in 2018, there are currently 244 million internal migrants in China [16]. Widespread in the Chinese language, the nomination 北漂族 沪漂族 and 广漂族 for “drifting people” became popular in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou respectively, which speaks of the numerous special social groups of labour migrants in these three Chinese cities.

Speaking of lifestyles, we cannot ignore a group of people, mostly young residents of Chinese cities, who lead a secluded, reclusive lifestyle, spending all their free time at home, on the Internet. To denote this social group, the nomenclature 御宅族 (“otaku tribe”) is used, the prepositive component of which (御宅) is a borrowing from the Japanese language and literally means “your honorable home”. Studies show that about 24 million Internet “addicts” are lost in the Chinese virtual labyrinth. As noted by V. Michel, “in a country where sociability and competitiveness are key values, people are disconcerted by the voluntary isolation of this tribe” [17].

## 5 Conclusion

All the names of social groups discussed in this article, first appearing in the Internet space, have become widespread in society due to their active use by the media. It is the media that are the first to react to changes in the development of society, contribute to the assessment of the surrounding reality, introduce new concepts, names of phenomena, among them, first of all, there is an enrichment of the vocabulary of the language.

Summarizing the article, we can conclude that the rapid processes of urbanization and globalization in China inevitably lead to the transformation of the social structure of society, which, in turn, creates the need for new categories. Neo-nominations of social groups, allocated on the basis of the lifestyle criterion, fix the main trends in the development of the Chinese urban community, reflect the transformation in the way of life of modern citizens, based on changes of not only socio-economic conditions, but also mentality, and value orientations.

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