

УДК 316.3/4+316.334.56

Restructuring of the Chineseness: Ethnic Marking of City Spaces in the Light of Migration from China

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Received 24.07.2018, received in revised form 25.10.2018, accepted 08.11.2018

The author uses Irkutsk materials to analyze the dependence of the ethnic marking of the city migrant localities on the migration flow structure and the specifics of migrants. The examination is based on two series of semi-formalized interviews (in 2014–2015 and in 2017–2018) following E. Goffmann’s dramatic metaphor approach, R. Brubaker’s views on the ethnicity and ideas about the “right to the city” put forth by D. Harvey, A. Lefevre and D. Mitchell. It is concluded that a change in the migration structure, goals and motivation of migrants from the People’s Republic of China leads to a restructuring of the city migrant localities from the places of contact to the spaces contesting the right to the city.

Keywords: migrant localities, ethnicization, “Chineseness”, migration, disputed spaces.

The research was supported by the Ministry of Education and Science (the basic part of the State assignment, project No. 28.9753.2017/8.9) and partly (analysis of practices of using urban infrastructure by migrants) by the grant from the Russian Science Foundation No. 18-18-00293.

Research area: sociology.

Citation: Grigorichev, K.V. (2018). Restructuring of the Chineseness: ethnic marking of city spaces in the light of migration from China. J. Sib. Fed. Univ. Humanit. soc. sci., 11(11), 1762-1775. DOI: 10.17516/1997-1370-0338.

Ethnic marking of municipal localities has become an integral part of the daily life in Irkutsk and other Russian cities. From the chronological point of view, open-air markets with a predominance of migrant traders were the first and most common among such localities. Being defined in the Siberian cities, as a rule, as “Chinese” ones, they

had become multinational by the end of the 1990s with the division into sectors also having ethnic belonging markers, e.g., “Kyrgyz”, “Azerbaijani”, “Vietnamese” stalls. Being a part of a more general process of reactivating ethnic sense in a (post) Soviet city, “ethnic” markets have developed into the most important feature and technique of the ethnicization process of urban space (Diatlov, Grigorichev, 2014).

By marking not only and not so much places of concentration (residence and/or work activity) of particular groups, visual and toponymic ethnic markers themselves identified, rather, spaces of specific relationships and practices. By the middle of the 2000s, perhaps, this very range of acceptable and approved behaviour patterns within certain localities and situations (“performance” according to E. Goffmann (Goffman, 2000)) had become the most essential content of the ethnic categories that existed in urban everyday life, mass consciousness and the media. Since the key participants in such relations in most cases were cross-border migrants, so, in fact, ethnic markers here fixed the migratization process taking place in Russian cities.

The question of the ratio between migrant and ethnic discourse remains open as regards the description of large-scale post-Soviet migration. The complex interaction of these views, as well as the cognitive traps of each discourse, were characterized by S. Abashin (Abashin, 2012) several years ago, however, they are still actively debated. Nevertheless, there is indisputable relationship between these discourses. This, in turn, implies the presence of reciprocal action: a change in the qualitative structure of habitual migration flows and the following change in the migrants’ motives, the scope of their activities and patterns of their interaction with the host society can lead to a change in the semantic load of the usual ethnic terms that comment on migration.

I will try to show how a change in the characteristics of a cross-border migration flow entails applying familiar ethnic markers when describing typologically different localities and elements of the urban infrastructure objects used by migrants now but which have not been used before. It seems important to acknowledge the emergence of totally new visual symbols of such locality, which make the city middlebrows rethink the content and connotations of the usual names. In other words, I will try to demonstrate how a change in the characteristics of the migration flow leads to a kind of metanoia of the “ethnic” characteristics of the migrant group and the urban spaces migrants use.

I can support my reasoning with an analysis of the changes in the migration flow from the People’s Republic of China into the Irkutsk urban space. Having begun at the turn of the 1980-1990s, this migration had a pronounced labour and trade character for

a long time. The use of other entry visa categories (for educational or tourist purposes) by migrants from the PRC often became just a make-believe for legal moving in Russia, and a Chinese “tourist” or student could easily be found on the market or construction site and hardly ever while visiting any city sights. This migration has become one of the key factors shaping the migration and “ethnic” environment of any Siberian and Far Eastern city. The wording “a Chinese migrant” or “a Chinese person” has become not only a description of the group of “aliens”, but also an exhaustive definition of their status, possible behaviour patterns and city places, where the residence of this group was, albeit unpleasant, but admissible.

The rapid growth of tourist flow from China starting in 2015 was a shock for the Russian common men and city authorities. Instead of the usual shop assistants, builders or unskilled workers, isolated within borders of markets, construction sites and industrial facilities, there came large groups of rather well off Chinese tourists, whose appearance, demeanour and whereabouts were strikingly different from those familiar to citizens. The advertency of tourists to shops, restaurants and city attractions has led to the need for a new understanding of the definition of “Chinese”: there appeared “a Chinese market”, “a Chinese restaurant”, “a Chinese shop”, etc.

The article is based on the author’s field observations and a series of unstructured or semi-formalized interviews (more than 30 records) taken in Irkutsk in 2014–2018 within two projects. The first of them included an analysis of the processes of forming intergroup boundaries in the urban space, where the Irkutsk “Chinese” markets were used as studied cases. The second project was devoted to a study of the urban infrastructure use by migrants and the newly emerged situations of their contesting the right to the city space. Two arrays of interviews share opportunity offered to the respondents to reflect about the choice of “Chinese places” in the city and determine the reasons for them being “Chinese”. In the article fragments of the interview are italicized; the author’s explanations necessary for understanding these fragments are given in square brackets. Interviews and observation materials were interpreted following the logic of the dramatic metaphor by Erving Goffman (Goffman, 2000) and the analysis of the ethnicity by Rogers Brubaker (Brubaker, 2012) and his adherers. I also made an attempt to fit perceptions of acceptable situations and performances related to the interaction of citizens with visitors from China into the conception of the “right to the city” (Harvey, 2003; Lefebvre, 1996; Mitchell, 2003), which would allow, in my opinion, to link ideas about the practices within the city scenery.

Chineseness without Chinese: “pre-tourist” Chinese localities in Irkutsk

Probably the first type of migrant localities in the post-Soviet city, which became labelled with ethnic categories, was the retail “Chinese” open-air market. Having appeared in the early 1990s in almost all Russian cities, these markets owed their existence to the Chinese tradesmen. However, as V.I. Diatlov writes, they were “Chinese” in public opinion only, sometimes contrary to the real history of their emergence and/or national belonging of marketeers: soon after the appearance of markets, they would become multinational, while their internal structure often remained non-transparent even for the administration (Diatlov, 2014). Regular customers on the “Chinese” market faced Chinese and Kyrgyz salespeople, emigrants from the South Caucasus countries and the regions of the Russian North Caucasus, as well as such citizens for whom the market became a place and a means of survival. Actually, Chinese marketeers quickly ceased to be the only and then the dominant selling group.

After the ban on foreign trade on open markets in 2007, the process of Chinese traders’ switching to the shadow market accelerated sharply. Preserving, in fact, the trading business, Chinese entrepreneurs were forced to communicate with buyers through hired sellers, intermediaries, and, in most cases, they did not have direct contacts with citizens. In other words, for the buying citizens the Chinese people discontinued being the main actors on the market, formally yielding the stage of performance to hired sellers:

“The Chinese do not stick out, they behave quite modestly. They sit somewhere controlling several pavilions, that is, he sits politely in his closet” (man, about 45 years old, interviewed in 2014).

However, as back as in 2014–2015 it was the “Chinese” markets defined in interviews as the carriers of the “real” Chinese character and the place of residence for the “real” Chinese people:

“You know, if you ask me where to find the Chinese, I will immediately say – on the market. I’m not going to say – in all these types of “Chinese” restaurants, as there are no Chinese there; the Buryats and the Uzbeks are only cooks, and there is no real Chinese food. So it is necessary to go to the bazaar for this for sure” (man, about 23-25 years old, interview in 2014).

The authenticity of market Chineseness was also emphasized by the developed habit of citizens visiting semi-legal eateries “chifan’ka” (also “chufan’ka”, “chafan’ka”, derived from “chafan” meaning meat salad with vegetables). In these cafes, according

to experts, there was a chance to try authentic Chinese food, touch “real China”, and at the same time plunge into “another” city, concealed from the common man by everyday fuss (Timoshkin, 2018). They were directly opposed to the legal places of the ethnic catering, which did not provide the authentic cuisine (Diatlova, 2015).

Markets remained, in the perception of citizens, the carriers of “correct”, “real” Chineseness, despite the obvious contradiction of the definition used (i.e. “Chinese”) to their internal organization, the national identity of shop assistants, places of production and supply of goods, the specifics of eateries and diners. Thus, the largest current Chinese market in Irkutsk, Kitay-gorod (which is different from Kitay-gorod in Moscow, as here it literally means “China Town”), begins with the Tajik cafe “Vostochnaia Kukhnia” (“Oriental Cuisine”), one of the most striking features of which is the colourfully painted tandoor which, in turn, is at least 3 meters long and clearly visible through the glass cafe walls. Starting with the tandoor, this “Chinese” market continues with the Mongolian yurt, which houses “Poznaya” cafe (the name is derived from the word meaning “buuz”) with Buryat cuisine, where, in addition to traditional Mongolian buuz, European-style cutlets with mashed potatoes are served. In one of the roofed pavilions in Kitay-gorod there is quite natural mix of the signs “Chinese cuisine”, “Chayhona” (meaning “teahouse”), “Turkish knitwear” and some handwritten ads in Russian with mistakes like “Need Kyrgyz girl for sell”. Besides, on the small Chinese market “Manchuria”, neither sellers nor buyers see anything strange in the fact that in the “Bishkek Stalls” pavilion some local (Russian) sellers sell Turkish and Belorussian knitwear.

So, the national mixture of the sellers, the structure of the goods, and the visible image of the “Chinese” markets prove that there is no dominance of the titular (i.e. Chinese) ethnic group and indeed lack of any other. Quite the opposite, all these peculiarities mark, rather, the actualization of a border situation in the market space, where the practices of the border contact zone are reproduced really far from the state borders. This very situation of meeting and contact with the “alien, outside” was, in fact, defined by the respondents as “genuine” Chineseness. For its existence the presence of the Chinese themselves in this agglomeration of various things and people is no longer necessary:

“Even if there are no Chinese on the Chinese market soon, if the situation develops in this vein, the market will still be called Chinese... You know, most likely, kitaika (literally “Chinese place”) is an image which has already entrenched in the minds of Irkutsk citizens in particular, so that any such market where migrants are working will

be called kitaika, even if, for example, they are not from Asia, or probably they are not Chinese, for example, they are people from Central Asia, too (man, 25 years old, interview in 2014).

Such Chinese character is fixed through primitive, easily recognizable visual markers that reflect, first and foremost, stereotyped ideas about China: a combination of red and yellow colors, stylization of the Cyrillic font to conform to the hieroglyphic writing. The contents of the signs may directly contradict their Chinese appearance: for example, on Kitay-gorod market, the signs of a large trade pavilion with goods from Kyrgyzstan are decorated in a similar style. The design of outdoor advertising often includes details reminiscent of the pagoda roof. Small and large images of dragons are widespread; in the warm season, Chinese lanterns are often used in the decoration of the shopping stalls.

Such visibility, no doubt, is focused not on the carrier of “Chineseness” (imaginary migrant from China), but on the consumer, and marks not groupness (and, therefore, not ethnicity as such), but the situation and its potential performances. It is important that the market owners and managers promote it in advertising precisely as “Chinese” (which is already noticeable by its name), making it a successor to the most famous Chinese Irkutsk market “Shanghai” by using both text ads (“The Chinese market moved to Kitay-gorod”) and regular public transport routes (Briazgina, 2017). In other words, the Chineseness of “Chinese” markets determined a specific set of practices of socio-economic interactions and localities for their realization.

There are smaller (but no less recognizable than the markets) various “Chinese” enterprises in the service sector. They have become popular since the late 1990s and unite auto services, car washes, small woodworking industries (sawmills, wood plants). In interviews all of them were assigned the following properties close to the “Chinese” markets and public catering services: low prices, large portions (in the version with the Chinese baths there was such an answer: “a lot of pleasure for little money” (woman, 42, interview in 2017)), low quality goods and unpretentious service. Visual markers, as on the “Chinese” markets, are distinguished by their laconic and stereotypical images: the same red and gold shades and an abundance of various images of dragons. Perhaps, the simplicity and recognizability of the symbols of Chineseness by consumers-citizens can be defined as the main characteristic of visual markers of such “Chinese” localities. The most vivid illustration of this thesis is an advertising sign of the auto repair service “Master Liu”, where the fast and inexpensive car repair service is offered to Irkutsk citizens by actor Jackie Chan – the main Chinese actor of the 1990s and 2000s who starred in Hollywood action films.

Chineseness itself, defined as the immanent property of the described localities, looks not so much as a characteristic of groups or groupness, but rather as a succinct description of how the host community interacts with migrants in a situation at the border. This marker determines the very scene and optional performances there and only there. At the same time, the Chineseness of such places is a stigmatizing factor that excludes it from the everyday life of the city and its citizens, and turns it into “gated living” space (Brunn, 2006) during non-working hours. With an increase in the standard of living, such “Chinese” places in the city become the setting for the avoidance practices:

“The Chinese market is not fashion; it is not fancy. It is a chic to buy the same Chinese thing being four times as expensive in the “Jam Mall”. Therefore, a certain imbalance is created – it is a shame to buy something on the Chinese market exactly and to be even noticed there.” (man, 24 years old, interview in 2014).

The Chinese per se are not the carriers of Chineseness here, so they are defined as low-status participants of interactions, who in real performances *a priori* play the roles of victims or fraudsters, and only in a mythologized unconsciousness they act as the keepers of a magic item or knowledge (Timoshkin, 2017). Chineseness as an ethnicity goes here beyond the group limits (Chinese only) and functions outside ethnicity context. The actual urban locality properly becomes the bearer of “Chineseness” and the performance scenes played inside it, and the “Chinese” city localities become the space of contact with the Other.

“Runaway gasterbeiters” and “wrong Chinese”: tourists from China in the urban space

The rapid growth in the number of tourists from China began to be felt in the Siberian regions as early as in 2015, and became particularly noticeable in 2016–2017. In 2016, in spring, regional authorities and media stated that the tourist flow increased by almost one and a half times (In 2016...). However, it was social media which responded most quickly and sharply to the appearance of visually standing out groups of Chinese tourists on the city streets. Social networks, web forums, comments under the news articles were filled with alarmist and often xenophobic statements about the “new Chinese threat”:

“The Chinese should not come to us, no matter what you say to me...”; “The Chinese have already bought half of Baikal”; “They enter as tourists and remain. At Surnov street I lived in a new building, there were 6 apartments on the floor, 3 of them

were inhabited by Chinese who lived with their families. Soon, as in Ulan Ude, there will be only half of people of Russian origin” (see comments to *Increase*, 2017).

Such a strong reaction was caused not so much by the growing number of Chinese migrants, but by the changed geography of their life in the city and the new nature of using the urban infrastructure: “This year, the invasion of tourists from the PRC is no longer impossible to neglect. They are everywhere: on Karl Marx Street, on Uritsky Street and, naturally, near Lake Baikal. If you decide to go by the Circum-Baikal Railway, do not be surprised that the majority of your neighbours in the car are Chinese. <...> Travel guides list the following favourite locations of Chinese tourists: the Kazan Church, the 130th quarter and, of course, Taltsy ethnographic museum (Starshinina, 2016).

In the new geography of the “Chinese” Irkutsk, which was briefly outlined here, one cannot but notice the main change: the Chinese suddenly reached beyond the strictly defined limits of construction sites, markets and services, and became active consumers of the city history, its public spaces, trade and entertainment facilities. This dramatic change was the reason for a shock reaction:

“... Passing through Shanghai market in the beginning of the 1990s between the counters with cheap consumer goods, could we ever think that in a quarter of a century everything would change drastically? And it would be not us, but the Chinese themselves who will walk through our most expensive shops, buying gold and furs?” (Starshinina, 2016).

There happened a radical redefinition of the “Chinese” places in the city. Back in a 2017 interview, respondents described the new urban localities that they positively associated with the Chinese and Chineseness:

“Chinese places of Irkutsk? It is easy to [name]! Karl Marx [street], the embankment, a monument to Alexander III, the whole 130th quarter, and, of course, shops!

Question: What shops?

Answer: Well, all sorts of. Jewellery and other luxury. And even groceries. Yes, all the tourist places where they buy us up” (man, about 25-27 years old, interview in 2017).

Localities, which were previously impossible to be associated with visitors from China, are now resolutely defined as “Chinese”. For example, in several interviews, the Orthodox Kazan Church was named as the “Chinese place”. The key argument that contributed to such an identity, in the opinion of the respondents, is the possibility to pay for purchases in the church shop in yuans:

“You know, I also often call the Kazan Church ‘Chinese’ for myself.

Question: Why?

Answer: The Chinese people like to go there. Beautiful, bright ... But that’s not the point. There are icons, candles, and well, everything like that can be paid in yuans. They willingly take yuans.

Question: Chinese?

Answer: No, I’m talking about these... employees... Well, those who serve in the church... They take yuans” (woman, about 30 years old, interview in 2017).

In my opinion, the two excerpts from the interviews demonstrate clearly that the key criterion of the “Chineseness” of the named localities is the new practices of tourist interaction with the city, and the new position of migrants in these relations. In the first of these interview excerpts, in my opinion, this new attitude is most pithily expressed by the definition of “where they buy us up”. If earlier a visitor from China was a seller of goods or services, now he/she is a consumer, secured, and therefore having the opportunity to choose. A different position and other decorations also open the way for other performances that are natural for the Chinese, but often unacceptable to the citizens.

“You know, when I see them [Chinese tourists], here in these places, literally in the very centre [of the city], where there is story itself... it often seems to me that these are migrant workers who fled from the construction site. What are they doing here? Somehow it is not right ... And they themselves are wrong...” (woman, 23 years old, interview in 2017).

Such “wrong” behaviour of visitors from the PRC is reflected not only by respondents and authors of posts in social media, but also in the academic environment. Here, the search for reasons leads the discussion participants to the issue of the difference in the dynamic development between Russia and China, and even touches upon the eternal Kipling confrontation between the West and the East (Round table, 2017). Nevertheless, distinguishing between the “right” Chinese in the markets and construction sites and the “wrong ones” – in shops and restaurants is clearly manifested.

New Chinese city localities are marked with new visibility. Signs and information boards in Chinese became its main element. Made, as a rule, in a minimalistic and very functional way, they accurately mark “China friendly” places. The most important difference of the new visual symbols marking the presence of the Chinese from the earlier ones, more familiar to the citizens, is the almost complete absence of signature, stereotyped elements, which mirror the well-established concept of “Chinese culture”.

Signs, price tags and information boards are aimed at the Chinese themselves instead of the Irkutsk residents. For the latter, new visual signs of Chinese interaction with the city and “usage” of this new language remain unreadable, and therefore “wrong”, revealing the appearance of “wrong Chineseness” in urban space. This wrongness is a symbol of locality, where the set of acceptable practices is not defined yet, and as a result, interaction with the Other is not viable.

It is no coincidence that the subtle and reticent symbols of the new “Chinese” city localities cause rejection and an acute reaction, unlike the bright symbols of previous years, screaming about their “Chinese” nature. It is significant that the respondents often do not notice the familiar symbols of “Chinese” place against the background of barely visible information stands with information written in hieroglyphs:

“There is such a stand here, almost inconspicuous, but everything-everything is written there, like what stones to buy from us.

Question: Is this where the Chinese restaurant is? There is such a dragon on the veranda.

Answer: I do not know... Perhaps, yes. There is something there, I do not remember...” (man, about 30 years old, interview in 2017).

It seems to me reasonable to assume that despite the fact that earlier the Chineseness described the border situation as a place for meeting and contact, a place for developing new communication strategies, now it is more bound to mark disputed city spaces. It is noteworthy that Chinese tourists do not put new meanings into the developed urban localities, for them Irkutsk is one of several cities that they would visit only once and where they would never return. Their symbolic appropriation of the city takes place rather through the perception of citizens, for whom the appearance of a new, “wrong” Chinese character means a challenge to their right to the city (Harvey, 2003). The blurring of the borders of clearly delineated places of contact with the Other creates the feeling that the city is completely absorbed by this space and loses its identity:

“You know, I have lately thought that our Irkutsk is turning into Manchuria. This is such a city in China, you know, at the border? There, the Chinese foist anything on us, and there’s nothing but trade there. As if there is no even a city there... I have a feeling that we have now become a kind of such a border, with almost no normal Irkutsk left...” (woman, about 25 years old, interview in 2017).

In this situation the city is not just appropriated by strangers, but it ends up being on the verge of extinction, dissolved in the infinite expanse of the inverted “Chinese” market, where the locals act as sellers, and visitors from the PRC buy national wealth

for next to nothing. It is symptomatic that it is precisely the motives of the unequal and unfavourable for the “sellers” interaction with the Chinese that are most often found in the comments of the news and publications about migration from China.

Thus, the new Chineseness is becoming the ground for new and unacceptable for the host society models of interaction with the Chinese migrants. The status of tourists, which implies their short-term stay in the city, does not help citizens in differentiating between these Chinese and those who previously came to the city for trade and work. The Chinese tourists are routinely seen as conforming to the current myths about “creeping expansion” (Diatlov, 2010), and the Russian tourist business actively feeds these stereotypes with images of multimillion-dollar losses and “wrong” coverage of the country’s history.

As a consequence, the new “Chinese” locality, in contrast to the former, becomes in the minds of citizens not a place of contact, but rather a space of conflict, the place for struggle for the right to the city. The gravity of the situation is added by the fact that the challenged places are situated mainly within the historical centre. Their symbolic (even if alleged) appropriation by strangers is reflected on not only as a violation of conventions on places and acceptable practices of interaction, but also as an encroachment on the city, perceived here as a place of memory (Nora, 1999). This expands the conflict from the struggle for the right to the city to the struggle for history.

Conclusion

In my opinion, the differences in the definition of “Chinese” localities in urban space and the content of their Chineseness evidently show a connection with changes in the migration flow. Changes in the motives, goals of visitors, their status and behaviour patterns in the Russian city caused the transformation of the mental maps for the “Chinese Irkutsk” and led to the need to redefine their Chinese character. Being previously the place of contact with the Other, such localities have become a place of conflict, contesting the right to the city.

In spite of this, the obvious differences, in my opinion, disguise a rather close relationship. Suffice it to recall the images of “Chinese” markets that were widely used in regional and federal media with widely and colourfully presented motives of “takeover” and even “occupation” of urban space (Diatlov, 2014). This rhetoric, which started in the 1990s, is still being used, coexisting peacefully with the practices of everyday life, in which “Shanghai”, “Manchuria” and simply various kinds of “kitaika” market have become one of the most essential elements of the urban infrastructure.

Created through a joint effort by migrants and city communities, these localities originally were the battleground for the right to the city and for symbolic power over the city space to a much greater extent. But with the emerging consensus on the permissible borders of the stage and performances on it, this rivalry almost completely reduced to the sphere of media and authorities' rhetoric, with practically no interference with the citizens' everyday life.

This makes it possible, in my opinion, to suppose that a dramatic actualization of ethnicity, provoked by the redefinition of the meanings of this concept, is a way of describing the conflicting nature of initial contact with the Other. Ethnic categories, that have been firmly established in Russian extra-academic discourse for reflection on migration, act here not as the language of describing groups, but as the means of describing (often very painful) situations when people are forced to develop a new range of ways of interaction with the Other. In this case, the mechanism for the emergence of the Other is not only a new migration flow, even if it acts as such a mechanism, but a change in the structural characteristics of a completely familiar migration, the interaction with which is already well-built in the host society.

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Пересборка «китайскости»:

этническое маркирование городских пространств

в контексте миграции из Китая

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На материалах Иркутска анализируется зависимость этнического маркирования мигрантских локальностей города от структуры миграционного потока и специфики мигрантов. Анализ построен на основе двух серий (2014–2015 и 2017–2018) полуформализованных интервью в логике драматургической метафоры И. Гофмана, взглядов на этничность Р. Брубейкера и идей «права на город» Д. Харви, А. Лефевра, Д. Митчелла. Показывается, что смена структуры, целей и мотивации миграции из КНР приводит к переопределению мигрантских локальностей города от места контакта к пространству оспаривания права на город.

Ключевые слова: мигрантские локальности, этнизация, «китайскость», миграция, оспариваемые пространства.

Исследование проводилось при поддержке Министерства науки и высшего образования (базовая часть государственного задания, проект № 28.9753.2017/8.9) и частично (анализ практик использования городской инфраструктуры мигрантами) при поддержке Российского научного фонда (грант № 18-18-00293).

Научная специальность: 22.00.00 – социология.
