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**Perception of home in the process of migration and transmigration: the experience of  
Russian teachers in Heihe, China**

**A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of**

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**In**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*By carrying out qualitative research, I explore the experience of being involved in transmigration and living on the border of two cultures. Three Russian teachers who work and live in Heihe, China were interviewed and asked how they redefine their practices of 'home' as transmigrants. Understanding of 'home' involves complex construction and reconstruction of ideas about 'home' which are unique for each individual and it is this that makes the basis for the comparison.*

*The research was based on material gathered mostly through one-on-one semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Each interviewee's story shows that there are different strategies being applied by people living away from their original homes.*

*I explored the idea that these people develop their relationship to home through relating to both material and non-material aspects simultaneously. Therefore physical spaces, other materiality and food, and non-material aspects such as social networks, communication and practices are all interwoven. The research explored that 'home' involves both 'fluidity' and 'fixedness' of place. The experiences of this particular group of multi-local people and their relationship to 'home' and 'host' country will add a useful dimension to the understanding of other Russian migrants who live in Heihe. And in addition, the experiences of these people will add to general ideas about translocality in other countries across the world.*

## Acknowledgements

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Background

#### *Introduction*

I was born in Blagoveshensk, Amur Oblast, Russia, a town that straddles the Russian – Chinese border with the Chinese town Heihe. Long before I went to Heihe as an anthropologist I became interested in the culture of Heihe and how different it was from my own culture. My father, an eye surgeon, worked in Russian-Chinese medical centres in both Heihe and Blagoveshensk. In 1990 he visited Heihe for the first time with my mother working under contract in Heilongjiang province. He was among the first Russians who went to Heihe for work. I was a child at that time, but I remember their stories about what they saw just across the border. These were descriptions of a different reality. After completing his work contract and returning home to Russia I remember, in the evenings, my father learning Chinese. We had numerous discussions about poverty, as he often told me about the degree of poverty he saw in Heihe. We talked about cultural difference, the difference in ‘mentality’ of Russians and Chinese and also other topics that concerned differences in culture. These stories have helped to mould my understanding of this cross-border situation and my own position as an individual and an anthropologist.

In this chapter, I introduce myself and how I came to study the topic of ‘home’ in the context of transmigration. Then, before exploring relevant defining concepts, I present my research aims and establish my research themes. This chapter also explores the historical background of the region Heihe - Blagoveshensk as well as some cultural facts and information. I further discuss how Heihe city has changed since the 1950s and how cross-border migration influences the cultural identity of Heihe. I then explore previous research in this region. In the conclusion, I will provide an overview of the thesis.



## *My story*

Until 2002, I lived in the Russian town of Blagoveshensk. After I finished high school, my parents, my brother and I immigrated to New Zealand. For the first four years, we returned to Russia for the summer holidays. It was during this time that I got married, finished my first Bachelor degree and fell in love with New Zealand. In 2006, we decided to return to Blagoveshensk as there were more opportunities for my husband's work, and also my large extended family remained there. These days, we return to New Zealand every year and spend from four to six months at a time in New Zealand. I continue to visit Heihe when I am in Russia. Therefore, before I began this research I had seen for myself how Heihe had changed. I had witnessed booming economic growth and how it affected both my hometown Blagoveshensk, and Heihe. At this time I travelled to Heihe as a tourist, spending time in the same sort of way as most visiting Russians did: shopping, eating in Chinese restaurants, visiting Chinese saunas, walking in beautiful parks and enjoying the waterfront area. However, my interest in China was never limited to these material aspects. I studied Chinese language and culture as part of my interest in China with the desire to explore more deeply the different aspects of this culture<sup>1</sup>. My goal was to be able to view, and perhaps understand Chinese people and their values from different perspectives, and to understand how this situation of cross-cultural relations in Heihe has developed. Travelling to New Zealand, back to China on a transit/tourist visa, then to Russia every year since 2002 gave me chances to see more than other Russians got to see when they were in Heihe. I was interested in the changes in the cultural identity of Heihe as a result of global and local changes, and I could compare these changes with my native city Blagoveshensk. What I became most interested in were people's experiences, their strategies for coping with rapid change, and how their lives changed in one way or another. Moreover, my experience of living in a multi-cultural New Zealand context allowed me to see how Chinese and other ethnicities living in New Zealand change their cultural identity too.

All of these experiences have led me to explore the issues of migration, movement, place, and 'home' more deeply. I became particularly interested in ways people "on the move" perceive their 'homes'. This theme kept occurring during my discussions with transmigrants (which I will define later in this chapter) before I started doing this research. And so, my ongoing interest in migration, transmigration and 'home' brought me to Heihe once again, but in a different role. Thus, after observing these cross-cultural phenomena, I got the chance to explore more deeply

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<sup>1</sup> I studied Chinese as part of my BA in Chinese at Massey University in New Zealand.

some of these aspects, through my fieldwork experience. The topic of ‘home’ became the central focus of the thesis.

In this research, I explore how this cross-situation is reflected, not in my own native Russian city Blagoveshensk city, but Heihe city. I am particularly interested in investigating the experiences of the many Russians that are not just visiting Heihe, but live there. Thus, their perception of ‘home’, the way they maintain and construct ‘homes’, make sense of ‘home’ are all central themes in this research. I chose to focus on Russian people in Heihe, rather than on local Heihe residents, because they can better reflect on changes that have happened and differences between Heihe and Blagoveshensk and more importantly, to explore their experiences of being located between the geographical and cultural borders. This became possible because I belong to the same culture as my research participants and we share a common history, cultural traditions, and language. Also, being a transmigrant myself, I was aware of the issues that concerned my research participants most. So in places, throughout this research, where relevant, I also discuss my own memories and reflections.

## **Research Aims**

Globalisation refers to social, economic, cultural, and demographic processes that take place within and beyond nations. Globalisation and greater movement of people, capital and resources in the world are changing ideas about place, ‘home’, movement and people’s position in relation to the local and the global. This research aims to understand the experience of being involved in transmigration, and to understand the context of these situations. By focusing on how these issues are interpreted, from the point of view of Russians who live in or visit Heihe regularly, I aim to explore their perception of ‘home’. My research aims to contribute to an existing literature on transmigration and transnationalism by exploring the lived experiences of these people. They are found in different life situations but share many similarities at the same time. I am well positioned to do this research as I am familiar with the issues I explore and I also come from the same culture and region. The research aims to understand issues surrounding the topic of ‘home’ through listening to stories of personal experience of living in Heihe and through carrying out participant observation while visiting and spending time with Russians in this rapidly changing Chinese city Heihe. What I was interested in were answers to the following type of question – What is the definition of ‘home’? What is involved in the process of making of ‘home’? What is the role of memory and nostalgia for the perception and constitution of ‘home’? What is the role of material and non-material aspects of ‘home’ for my research participants? The answers to these and other questions led me to suggest that ‘homes’ of my

research participants are both 'mobile' and 'fixed', and they involve both material and non-material aspects simultaneously. My research, explores how transmigrants experience and imagine their spaces, how they differentiate between their native and host countries in the context of cultural and geographical boundaries that surround them. While my research aims to focus on Russian-Chinese relations, it will be shown that issues of sense of 'home' and place, globalisation and localism, are also important for other cultures including New Zealand. I now explore the theoretical background for my research.

## Theoretical background

Globalisation is not limited to local processes, identities, and units of analysis (Basch, 1994, p.11-12). As a result of the intensification of world-wide social relations "distant localities are being linked in ways that shows what happens on a local level is influenced and shaped by events occurring many miles away" (Giddens, 1990, p.64). As Warner and Child (2003, p.1) argue, 'globalisation', coexists with 'localisation'. Thus understanding the balance between these two processes has become increasingly important.

The term "translocality" represents a complicated notion of places and people in the world today. The complex world cannot be understood as a collection of self-contained localities, nor should it be viewed as one global space. It is about local processes in the global context which are made accessible to many people. For example, translocality refers not just to the physical mobility (and movement) alone, but to other forms and functions of connectedness (such as circulation of images, goods and capital in the world; new technologies; media and tourism), both past and present (Oakes & Schein, 2006). In the context of this research, it is used to highlight a simultaneous focus on mobilities and localities (places), or "translocality as 'groundedness' during movement" (Brickell & Datta, 2010, p. 4). The representation of translocalities not only as imagined communities or as globalised spaces of hyper-mobile flows makes them interconnected spaces of "locatedness spanning multiple sites of material life both within and across borders" (Appadurai, 1996, p.188). Transmigrants who are translocal people and whose lives span multiple sites of material and non-material life are the focus of this research.

Now I provide a definition of transmigration, "The process by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement" and transmigrants are "Immigrants who develop and maintain multiple relationships - familial,

economic, social, organisational, religious, and political - that span borders we call transmigrants (Basch et al, 1994, p. 7).

According to Olwig (2007), the more fluid and globalised the world becomes, the more concerned people appear about identifying themselves with local places of origin and corresponding cultural identities. The topic of homeland, cultural identity and 'home' is prominent in the scholarly literature about migration and transmigration (Blunt & Valley, 2004; Brickell & Datta, 2011; Brickell & Datta, 2010).

However, I found a gap in the literature on this topic where 'home' is often treated as either fixed (static) or mobile (in movement) (Lam & Yeoh, 2004; Nowicka, 2007; Wiles, 2004) . Since I found that it was not the case for the people I studied. I have shown that there are more movement, complexity and fluidity to my participants' concepts of 'home' which also did not reflect what I found in the literature. The 'home' of my participants was perceived not only in movement due to the frequent border crossings and mobility of people but also in fixity and always in relation to place. This process involves material and non-material aspects of 'home' which also appeared to be indiscrete. Also, I saw that an understanding of transmigrants' own interpretation of 'home' and the importance of everyday lived experiences is missing in the scholarly literature on transmigration. This is essential for the understanding of broader concepts surrounding this topic as provides a more complex emic perspective of home.

Observing the "small politics" of the everyday life of transmigrants allowed me to explore more intimately the 'home' experiences of my participants as migrants. It allowed finding the relationship between place and subjectivity, and exploring migrant strategies and agency in action (Bonisch-Brednich & Trundle, 2010, p. 10). The perception of 'home' of transmigrants involves construction and re-construction of their previous ideas about 'home', making of 'home' through movement and crossing of boundaries or through a form of stasis, but "commonly they involve both" (Bonisch-Brednich & Trundle, 2010, p. 10). In both cases, place remains an important basis for analysis because of its materiality, which I cover in chapter 4.

One of the books that assisted me to do this research on the topic of 'home' and migration is the Bonisch's and Trundle's (2010) *Local Lives: Migration and Politics of Place* (2010). It explores issues that are arising in the world today as a result of migration and transmigration in the era of globalization. The book provides accounts of the lived experiences of migrant people who share memory and imagination. As the authors point out, "little distinction is made theoretically between local and global boundaries or forms in order to allow interlocutors to define their own experiences of flow and closure, closeness and distance, the familiar and the foreign" (2010, p.

3). These ethnographic cases demonstrate the importance of place-based identity resources which migrants often assert and transform in order to craft a sense of emplacement. Emplacement refers to physical and social positionality within an area (Stewart & Strathern, 2005).

Place-based identity resources of 'home' can be material (as physical) and non-material and are often interwoven. They are not discrete as will be explored in the examples of my research participants. Memory that connects the past and the present is a significant way of relating to 'home' (Ahmed, 2003). Making of home is about affective qualities of 'home' and the work of memory in their making cannot be separated from more concrete materialities. It can be anything that surrounds people such as objects, rituals, borders, cars or photos (Ahmed, 2003). In his work about the role of food in the construction of memory, Sutton (2001) argues that the power of tangible everyday experiences to evoke memories for people through which identities are formed is significant. Thus, the interrelationship between culture, food, and memory is clear. All these material and non-material aspects of 'home' are used in the construction of 'home' by transmigrants as they are socially embedded. In this research, I have artificially separated material and non-material aspects for the purpose of analysis. However, experience of 'home' involves both of these aspects simultaneously.

## Heihe

### Geographic area and climate

Heihe is located at the northern edge of Heilongjiang Province on the Chinese-Russian border, on the south bank of the Amur River, adjacent to the Russian city of Blagoveshensk which is the capital of the Amur region (*Amurskaya oblast*<sup>2</sup>). Heihe was among the first border-opening cities that China established during the 1990s. It has a close trade relationship with Russia. The Amur River connects both cities, through its summer flow and winter freeze. According to the regional profile information website of Chinese provinces, transportation between the two cities is by ferry boat in summer and by bus or hovercraft<sup>3</sup> in winter time (Heihe [Heilongjiang] City Information, 2011).

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<sup>2</sup> *Amurskaya oblast* is a federal subject of Russia situated on the banks of Amur and Zeya rivers about 8,000 km from Moscow, Far Eastern Federal District. The population of Amur oblast is about 870,000 (2008); land area - 363,700 sq. km (russiatrek.org, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> A hovercraft is an air-cushioned craft, which is capable to travel on different surfaces (land, water, ice and mud).



Figure 1: Ferry boat Amur 2010 on the way from Blagoveshensk to Heihe (Blagoveshensk city in the background) (Source: author)

Heihe has an acutely continental climate with an average summer temperatures of +27°C and an average winter temperature of -27 °C.

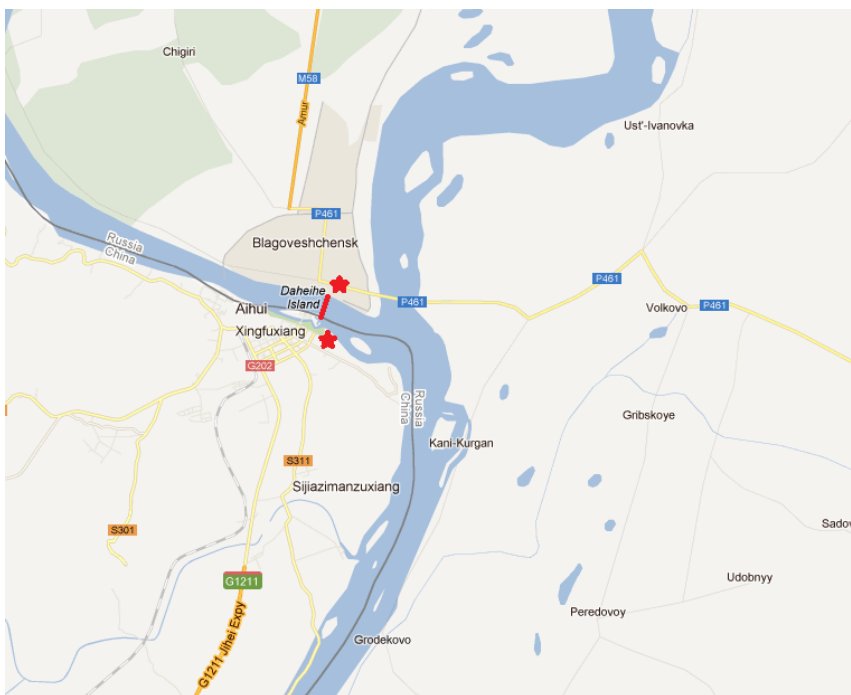


Figure 2: Map of Russian and Chinese border. (Two stars show Heihe and Blagoveshensk which are separated by the river) (Source: Google maps)

## Historical context

I describe the historical context of Russian-Chinese relations in order to understand what caused this cross-cultural situation that enabled Russians to visit Heihe without major barriers. In the early 1950s, Sino-Soviet friendship<sup>4</sup> was one of the central themes in the Soviet press, and the popular slogan was: ‘Russians and Chinese are brothers forever’. However, in the second half of the 1950s, conflict in the Sino-Soviet alliance started to appear “over questions of ideology, security, and economic development” (Worden, 1987, p. 37). Thus, in the early 1960s, the Chinese press was publishing only negative data about ‘Soviet reality’ (Byrov, 2000). So in the 1960s, the relationship between China and USSR broke down. According to Byrov (cited in Worden, 1987, p. 1), “Chinese leaders were disturbed by the Soviet Union's moves under Nikita Khrushchev toward de-Stalinization and peaceful coexistence with the West”.

As Worden (1987, p.1) points out, during the 1960s an ideological dispute had emerged between China and the Soviet Union caused mainly by territorial issues. In 1969, it had blown out into “bloody armed clashes on their border”, resulting in the deaths of many soldiers and ordinary people (Worden, 1987, p. 1). Bordering cities were the first to experience the tension due to this breakdown between the two countries. Contact between Russians and Chinese were strictly forbidden. The confrontation lasted for almost 30 years right up to the mid 1980s.

In the 1980s, as a result of the Chinese economic reform, China's approach toward the Soviet Union shifted again. Political and leadership changes, in Russia between 1982 and 1985 provided openings for renewed diplomacy. The relations between the two countries improved in different areas, including resumed economic and technical exchanges, trade expansion, opening of borders and exchange of delegations (Worden et al, 1987).

A turning point in the trading relationship occurred on the 18<sup>th</sup> of February, 1988. On this day, the first cars filled with goods for trade and exchange arrived from Heihe in the river port of Blagoveshensk (“Martial law”, 2009). Since that time, entrepreneurs from Blagoveshensk and other Russian cities have gone to China to purchase goods.

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<sup>4</sup> The Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance, is the treaty signed between China and the Soviet Union on February 14, 1950 (Kuisong, 2005).

According to Vragova (2007), modern China pays great attention to the development of this border trade. In the beginning of the 1990s, barter trade was common, which stimulated the development of Russian-Chinese trade relations, especially on the border regions. This time coincides with a collapse of the Soviet Union, when international trade was not regulated by the government (Ryzhova, 2008, p. 4). In these years, some people called Blagoveshensk “Adidasovsk” (informally), because a huge number of Chinese goods, including popular sportswear Adidas, were brought into Russia through the one working border customs facility connecting Russia and China. The local airport could not handle the load of arriving and departing charters from an entire ex Soviet Union. So from 1988, there were specific places in Blagoveshensk and Heihe where people could exchange goods. As my father told me, these places were coordinated by local government of Heihe. The Chinese were happily buying watches, coats, army coats and fur. In exchange, they offered leather jackets, padded coats, sportswear, pearl jewellery and other commodities which were in short supply in the Soviet Union<sup>5</sup>. I was four or five years old at this time but I remember when my father and my uncle went to China for the first time to exchange goods. They took away fur coats and hats and exchanged them for something which now seems less valuable, such as sportswear, cheap leather jackets and pearl necklaces which we could not get in Russia at that time. Now we remember those days and smile. However, when I asked them whether they felt themselves defrauded by this unequal exchange, they say that in an exchange system like that, it is difficult to apply monetary values to the products being exchanged. They said they were happy about it although the values of the products have changed since that time. In the second half of the 1990s, bilateral trade gradually changed from barter to a monetary system.

Just twenty years ago Blagoveshensk and Heihe were very different from each other in terms of social and economic conditions of development. As the centre of the Amur region and the third biggest town of the Far East, Blagoveshensk had four universities, tens of polytechnic universities, museums, theatres and other sociocultural institutions. Heihe, on the other hand, was a small, underdeveloped city. The whole city had just four restaurants, and in the evening it was often plunged into darkness as there was no reliable lighting in public areas. Before 1993, Heihe was a district city. There were donkeys on the roads and cars were not popular. According to the 1982 census, the population of Heihe was 66,000, which was less than 1% of the population of the province. In 1993, Heihe gained the status of county capital. According to Ryzhova, “Industrial production was meagre, and agriculture constituted the main sector of the

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<sup>5</sup> In the Soviet Union, consumer goods, food, and public services were limited and were supplied only after access was granted by the ruling party.



economy” (2008, p. 326). The 2006 census shows that the population of Heihe has tripled since 1982 and has become close to the population of Blagoveshensk. The impact of opening up policies on border trade was significant. This is reflected in the increase in average incomes in the Heilongjiang border districts which grew from 400 Yuan (NZ\$77) in 1989 to 2000 Yuan (NZ\$385) in 1995 (Wang, 1995).



Figure 3: Heihe city at night taken from Blagoveshensk (Source: Stegancev, 2007)

During the period of strict controls between the two countries, there was no opportunity to learn Russian on an ‘everyday level’. However, the opening of the borders attracted the interest of Chinese, in learning Russian. A large number of Chinese in Heihe city can speak Russian now, having learnt it to be able to trade. Thus, in the 1990s, there were numerous short language courses for local traders. In addition, many Chinese traders have learnt Russian on the streets, in the process of trade with Russian visitors (Ryzhova et. al, 2009, p. 230). Teachers of Russian language are also in demand at the Heihe University where my research participants work. More and more Chinese people see opportunities for their children doing business with Russia so they are interested in learning Russian at tertiary level. My research participants are a good example of that, as they teach Russian language in Heihe at the university. Interestingly, not many Russians are willing to learn Chinese language, which, probably, is going to change in the future as more and more people realise the influence of China on the world’s economy.

### Heihe city today

Today Heihe is completely different from what it was 20 years ago. Older buildings are gradually disappearing and new ones appear in their place: high-rise apartments, new micro districts<sup>6</sup>, parks, and walkways have been developed.

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<sup>6</sup> A micro district or *Mikroraions* (in Russian language) refers to a residential area, which consists of a complex of apartment houses with nearby facilities.



Figure 4: Statue in the Heihe waterfront (Source: author) Figure 5: Central shopping street of Heihe (Source: author)

There are hundreds of Russian people who go to China for shopping every day. These days, Russian visitors can pay in Russian currency (rubles) almost everywhere. There are many restaurants with menus offered in both Russian and Chinese language in those that Russian people visit regularly. These restaurants are cheap, and the food is of a high quality. Also, Russians go to Chinese saunas and karaoke bars. Many Russians travel by themselves, although some go as part of tourist groups. According to Waldren (2010), migrant lives can become imprinted on the landscape. This is demonstrated in Heihe as indicated by shop names, Russian statues on the waterfront and rubbish bins in a form of Russian *matryoshka*<sup>7</sup>.



Figure 6: Shopping mall Huafu and other shops with Russian names (Source: author)

<sup>7</sup> *Matryoshka* is a traditional Russian symbol, a nesting doll made from wood and decorated in a traditional manner. In China, this kind of folk art has been made into statues which can be found in many parts of Heihe. Chinese like this idea, as it looks bright and interesting, and highlights the influence of Russian culture on this city

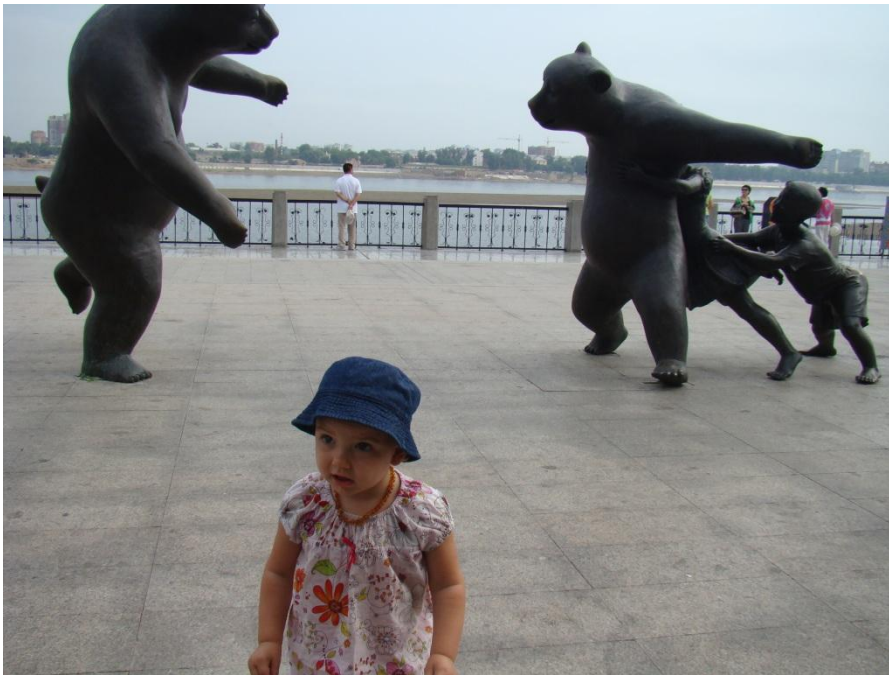


Figure 7: A Siberian bear and Chinese panda (Blagoveshensk city can be seen in the background) (Source: author)

For the past 10 years, I have been visiting China regularly, and I have always been interested in the fact that this city is changing a lot to accommodate Russian visitors. For example, Russians get the advantage of staying without a visa while they are in Heihe. Shops stocking a variety of goods to suit ‘Russian tastes’ of clothing is growing. Chinese people quickly adapt to changes in world fashion and carefully follow Russian trends in clothing. Russians are able to buy not just cheap clothing but fashionable ones, suited for the European market Chinese people’s tastes are also changing as a result of Russian influence.

From my observation, I can see that Heihe has been changing significantly, certainly infrastructure has increased significantly. Today, natural and city landscapes are attracting visitors, there are many parks, and the town is very green. The number of public parks has increased by 40% over the period from 1998 to 2006 (Heilongjiang Statistical Yearbook, 2006). These factors have resulted in Chinese as well as Russian people migrating to Heihe. On the streets, in the parks, in the shops, and in the hotels, there are groups of Russian tourists. At the same time, the requirements and needs of Russians are pushing the development of Heihe’s taxi parks, restaurants and consumer services in a particular direction aligned to Russian preferences.



Figure 8-9: Waterfront area near the new park (Source: author)

### Cross- border migration

Today, the number of Russian migrant workers who live permanently in Heihe is between 200 to 300 people. According to the Xinhua agency (“China and Russia join together”, 2011), the main information news agency in China, trade unions of Heihe city and Blagoveshensk city have been incorporated to help solve problems concerning the protection of interests and rights of migrant workers who live in Heihe. This is relevant to my research participants as they are able to seek help from trade unions if needed.

Recently, Heihe and Blagoveshensk started work on the implementation of the “Twin cities” project. According to this project, the two cities will develop tourist resources and will become an integrated centre of tourism (“Chinese international trading and economic fair”, 2011). This has been developed by the Amur Regional Committee and the Heihe government which aim to form a trans-boundary agglomeration<sup>8</sup>. Also, there are a number of cultural festivals that unite both cities and provide an opportunity for people to learn more about their bordering neighbours. These festivals which include both traditional and modern cultural performances occur regularly. The main events of these festivals are directed toward cross-cultural cooperation and are carried out for the purpose of strengthening social and cultural relations between the two countries, which is the aim of both Chinese and Russian governments. Visitors can see photo exhibitions, sales and exhibitions of Russian and Chinese products, performances of Chinese and Russian local dancers and singers, and other traditional art performance. There is also a swimming

<sup>8</sup> In the world there are around 50 trans-boundary agglomerations. These are cities which are situated in different countries, but are in close proximity to each other. Most of them are situated in the North America (22), Europe (18), and South America (4). There are only two in the whole Asian territory. Blagoveshensk and Heihe are not yet officially considered to be a trans-boundary agglomeration.

competition across the Heilongjiang River with participation of sportsmen from Russia and China. These cultural festivals are open to all people and often attract people of many different ages. Festivals of this kind are held in both cities.

Student exchanges between the two cities have become very popular over the past 15-20 years. These exchanges are reciprocal between Russian and Chinese students. Usually these exchanges last for 5-7 days and provide an opportunity for school students to experience what it is like to be a student in a different culture. Teacher and university student exchanges have also been popular. One example of this is my research participants who went to Heihe as part of these exchange programs. According to the article *Chinese and Russian teachers in Heihe city* (2011), the 8th of March is international women's day in both China and Russia. Russian women who work in Heihe University celebrate this day with their Chinese colleagues. Currently, there are 30 international teachers of different disciplines in this university including 20 from the Amur region. These teachers have formed what they call a 'family'. This research will explore the lived experiences of three of these people and their reasons for working and living in Heihe.

Heihe not only attracts Russians for shopping, leisure and work. There are also a number of cases of Russians who have moved to Heihe to live. According to Limanskaya (2011), one of the reasons for that are lower prices for property compared to prices in Blagoveshensk. In Heihe, for example, a square metre in a new apartment will cost about 7 thousand rubles (about NZ\$350) and with a view of Amur and Blagoveshensk about 10 thousand rubles (NZ\$500). In Blagoveshensk, on the other hand, one square meter of an apartment will cost around 60 thousand rubles (NZ\$3000). Kotov notes that not all people are able to buy their own property (2008). An average monthly income in Russia is 23,350 rubles ("Middle salary in Russia", 2011). Things are similar with renting. It is much more affordable to rent a flat in Heihe than in neighboring Blagoveshensk (Limanskaya, 2011) where price difference is almost five times as high. Also, living expenses, such as electricity, water, central heating, and telephone are all very cheap in Heihe compared to Blagoveshensk.

Today, the majority of Russians who buy property in Heihe are aged from 40 to 55 years, most of whom do business with China (Kotov, 2008). There is information in the media and press about Russian pensioners who have bought property in Heihe and moved there, supporting themselves with pension money from Russia (Kotov, 2008; Limanskaya, 2011). However, I found examples of these people were difficult to find. In the initial stages of my research, I was interested in finding the pensioners who moved to live in Heihe. However, in reality, these

instances appeared to be exceptions, and most of them have already moved to other Chinese cities (closer to the South) or have come back to Russia.

In July 2010, the number of tourists (mostly shoppers) passing through Heihe's customs reached 115,000 people. This figure is 25% higher than in the previous year. As per the new custom rules of the Russian Federation, from July 2010, an individual is allowed to take a load of a maximum of 50 kilograms to Russia. This further attracts traders and tourists who do business in China.

However, not just shopping attracts visitors to Heihe. Heihe is now a popular transit place to other Chinese cities and other countries. From my own experience I know that many Russians choose to visit the famous Wudalianchi, popular for its mineral springs ("Wudalianchi", 2001). They come from different Russian regions, including central Russia. Hundreds of Russians go through Heihe to other popular tourist Chinese places such as Baideihe, Dalian, Beijing, Sanya and others. This has happened since the opening of borders in the 1990s. With opening of borders and cheaper fares, there is a greater mobility of people. It has become easier to get from one place to another. Visa regulations and borders are no longer obstacles. People can experience different places in shorter periods of time. In terms of travel to other countries, my family and I, for example, always travel to New Zealand through China (through Heihe then to Beijing and from Beijing to Auckland). In comparison, I had been to Moscow only once, when I was six. It is cheaper and more convenient to get to New Zealand through China than through any Russian city. Many of my friends go to Malaysia, Thailand, Hong Kong and other countries via China. It takes less time to travel through Heihe, as there are many domestic and international flights from Harbin airport which is just one hour by plane from Heihe. Since "movement is only possible in reference to place" (Bonisch-Brednich & Trundle, 2010, p. 1), by crossing Heihe border and using it as a transit point to other countries or cities, visitors alter the identity of Heihe city.

The interplay between the local and the global has a dimension not only of cultural reshaping, but also of cultural disorientation. People who visit Heihe can see on the one side a rethinking of traditional culture, a restoration of traditional values and attitudes; the other side the influence of Western ideas on the Chinese culture (Daiyun, 1997, p. 33). An example of that is that Coca Cola and McDonald's is in almost every city in China. Heihe city is not an exception. While there are no McDonald's or KFC in Blagoveshensk yet, there are at least three of them in Heihe. This is the main place where Russians in Heihe go for their breakfast. However, it is just a matter of time for Blagoveshensk to become as 'globalised' as other cities have and to have a McDonalds as in other cities closer to the capital. The next section explores other research in this region on transmigration.

## Research in this region

My research explores the issues of translocality and transmigration through the example of Russian people living in Heihe. A literature review has shown that there has been no research done on the topic of 'home' in the process of migration and transmigration in this particular region. Natalia Ryzhova is a professor of economics and geography in the Amur State University. She has written on the topic of cross-border relations but her work touches mainly on economic relations between these regions. One of her articles, *Trans-border Exchange between Russia and China: The case of Blagoveshchensk and Heihe* (2008), demonstrates the differences between the two cities, starting from population density and finishing with entrepreneurship in the two cities.

Another publication by Ryzhova: *Peculiarities of Transmigrant Adaptation in the "Twin cities" of Blagoveshensk and Heihe* (2009) concentrates on economic adaptation in the process of transmigration of migrant workers both in Heihe and Blagoveshensk. However, she does not touch on the topic of cultural adaptation and just briefly summarises the common economic activities of transmigrant workers when they cross Russian or Chinese borders. Her work compares and contrasts the process of economic adaptation in both counties, making it clear that it is harder for transmigrant workers to work legally in Russia than in China. She discusses the various jobs of Chinese workers in Russia: where they work as traders, construction workers, agricultural workers, restaurants workers, entrepreneurs and in many other occupations.

Ryzhova (2009, p. 8) points out that among popular jobs that Russians get in China are programmers, translators and commercial agents. However, Russian graduates with Cantonese language proficiency have more opportunities to work in China and often aim to go to other Chinese cities, such as Harbin, Shanghai, Beijing, Shenzhen and others. In these bigger cities, there are many job opportunities in international organisations which trade with Russia and countries of the ex-Soviet Union. As Ryzhova (2009, p. 8), argues, "unskilled labour of Russians in China is particularly rare". The number of transmigrant Russian workers that have official jobs is not large in comparison to the number of Chinese in Russia. Still, these people's experiences are important as they can provide valuable information for research on the topic of cultural adaptation in the process of migration and transmigration.

In another article, *Informal Economy of Translocations: The Case of the Twin City of Blagoveshensk-Heihe*, Ryzhova explores that social life of bordering cities has resulted in the unique form of translocal informal economy. As she points out, “its communities belong to what might be broadly considered two different civilisations and are socially and culturally distinct. However, even though the border has been a barrier, in the last twenty years the local people have created a form of social symbiosis”. Now the two economies are closely interlinked (Ryzhova, 2008, p. 324).

Ryzhova (2008) shows that these particular cities (Heihe and Blagoveshensk) have been affected by transmigration more than others. It is her contention that these people belong to two nation states now. They live and work on each side of the borders. In the following chapter, I explore the experiences of some individuals who may also be said to belong to two nations and who share memories and experiences of living in Blagoveshensk and Heihe.

## **Thesis overview**

Chapter 1 is the background for the research which includes how I came to study this topic, historical facts about Heihe and the topic of migration in the context of Heihe city. Also, this chapter provides a theoretical framework for this research. Chapter 2 covers sources and methods that I have used, the process of data collection, research participants, and ethical issues that I have dealt with in the process of the research, and problems I have faced. Chapter 3 introduces my research participants in the form of three different cases, three women: Lana, Elena and Katerina. In concluding this chapter, I talk about these people as a group as they are united by a common life situation. Issues covered in Chapters 4 and 5 are linked, but I am separating them for the purpose of analysis. Chapter 4 explores the importance of physical spaces, food, and other materiality for the perception and making of ‘home’. Each research participant shares their own experience of relating to these issues. I also share my own story and use my reflections throughout the research. Chapter 5 concerns social networks, communication and practices that influence the perception of ‘home’ of transmigrants. Family ties and a sense of familiarity and language barriers are just as important for this discussion. In this chapter I further explore how information technologies challenge ideas about ‘home’ because of the shrinking of distances between people and places. Chapter 6 is a concluding chapter, summarising the main ideas and issues that arose during this research. I found that ‘home’ can be static and fluid at the same time and it is a complex term which incorporates material and non-material aspects simultaneously.



## Chapter 2: Methodology

### Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss the methodology of my study which shows the way I carried out this research. I start with the discussion of my main research methods and then I introduce my research participants who I interviewed in Heihe during my visits. Here I also discuss my methods and sources that I applied during the fieldwork and the writing of my thesis. I defend my choice of data collection methods and problems that I have faced during my fieldwork. This chapter further discusses the ethical issues that came up in the process of doing the research and of writing and how I coped with them.

### Methodology and methods

As Crotty (1998) points out “individuals’ ability to employ a large range of tools and methods, even unconventional ones allows to approach the object in a radical spirit of openness to its potential for new or richer meaning...it is an invitation to reinterpretation” (1998, p.51). So the ability to combine the researcher-as-*bricoleur* who pays special attention to the objects of research is an important skill that I tried to apply during my fieldwork. Although I was aware of the benefits of experimental ethnography from the works of Abu-Lughod (1988; 1991; 1993), Kondo (1993), Visweswaran (1996) and Brown (2001) and tried to apply its features where possible, my research is more like a narrative ethnography.

The primary methods were participant-observation and one-on-one interviews. I chose to do semi-structured interviews as this allowed building initial rapport with people by giving them a chance to talk about topics beyond the interview questions and this also provided the chance to ask specific questions that I had prepared in advance. I did not feel comfortable using a fully structured interview as its formality can create an environment that contradicted the more personal nature of my research. Therefore, this semi-structured approach helped my participants overcome barriers in communication and talk freely. It minimized the distance between us allowing the interviews to be more informal. However, I was aware that I was more an insider for them in my roles of postgraduate student, mother and transmigrant, but in my role as an

anthropologist, I was more an outsider for them. Also, I found that sharing my own life story with my research participants also helped to build rapport.

Besides the recorded interviews that served as the main source of my data, I carried out participant-observation. Participant-observation is “a way to collect data in naturalistic settings by ethnographers who observe and/or take part in the common and uncommon activities of the people being studied” (Dewalt, 2002, p.2). This methodology has served as a powerful means for experiencing some of the activities my research participants engaged in while living in Heihe. As Kirby (2006, p.149) points out, it is a method which allows “learning and sharing how others experience the social world”. Moreover, according to Dewalt (2002, p.2), “participant observation provides context for sampling, open-ended interviews, construction of interview guides and questionnaires, and other more structured and more qualitative methods of data collection”. During my trips to Heihe, I tried to visit the same places my research participants usually go – a large supermarket, their local market, small restaurants, shops, parks, and the waterfront area. Since Heihe city is quite a small town, the number of places that I could go to be a participant and observer was limited. Besides meeting with my research participants in their usual environment outside of their homes, I was also able to visit them for the whole day on campus in their living complex and spend time with them during their day-to-day interactions. I did not want to be intrusive, asking for more, because my research participants are very busy people, especially one who is a mother of three. All free time was spent with her children and household duties so their time was limited.

Therefore, I also used Skype, to talk to one of my research participants (a mother of three children) because she could not talk to me face-to-face when I was in Heihe during my first round of interviews. Also, another participant asked me if she could respond to my interview questions on paper, as she considered it a more efficient way considering her time was limited and that she wanted to think about my questions privately. Thus, she sent her answers by email to me on my return to Blagoveshensk. Therefore, I could compare what it was like to communicate with the same person in different settings. In the first case, I had a chance to talk first through internet and then we met for the second interview in Heihe for a face-to-face interview. In the second case, we talked in person during the first interview and for the second interview we talked briefly and then my interview questions were answered on paper. I learnt that both ways worked well. However, since I could not immediately respond to the answers written on paper, I obtained less information compared to one-to-one interviews.

My data composed individual cases of three women. Even though I studied people from my own culture who speak the same language, these women were away from their birth/native Russian homes. They all moved to live in China to work in the same institution, but all for different reasons. I had to find ways to approach them, to establish rapport and make the fieldwork an enjoyable experience. Although certain transformations happened in me as I started to re-think my own life situation, I decided not to include this analysis to greater depth than I have done. Instead, I included myself and my participants within “a single narrative ethnography” (Tedlock, 1991). I felt more confident with this writing style, because in this way I could present my own story but without influencing to my participants’ narratives.

I clearly saw that my research would not be complete if I relied on recorded interviews only. In order to see how others experienced the social world and to record their lived experiences, I had to experience them in the same way as my research participants did, or at least partly. So, I used multiple strategies to position myself in the process of my research. By locating my research activity in the same social world of the cross cultural phenomena I have been living in, I had an opportunity to explore issues that directly touched me. In other words I had an opportunity, “to explain the nature of research within the same framework as is used to theorize about the objects of study” (Reason, 1994, p.4). One of the ways to do that was to position myself in relation to other Russians that visited Heihe, which gave me an interesting and important experience because this was another attempt to better understand my participants. My research participants did not relate themselves to ordinary Russians who arrived in Heihe for shopping and tourism, which I too felt during my field trips. This raised an important issue, that of a making a differentiation in relation to others based on social class. Even though my research participants did not make it clear that they felt that they belonged to a higher socio-economic class compared to ordinary Russians who visit Heihe for shopping, from their stories I found that they tried to avoid other Russians exactly for this reason. *Other* Russians can easily be identified in the crowd. Some of them drink a lot of alcohol when they are in Heihe, and so they disgrace Russian culture (according to my research participants). On the other hand, the teaching community is respected by Chinese and Russians alike, so seeing this respect, my research participants feel differently from others. When we talked about Russian businessmen who visit Heihe, their opinions were different, and my research participants said that this class of people is an exception: they behave better and they control themselves better. In my case, I also felt different, since the purpose of my trip this time was not shopping and the visiting of restaurants, but something that I saw more useful and more important – my fieldwork. Therefore as an anthropologist I related myself to a different category than before.

Taking different roles in the process of my fieldwork was one of the strategies I employed to overcome barriers in communication and reduce distance between me and my research participants. Venkateswar (2004) discusses this in her ethnography *Development and ethnocide: Colonial Practices in the Andaman Islands*. According to Konig (1980), the researcher should decide which role is the most suitable to collect useful data. Also researchers must know which roles are open to them on the basis of their competence and personal experience (Konig, 1980, p. 417). In my opinion, this aspect is important as it helps to identify and practice the different roles (in my case these were of mother, daughter, friend and anthropologist) in the field which allows minimizing the distance between research participants and the researcher. However, as Konig (1980) points out, the selection of a particular role may limit the researcher's access to specific information (Konig, 1980). According to Laine (2000), multiple roles include 'learner', 'friend' and 'collaborator'. Such roles unite the researcher and other people in bonds of friendship, rather than isolate and detach them. In my case, the emphasis of familiar roles helped me to establish rapport with my research participants in the beginning and in the later stages of the fieldwork.

My role as an anthropologist was less familiar to me, but it was the role I took when I just introduced myself to my research participants and gave them my information sheets. I found it was harder to be in this role because I was a complete unknown person for them in the beginning. I was also a stranger to myself in my new role. Thus, my other roles/positions helped me to feel more comfortable in this new role. After that I started to feel more confident in the role of an anthropologist.

Fieldnotes also have become a valuable source of data, as they contained my immediate reaction to the information I obtained. I used photographs that I took during my fieldtrip to illustrate my points. I translated all Russian literature that I read for this research myself. When I was transcribing interviews and fieldnotes, I was aware that regardless of quality and quantity of the information I gathered, these are just tiny bits of the bigger picture. According to Geertz (1975) - truths are always partial and some ethnographers argue that the full story or the real story cannot be written down (Brown, 2001; Venkateswar, 2004). I tried to be aware of that in my fieldwork too.

To become closer to my research participants, I tried to find common points with them and was empathetic to the problems they shared with me. Thus, another strategy that I used to better understand my research participants was to find similarities with them and to make them feel that I am like them. In some cases this required me to imagine myself in their place. Reflexivity has greatly helped me to feel the way my research participants feel being a part of both cultures,

because while doing this research I was constantly thinking about my own life situation. I am a part of two cultures – New Zealand and Russian at the same time. I consider both places my home. I agree with Kirby (2006), “just as the researcher affects the data, so too, the researcher will be affected by the data” so I too have been affected by the data I gathered. This happened when I put myself in the place of my research participants and thought about answering the same questions as my research participants did and seeing their lives as if I was in their place, in fact, I was in a similar place as them. Therefore, I included my own voice in-text throughout the research. I have presented my personal experience in ‘text boxes’, in order to separate my stories from my research participant’s stories but at the same time to show that I can also add to the discussion of ‘home’ experienced by myself.

In a similar manner, Kondo (1986) was in an unusual situation of being half Japanese, half American, and who went to Japan (for the first time in her life) for a fieldwork, I also saw myself in a similar situation when I went to Heihe as an anthropologist to study people from my own culture. Kondo (1986) emphasizes that most ethnographers are products of contexts in which the observer/ethnographer is a visible outsider. As a result, the other is often depicted as a separate and distinct being. Being uniquely positioned in this research, for my research participants I was more an insider rather than an outsider from the very beginning. However, at the same time, I had an access to the perspective of an outsider (as an anthropologist) and an observer who could see things that were not apparent to insiders. This opened more experimental and affective modes of carry out my fieldwork.

My research participants discussed issues surrounding the topic of ‘home’ and migration with me in a way they never did before, as they told me at the end of our interviews. So they too took their roles (of research participants) as they were familiar with social science research. One of my research participants pointed out that our discussion gave her food for thought about her future and past. Another research participants said that in the role of research participant she was a stranger to her own *self* in some parts of the discussion, because her responses to my questions were different compared to if they had been asked, for instance, by her mother. This is an important point because it raises questions about objective and subjective truths and limits of knowledge in anthropological work. I saw the importance in relationship of mutual influence between my research participants and me - the relationship which was an emotional journey for me but that left us friends.

## Research participants

Three Russian women who live in Heihe became my main participants for this research. Their individual backgrounds provide a basis for contrast and similarity. A local journalist, Oxana from Blagoveshensk whom I got to know through my uncle organized the meeting with my first research participant. This research participant introduced me to her colleagues from the university where they worked.

The age group of my participants are between 35 to 64 years. They were able to reflect on the differences that composed their ideas about ‘home’ before and now, as they had work and life experience in both countries. The choice of women as research participants only for this research was not the main criteria. First, because of cultural reasons, to spend more time with women who I never knew before rather than with men, was more appropriate, so this was a consideration when I was selecting my research participants. Also, clearly I have more common ground with women, as we share emotions, concerns for the family and children, our memories, in a way other than men do. Emotions are important in the production of knowledge and enhance in understanding, analysis and interpretation (Hollad, 2006; Sampson et al, 2008). However, due to the restrictions of time and word limit I was not able to employ emotions in my thesis to a significant extent.

Research participants have been selected based on their life experiences. They have been a part of a university teaching community, and they have all been in Heihe for more than three years. The time spent in Heihe also became another criterion for participant selection. This selection implies that my research participants experienced life changes that happened over a certain period of time. Over these past three years, my research participants went through cultural adaptation, involving the construction and reconstruction of their ideas about “home”, changes in routines, activities, and the adoption of strategies for social communication with their Chinese students and with a group of the international teaching community.

Besides these primary research participants, I talked informally to both men and women from different social and economic backgrounds who visit Heihe. I discussed their experience of travelling to, and spending time in, Heihe city before and after the simplified entry regime. It was not difficult to find them, especially in my first two trips. When I started researching this topic, I found many people who were willing to share their opinions about cultural changes that happened over the past years between the borders. One woman from central Russia who moved with her husband to Heihe provided her own view on Heihe. I met her during my first visit to

Heihe through my friend Oxana. Her story was about the better life that she had in Heihe compared to her life in Russia. This was a story from a person who was new to the city as she came to Heihe for the first time and remained there. This was an interesting perspective as it touched mainly on material aspects. I talked to another woman who I met in a shopping centre in Heihe. She owns a shoe shop in Heihe and her perspective was also different, as her story centred on doing business with China and the ‘mentality’ of Russian and Chinese buyers. I also met a group of Russians on the way back to Blagoveshensk on the boat. They were from central Russia and came to Heihe for shopping. I also talked to Russian doctors in the Eye Medical Centre, which has been operating in Heihe for almost eight years. These doctors work shifts, swapping every two weeks. I listened to their stories and experience of this cross-cultural situation that they had lived in since the opening of the borders. My father was one of the co-owners of the Eye MC and one of the first doctors to start working in this Russian-Chinese eye centre. Therefore, my father’s experience is also important for my own understanding of this topic. Another important person who helped me during my trips was my father’s Chinese friend and translator. She helped me with living arrangements in Heihe and also ensured that I was safe during my interviews by giving me rides to my research participants’ place.

### **Data collection**

My interviews were carried out in semi-private informal environments to suit my research participants. Being in their flat allowed them to be more comfortable and speak openly about their problems and concerns. Overall, I conducted two interviews with each research participant in Heihe. The first session was carried out outside of their homes – in a café and waterfront area and on Skype, while the second session was carried out at their university apartments. All interviews were recorded using a digital recording device. This was then transferred to my computer and transcribed by me after I completed my trips to Heihe. Each interview was planned to last for not more than an hour, but since our conversations were in an informal environment, the amount of time for interviews was flexible and my participants were free to change the topic and talk about different things other than the research topic (Bernard, 2011). In general the women were quite serious about answering my interview questions and were interested in continuing to talk about them after the interviews were completed. All of them were familiar with the nature of social science research, and my role was not unfamiliar to them. They all were teachers and had already completed or were in the process of completing their own research. This fact has influenced the way they answered my questions. This though, was not immediately obvious. For instance, even though the first session had been carried out in an informal

environment, my research participants treated me more formally than when I visited their apartments in my second trip to Heihe. The choice of wording, the manner of speech and, more importantly, the amount of information they gave me in the first trip was different from what I received in the private environment of their homes. Also, this was my second meeting with them, which made a difference too. In the walls of their apartments they felt more comfortable and their roles/positions changed because of that. They joked a lot and they were sharing personal stories, and even gossiped about one another making it clear that they were relaxed with me. So, for some time they forgot about my main role and purpose of my visit and very importantly about their prescribed roles of research participants. This indeed had many benefits for my research. They appreciated me as a social scientist and respected me as an anthropologist knowing how it can be - carrying out research. At the same time, during our second session they found in me a friend, a person whom they could talk to on an equal basis about painful problems and more importantly talk about the concept of 'home' as they really feel it.

### **Ethical issues**

Like Turner (1987) and Venkateswar (2004) I was aware of the limits to my research and how my own history and cultural background would affect the research. Therefore I had to search for strategies and ways to approach my research in a way that was both ethical to my research participants and comfortable for me. I tried to be a thinking, feeling human being who is caring, sharing and genuinely interested in friendship and the needs of others. As Laine (2000) points out, "the new form of fieldwork being suggested not only puts people in contact with others in more sensitive ways than in past moments in social science, but also calls for more maturity, greater sensitive, authenticity and integrity" (Laine, 2000, p.16). Thus, I tried to carefully reconsider the ethical issues that I was aware of prior to my interviews to ensure that none of my research components violated the code of ethics of the Association of Social Anthropologists of Aotearoa/New Zealand (ASAANZ) or the Massey University Human Ethics Code (MUHEC). One decision I made was that although they made it clear that they did not mind if I used their real names I decided to use pseudonyms to ensure anonymity of my research participants.

When I started writing my thesis, I found it was not always easy to write about someone's life especially about someone whom I did not know for a long time. I was unsure how to present their life cases/stories in a way my research participants would want to see them. Although I tried to include their own voices wherever possible, there were a number of places where I had to use my reflections and my own interpretation of what they said to me. It was not an easy process.



An example of that is the case when I had to describe the marital status of my research participant as this provided the context for her life story.

Another issue that I have recorded is that it is hard to act ethically when gathering data from people other than key participants. In some places, I felt that it was better if they did not know that I was an anthropologist, as I believe the knowing would have produced biased answers. However, I was aware that it is unethical to gather information which can be used in the research from people without their permission. So this was one of the difficulties I experienced and which I want to continue to avoid in the future. As Kirby (2006) points out, participant observation takes a good deal of practice.

I tried to ensure that my research participants were informed about the nature of my research and its outline prior to the start of fieldwork. To ensure a safe environment for them and me, I gave them an opportunity to choose an interview place which they believed was safe and comfortable for both of us. The topic itself was not one that was risky for participants to discuss with me, so they did not feel much pressure on them throughout our interviews. Only when we talked about other Russians who visit Heihe could I feel some tension. This might be because their opinions were more negative than positive because of instances of 'bad' behaviour suggested above.

Participants were given an information sheet either through the internet or in person. When we met, I further explained anything that they required clarification about, such as the nature of my research and my own life background. Information sheets were signed during our first meeting in Heihe.

I also tried to maintain arrangements for handling, storage, security, and disposal of raw data, information, and other material produced in the course of the research. I password-protected all data in my computer and ensured that fieldnotes and interview transcriptions were stored safely. I made it clear to my participants that they could withdraw or decline to take part in my research at any time.

I was especially grateful that there were no conflicts of interests/roles during my research. Although I promised myself in the beginning of fieldwork never to express any opinions that would be radically different from my participants' opinions, I was happy that there were no situations that would require me to restrain myself. In all cases, I accepted my research participants' thoughts and ideas, showing them that they could see support in my face. The research also did not violate culturally sensitive issues. Since I was from the same culture as my

research participants, this minimized the potential risk of misunderstanding some of the specific cultural features and issues in that way avoiding cultural insensitivity.

I took care at all times to ensure that I was safe. For example, my translator friend gave me a ride to apartments where my research participants lived. I was grateful that I had this opportunity, because the living complex was situated outside of the town and I was a little bit scared to take a taxi as I had never been outside of Heihe by taxi before. My translator friend ensured that my research participants met me and only then did she leave. She also picked me up after my day in my research participants' apartment complex. My translator also gave me a Chinese SIM card, so I could phone her anytime if there was a problem. Also, I always let my family know where I was and carried a cell phone. I was alert all the time but there were no problems that could put me in danger.

## Problems

In the beginning of the research, I faced some difficulties finding potential research participants. I was interested in interviewing retired people but I ended up with no people that suited as potential research participants. Later on, I was told that many Russian pensioners had moved from Heihe and some had passed away. Then my selection criteria based on age was modified as I found a Russian community of university teachers with an age range of 35 to 64 who became my main participants. The biggest obstacle was the fact that I was in Russia, while my potential research participants lived in China. Even when I went to Heihe on my first field trip, I could only phone those people whose contact details were kindly given to me by my journalist friend. Later Oxana introduced me to a Russian university teacher who lives and works in Heihe. Then through her social networks I got to know this whole community of Russian teachers who work in Heihe.

My previous research<sup>9</sup> had not been away from home, but this time I had to go to another country. Although not for the first time, it was still a different country, different culture and mainly it was me who was different and unfamiliar to my own self, me as a researcher, not just a visitor of this city as before. My carefully planned research proposal and my ideas about the process of my field research before I went to Heihe, ended up in practice with continuous modifications. In total, I made four trips to Heihe, and each trip left me with a lot of information I could include in my research. Everything seemed fascinating and useful. However, I needed to

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<sup>9</sup> My previous research topic *Breastfeeding Experience in the Context of Two Cultures (2010)* explored issues surrounding breastfeeding in Russian and New Zealand cultures.

narrow down my focus and my supervisors were of a great help in this matter. So after that I did not have any serious problems doing the research. .

Thus, one of the issues that emerged in the process of collecting data, that of doing research and fieldwork, appeared to be different from practical anthropological research encounters. The process of carrying out research and fieldwork is always unique, always different and cannot be copied. Every fieldwork experience is a story, full of details and facts which affect both research participants and researchers. Therefore, it is very difficult to predict something in advance or be confident in the success of the fieldwork. Nonetheless, it is an incomparable experience, and it has its positive and negative moments, essential for gaining general experience as an anthropologist.

At the time my fieldwork journey came to an end, I thought that my data might not be enough to write a thesis. I cannot say that I was disappointed with my fieldwork, but I felt that my data could only depict a tiny part of what I have seen and what I heard from my research participants and all other people who I met during this time. Although, I understood that I could not present each research participants' story in full, the information that I obtained in the process of my research was enough to start exploring issues surrounding the topic of 'home' and transmigration among the group of Russian teachers.

## Chapter 3: Research Participants

### Introduction

This section introduces my research participants, Elena, Katerina and Lana, three women who moved to Heihe from Russia. In this chapter, I will provide an introduction to my research participants, a description of their life in Russia, their families and their work. After which follows changes in their lives from the time they moved to Heihe. I believe that including their voices is essential, as it gives the reader the opportunity to hear in their own words what happened to them over these years – in terms of their experience of moving to and living in another country. I have structured this introduction of my research participants as three individual cases, but at the end, I will, compare and contrast their individual backgrounds. In the next chapters, their experiences of being in Heihe will be explored in more detail in the context of the discussion of the concept of “home”.

### Lana

Lana was the first research participant who I interviewed and who shared her story with me. I had come to Heihe one day in advance (on a Friday), so we could meet on the Saturday morning. Our first meeting was on the waterfront, near the Amur River. Lana was the only Russian around, so I could easily recognize her among the Chinese people. She was wearing bright shorts and a top, since the summer heat was tangible from the early morning. Her hair colour was also very bright, as well as her lipstick. I think I could recognise that Lana is Russian even if we met in New Zealand where there are many European faces. Lana is a young woman who soon turns 35. She has never been married, which she considers to be “not right”, because in Russian culture, a woman over 30 is expected to be married and have a family.

We were sitting on the bench and our interview was very informal from the beginning. Since it was Saturday morning, there were not many people on the waterfront, just a few elders who were doing their morning exercises, some of them were standing and some were walking and exercising Tai Chi at the same time – an ordinary picture of an ordinary morning in all Chinese cities that I have visited. I can still clearly remember what a lovely morning it was; the whole atmosphere of that morning and the place itself were favourable for spending time outside, near the river. The heat was only just setting in and the air was fresh. All of that made our talk free and easy.

Lana won my favour by being very friendly and easy-going. This helped me to act naturally as well, even though we were just getting to know each other. We were able to joke about cultural differences that sometimes left us in embarrassing situations. I told her about my experience of speaking in Russian when I had just come to New Zealand, while being sure that I was the only Russian around and then those uncomfortable moments when I got to realize that somebody had understood me. So my time with Lana passed so quickly that day. When we were saying goodbye to each other, we decided that we had to meet again. Before I came to China again, we communicated on Skype when we had time. We found many common points of interest, for instance, both of us are in the process of doing postgraduate research. So we talked a lot about the difference between doing research in Russia and New Zealand. Lana also told me about her ideas that she wants to use in her research, which is about the use of Russian language by Russian immigrants who have lived in China for more than ten years. So our themes of research overlapped which made it interesting for both of us.

We met for the second time one month later, when I came to Heihe to interview my research participants about their 'homes'. Most of the time that day I spent with Lana, because she was not very busy compared to my other research participants who had families. Lana met me outside the gated university campus and showed me a little bit of a campus life. Since it was again a Saturday, it was very quiet outside because it was a day off for students and teachers. Heihe University is a big university, similar to Massey University's campus. Before it gained the status of university, it operated under the name – Heihe Normal College but it has been an educational institution here in Heihe since 1960. It has clearly been through renovations. Apartment flats for teachers and students are situated in new buildings. So, after being shown a little bit of the university itself from the outside, we went to the apartment complex. Downstairs, a security-man checked where I was going, recorded the time of my arrival and I had to leave my passport while I was there. Lana spoke in Chinese, but I felt that it was still not easy for her as she knows just basic vocabulary and phrases. Her flat is on the second floor, where the rooms are situated along a long corridor. I got the feeling of being in a hospital as the floor is tiled and there are many brown doors on each side of the long corridor. Lana's flat is close to Elena's, while Katerina's flat is situated further down the corridor. During our second meeting we talked mostly about issues surrounding the topic of 'home', which will be discussed in future chapters.

Lana is 34, single, originally from Komsomolsk-on-Amur town, the same town as Elena and Katerina are from. She graduated from the Amur Pedagogical University with a major in Philology in Russian language. While she studied she lived in Blagoveshensk. Lana said she always wanted to be a teacher. While studying, Lana lived in a student hostel flat provided by the

university where she studied and lived with four other friends in one room as did many other students, who come to Blagoveshensk from the Amur region. When Lana graduated, she had no choice but to go back to her home town, because she could not afford to rent a flat in Blagoveshensk. If she had not gone back, all of her low salary would have had to go to pay rent. Teachers still get an extremely low salary in Russia. Lana said that recently she had heard that as from the new study year in 2011, teachers' salaries in Russia were going to increase by 30%. I said I thought that this was happening due to the up-coming elections in December, and the ruling party wanted to win votes by offering these salary increases for government-financed organisations. Until now, working as a school teacher has been a thankless job economically as they get paid so little, and too often cannot afford even the basics.

I asked Lana to describe her life in her home town before she went to Heihe. Lana laughed and started her story: "Basically, I started to think that I had made the wrong choice when I decided to be a teacher. I did not like my job; I did not like my living conditions because we lived in a small apartment with my parents". She smiled and looked around her flat, then continued: "I could not afford to rent my own flat, let alone buy a house. I did not like the town I was originally from, and I did not want to go back there. I thought that I would stay in Blagoveshensk after I graduated. It was not in my plans to go back home, and this was particularly frustrating, as I realized that my life had gone in the wrong direction". Many of her friends remained in Blagoveshensk as their parents helped them at the beginning of their careers. Lana's parents could not afford to send her money for living, while she was looking for a well-paid teaching job. She said: "I ended up with no place to live after I graduated. So I returned to my home town and worked as a teacher of Russian in a local school". One of her friends told her about the teachers' exchange program. Lana applied and waited for a month to get a reply from Heihe University. Lana explained, "This offer (to go to Heihe) was like a piece of good luck, which was so unexpected but so opportune". So Lana went to Heihe without the intention of remaining there to live. It has now been three and a half years since Lana moved to Heihe to live. She went to Heihe without knowing a word of Chinese, feeling insecure and did not know how it would go. This was also the first time Lana had travelled to another country. Even though she studied in Blagoveshensk, she had never been to Heihe before. I was shaken by Lana's experience because I started to realize how hard it could be to escape a hopeless situation without the opportunity of support from parents. Also, going to another country, to which Lana had never been before, was also showing how desperate she was feeling at that time.

In Heihe, Lana met a group of other Russians and other foreigners who were teaching different subjects in Heihe University. At that time, she met Elena and other people with whom she still

maintains communication. In the beginning, for about five months, they lived in a hotel, before they were provided with apartments on campus. Twice a year, Lana goes to her home town to visit her parents, during the Chinese New Year holidays for one month and for one month, during the summer holidays. She says that her visits are more than enough for her not to miss her family home until the next visit. Even though Lana can go to Blagoveshensk for a weekend, she says that she never goes there because she does not have anyone there other than her university friends, some of whom are already married and others who she does not communicate with as before. Therefore, she can only enjoy walking along the waterfront and looking at Blagoveshensk from the other side of the river. Lana says that if she needs to go to Blagoveshensk she can go anytime, but there has been no need so far, plus it costs money to cross the border. So she laughs and says, “I do not use the advantage of living near the border with my home country, and do not go there even if it is so close. If I came from Blagoveshensk then I would certainly go, maybe not every weekend, but once a month”.

Lana has a brother who also works as a teacher in Heihe. He has also finished the same degree as Lana. After finishing his studies, he also had no choice but to go back to his home town where their family was. Due to high property prices in Blagoveshensk he could not stay there either, although he wanted to. Then he was offered a teaching position in a small village nearby their home town. Many children that he taught were from problem families because in a small village like this there were many problems with alcohol<sup>10</sup>. This was reflected in the children who were often exposed to conflict, violence and lack of family attention. Lana says that he is still in a state of shock after this experience as too often these children were not easy to communicate with. Lana says that if her brother had been older and more mature, he could have risen to that challenge. However he was too young and his first teaching experience was a nightmare for him. He came to Heihe in 2009. She helped him to move by referring him to Heihe University and now he is also teaching Russian to Chinese students. Lana says that even now he is still recovering from this first teaching experience. But he is quite happy with improvements in his living conditions and he is satisfied with his current teaching role. Students like him and respect him much more than students in the Russian village did. She is happy for him and for his new life, and says that he has almost adapted to Chinese culture, particularly to Chinese food. However, she points out that even though they live on the same level in an apartment complex, they have separate lives. She laughingly said, “It is nice that someone from the family lives nearby, but we try not to disturb each other too often”.

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<sup>10</sup> There is a strong drinking culture in Russian villages. There is no support from the government for the farming and agricultural sector. Many people cannot afford basics. The life is considered to be very hard and people turn to alcohol for relief.

Now Lana is enrolled in a postgraduate program in Amur Pedagogical University extramurally, and she is in the process of starting her dissertation on the topic of language. She wants to use her situation to her advantage for her PhD research, so she has chosen to write about Russians who have lived in China for more than ten years. She wants to find out whether they still speak Russian and how life in China has affected their use of the Russian language. Lana also plans to get married and to have children. However, she smiles and says, “it is only possible with a Russian man”. She does not see herself with a Chinese husband, and she has never had a Chinese boyfriend. She says that some of her Russian friends have married Chinese men, but for her, it is extremely important to have the same ‘mentality’ as your ‘other half’. It involves more than just language and for her includes, “understanding jokes, Russian movies and Russian culture”... and says... “it is only possible with a Russian man”. Therefore, she thinks that one day she will need to go back to Russia. She has not yet decided when.

## Elena

Before I met Elena, I had thought that at over 60 years of age, moving to another country must be a very hard decision, so there must have been some convincing reasons for it. From my experience, not many Russians can get used to Chinese food, traditions and Chinese culture in general. This has been based on my friends or relatives who return from a holiday in China, and who often complained about the food saying it is very spicy and salty. Also I noticed that it is much harder to adapt to Chinese food for older people, for instance, my grandmother and grandfather cannot stay in China for more than two weeks as their taste receptors are not accepting spicy food and their digestive system cannot tolerate this food.

However, when on one sunny morning I met with Elena, in a café in the center of Heihe, I found that she did not fit into the category of pensioners I often got to see in my life. I was surprised to see a highly active and energetic woman looking younger than her age. She has curly dark hair and she is a very tall woman of neat appearance. She looks like she is in her 50s. When we met, Elena was dressed in a long light dress, as the days were very hot with an average temperature of more than 30 degrees. From first sight, I got a feeling that Elena was a very powerful woman. It came from her gestures, from her look and her manner of speech. Later, another participant, told me the same, that Elena is a very driven woman.

My other research participant, Lana had introduced me to Elena (and her daughter Katerina), she gave them my information sheets and arranged the first interview before I came to Heihe. So in



the first meeting, Elena came together with her daughter Katerina. With Katerina, we agreed to talk on Skype, as it was the most convenient option for her. Then Katerina had to leave and I could talk with Elena one-on-one. The place for the first meeting with Elena was a small café that served European and Asian food. Katerina and Elena both ordered coffee and we began.

In the beginning, I felt ill at ease at a table with people that were almost strangers and it was not as comfortable as I expected. However, since my research participants were relatives (mother and daughter), this made it easier because, at least two of “us” knew each other well. However, this did not help my early shyness because both of them were looking at me at the same time and I felt that I had to initiate the conversation / interview. And I had to choose the right words so I would not sound silly. It is interesting that the first issue that we discussed was outside of my research topic, which was introduced by Elena. We talked about kids! I told them about my family and they told me about their children and grandchildren. So only after finding common ground did I feel that the time was right to start talking about my research. When Katerina left, I had a chance to listen to Elena. It was here that I got to realize that there is a great advantage in carrying out one-on-one interviews because Elena began to talk about things which she was not able to discuss in front of her daughter, for instance, problems with her grandchildren’s education. So in front of her daughter she was a mother, but when her daughter left, I saw a woman who moved to Heihe and then a grandmother of three grandsons who was worried about their future. The awareness of this “role performance” made me very excited as I started to see the evidence of what I read in various anthropological works (for example Turner, 1986 and Goffman, 1959). In the first interview they introduced themselves, and gave me some general background of their life experience but they did not go into much detail.

I came to Elena’s home one month later to interview my research participant about ‘home’, to find out what this term means for them in the process of transmigration. This meant I could see her apartment, which was different from the ‘homes’ of Russian women of that age I had seen before. I will explore this further in detail in the next chapter. I had been in her apartment just for a few minutes, because Elena had to leave to look after her grandsons. However, I got to see the physical space, which is important for the following chapter on materiality of ‘home’. Also, Elena promised to answer my questions on paper; she said that it was easier, as she could think about it. She kept her promise and I received her answers shortly after returning to Blagoveshensk from my trip. This method had its strengths and weaknesses. On the one hand, these answers on paper were valuable because she could really think about them more deeply because she had time for it. On the other hand, her answers were short, because they were answered on paper. Of course, once I received her answers I could go back to her and ask further

questions but I did not feel it would be convenient to disturb her again. Probably, this was because we had more distance between each other compared with Lana, for instance. Therefore, I got less information from Elena than from the other participants.

Elena is 64 years old, originally from Komsomolsk-on-Amur city. Komsomolsk-on-Amur is situated in Khabarovsk krai (region), on the left bank of the Amur River with a population of 263,900 (Federal State Statistics Service, 2010). Elena has another daughter who lives in Moscow. Also, she is the grandmother of four grand-children: three of whom live in Heihe. In Russia, Elena taught Russian language in a university in Komsomol on Amur before moving. She has given her whole life to students and has been working in the Amur Pedagogical University since she graduated from the university 30 years ago. However, when she came to retirement age (in Russia it is 55 years), she had to decide whether to continue working or not. Since she did not want to live constantly restricting herself materially (in terms of affording things) when she was physically healthy, Elena decided to work a few more years. Her husband is older than her and already retired. With the small amount of money that they started to receive as pension benefit, they could only afford to pay for living expenses.

However, teaching in a university in Russia was not as easy as before. As Elena, points out, as time went by, it became harder to work in the university environment, due to the attitudes of younger staff toward her and her senior colleagues. Also, educational reform was not far away, which makes it especially hard for older teachers who would have to adapt to a new system. Then she found out about the university exchange program and was offered work in Heihe under a program between the university where she worked and some Chinese universities. In, 1989 Heihe University and Blagoveshensk State Pedagogical University signed the first bilateral agreement. From that time, student and teacher exchanges were common. Heihe University is currently the only university in Heihe. There are Chinese teachers who work under contract in Blagoveshensk as well. I found a job advertisement in on the Amur region's information websites, dated 2<sup>nd</sup> of October 2007 which stated: "Urgent! A teacher of Russian language is needed to work in Heihe University for one semester. Salary is 3000 Yuan, residence is free, teaching load is 18 hours per week. Please, contact the Department of International Relations in Blagoveshensk State Pedagogical University (BSPU), room 200)". Below in the comments I found that further requirements for this job were the attainment of a Philological degree and experience of working as a university or school teacher (in Russia). I realised that this was one of the ways many other teachers who work in Heihe University found about the opportunity to go to China for work. Also, I was told by my research participants that these kinds of opportunities

become available from time to time and are a part of this bilateral agreement between Heihe University and Blagoveshensk State Pedagogical University. The demand for these positions is not huge, since 3000 Yuan per month is not a very big sum for Blagoveshensk. However, for many people who do not own their property in Russia, this option is more than beneficial. According to my research participants, since food in Heihe is very cheap, as well as clothing and other goods, a part of the salary is able to go into savings. Only after living in Heihe for some time do people come to understand that 3000 Yuan can be enough to live well. That is why it is still possible to find a job as a lecturer in Heihe University without stiff competition. Since the next closest university is in Harbin, people can start adapting to Chinese culture closer to home if they want to continue living in China. After working in Heihe, some people prefer to move to Harbin or the South of China, or to return to Russia. I heard that some teachers come back again to Heihe to work for another semester or two. When I asked Elena, whether she was the first one to come for such a long period of time (four and a half years) she told me, “I was the first who remained in Heihe for such a long period of time. However, we have friends - one couple who are over 50, and who also teach in the university with us”. After a pause Elena continued: “Although they have lived in Heihe for 6 years they only applied for the position in the university 2 years ago”.

I asked Elena why she decided to go to Heihe rather than Harbin which is more attractive to many Russians who decide to move to China. Elena said that she could go to Harbin through a similar exchange program that her university was co-operating with, but chose Heihe because it is closer to Russia. She says: “I really wanted to see what it is like working in a Chinese university and teaching foreign students. Plus I wanted to see another culture, Harbin or Heihe – were not that different for me”. All of that made her decide that this trip would be an excellent opportunity to change something in her life regardless of the fact that she was of retirement age. Elena says, “It was certainly unexpected for me and my family that I decided to remain in Heihe for four years and spent a year and then another year. Now I am still here. I think that life here is easier and less stressful. I eat a lot of fruit and vegetables all year around, and I can help my family. We saved some money here, as well. Everything is so cheap, and we do not have to pay for accommodation as the university provides these apartments, which are not bad” (laughs).

Elena says she did not have many problems adapting to Chinese culture. The main issue in the process of adaptation were difficulties in understanding her Chinese students. Elena came to Heihe without preparation. She did not go to Chinese courses and, in fact, did not know a word

of Chinese. In the past four years she had to learn the basics in order to understand her Chinese colleagues and students. She says that being around Chinese, who can understand Russian on a basic level, gave her an advantage. When Elena talked about language and learning to speak Chinese, I felt a tension in her mood. She said, “. . .for me, it was quite hard to learn a new language at that age. Some of my students understood a little bit of Russian already, and in the beginning they helped me to communicate with those who did not know a word of Russian. So it worked out quite well. Most importantly, language was never an issue because I felt a lot of respect from my students. It is a separate topic, but I want to say that Chinese students are exceptionally polite. Because of Chinese cultural traditions, they treat their elders with great care”. Elena’s words were in line with what I read about China when I studied Chinese culture for my BA.

Elena brought her family with her after living in Heihe for one year. Her husband, her daughter and three grandchildren are all united in unusual circumstances, in a foreign country. Elena believed that Heihe is a good place for her grandchildren to be as they can learn Chinese and explore another culture. Also, it was a better place for her daughter whom she found in a depressed state when she had gone back to Russia for a holiday after the first year of living in Heihe. As she points out, “I insisted that Katerina should also come. It was an excellent opportunity to shake her up as she was moping around tired of her work that she was combining with the care of three children”. Elena looked at the family photo, where all her grandchildren were pictured and continued, “In Heihe, she could get away from her computer work and change her situation, save some money and live with less stress”.

However, it was not as easy as Elena had expected. From the very beginning, Elena’s husband looked after the children when Elena and her daughter were lecturing. The children have not learnt Chinese. When I was in their apartment, the children talked to me a lot, but I noticed that their Russian is not very good either. The children spend most of their day on the university campus in their apartment with their grandfather. The boys like to watch TV and play computer games. Sometimes they went to playgrounds, but these are far away. The university is situated outside the town. There were no other children around, so they lack communication with other children and adults. Only this year Elena’s older grandsons went to school, but Katerina and Elena were not satisfied with it. The quality of teaching was not as good as they expected. When I moved to the topic of grandchildren and their schooling, Elena said in a temper, “They go to the Chinese school, which has Russian classes as well. They have been to school for one month already, but they have learnt just a few letters and it feels like teachers do not want to burden our boys with too many tasks”. She shrugged her shoulders and said, “But the boys (twins) are seven

already. In Russia, the primary school program is more demanding. Believe me, I am a teacher, I looked at their textbooks and they are at a preschool level". As I understood, in the Chinese school where Elena's grandchildren go, there is a Russian teacher who teaches two subjects at preschool level. In Chinese classes, due to language difficulties, teachers do not give Elena's grandchildren too many tasks.

Elena told me that she will soon be turning 65, and she cannot work anymore according to her contract. She took a deep breath and said, "Now it's time for me to retire. I think this experience was a great opportunity to end my career the way I always wanted. Now it's time to teach the grandchildren. We plan to go to Moscow in the beginning of the New Year". I asked why and Elena replied, "They need to have a strong schooling. I think I will miss Heihe, because during these four years that I have lived here, I have had more positive moments than negative. But I think I always knew Heihe would be a temporary place to be". I felt regret in her words. Elena is uncertain how things will be in Moscow, as they will have to start a new life again, to adapt to living in a big city. Luckily, her younger daughter lives there, so it will make things a little bit easier for them.

### **Katerina**

Having introduced Elena, I now move to Katerina - her daughter whom I met on the same day I met Elena in the city café. Since our first conversation was very short, and as Katerina was busy with her children, we agreed to meet on Skype. The first one-on-one interview was carried out through a video Skype call. First I thought that it was a non-anthropological method of conducting an interview. Then I realized that if it would make my research participants more confident and if it was the most convenient option, then it should not be a problem. Our first interview was done on Skype when her children were in bed, and she could relax and talk with me. The second time, we met on campus in her university apartment. I got to meet her children, see her mother again, and meet her father. Moreover, I got to observe the inside of the flat which will be explored in detail in the next chapter on materiality and physical spaces.

Katerina is 38, a mother of three boys, twin boys aged seven and the youngest son aged four. Katerina was very tall, taking after her mother. Perhaps she is over 180 centimetres. She wears glasses and has blond-brown curly hair. She has her mother's constitution, but her figure is a little bit fuller. I also noticed that she limps a little. When we first met, Katerina was wearing

wide grey pants and a white blouse. From the first meeting, I found that Katerina is not as talkative as her mother and in the beginning she was not very easy to get to know.

However, when we talked on Skype, she spoke more fluently than in our first meeting, although I noticed that her answers remained quite formal and brief requiring further discussion. Our first talk focused on research-specific questions and answers. I felt that it was not appropriate to ask about children or talk about anything else other than the research, because it was quite late at night and I realized that her time was limited. So when we finished, I felt that this time my interview was more formal than the others and it did not make me feel very good. I could not feel that she was open to me. Even though we could see each other using web cameras, I found that the internet was an obstacle for a more close contact between us. When we met one month later in her university apartment flat, I could see the difference in our communication. Our physical presence in one room, eye contact and body gestures helped to make the conversation more informal. Even the proximity of her children during our interview made our talk more relaxed. Although, Katerina was still not as sociable as all the other people whom I talked to during my trips to Heihe, with relief, I found that we started to talk on topics outside of the research. We talked a lot about children. I told her about my son Ruslan (almost five years old) and my daughter Alisa (almost two years old), and we found common ground when I told Katerina that my children do not go to a child care centre for the whole day as I try to educate them at home. Katerina's seven year old twin boys did not attend childcare centres and her youngest son (four years old) just started attending for half of day. So we discussed the advantages of home preschool education compared to child care centres and this made our interview more informal compared to the first interview through Skype. Katerina found in me someone who understands issues that concerned her in this matter. So I started to feel more confident as our discussion progressed. I felt that I had established rapport with her.

Like her mother, Katerina is originally from the city Komsomolsk-on-Amur which is just a few hours by train from Blagoveshensk. Katerina was a polytechnic university English teacher in Russia. For the years before she moved to Heihe she also helped writing dissertations for students and had an organization which provided proofreading, editing and even writing services for people writing research papers and dissertations. In Russia, it is still possible to find someone who can write a whole thesis for you, from the beginning till the end. Even though writing a dissertation requires a defence of a thesis paper by a student in front of the assessing academic group (including external examiners), this does not interfere with the successful passing of the thesis paper even though it is not written by you. I am not sure how exactly everything is performed and whether examiners are also corrupted, but the mechanism works and there is a

demand for this kind of service. However, I must note, that these kinds of cases are rare. Katerina did that to support her family. However, this income was not stable. As she remembers, this business was not particularly pleasant either. Constantly spending time at the computer impacted on her health and she was less active. Listening to Katerina about her previous 'work', and the small amount of time she required for writing dissertations for others, (including managing to avoid plagiarism), made me believe that she is indeed a very intelligent woman. Her knowledge in different disciplines, from cultural studies to economics is fascinating. When I asked Katerina, how she did that, she said: "I love reading, I read a lot and read everywhere. Writing every dissertation was like a challenge, to check the depth of my knowledge in different areas. However, this experience was consuming all my energy. I always worried about how it would be, and, of course, I knew that this is not the best thing I can do with my knowledge". I was so surprised to find out that she has not written a dissertation for herself yet. She explained this, "I thought that I would always have time to do that for myself. Then I left to live in Heihe. But so far I have not seen a need to write a dissertation anyway."

When sitting at the computer for the whole day became intolerable and she wanted to escape from everything, the way out came unexpectedly. Her mother came for a holiday from Heihe. Elena saw her daughter always on the computer, and feeling alienated from her work, and decided that Katerina must also go to Heihe. Katerina agrees that her mother made her go and moved her away from the computer. She remembers that her mother described Heihe as a nice place to live and work in. Katerina's father was happy to go to help to look after the children in Heihe with his family.

Katerina is married, but her husband works shifts in Russia so he did not come. Katerina did not talk about him much, and I saw that this topic was not very comfortable to discuss. Katerina just mentioned that he came to Heihe to visit his family once a month, so the children were able to see him which she said was good. The prospect of moving to Heihe with three children was an anxious one, according to Katerina, because there were too many things that were going to change for them. However, the children were little at that time (aged four and one), which meant adapting to a new environment was easier. The fact that her mother came to Heihe before her was an advantage as she could show and explain new things to Katerina.

Katerina also came to Heihe without knowing Chinese. She says that sometimes it was a problem but in general it was not a significant obstacle in adaptation to Chinese culture. This they believed is due to the number of people who can speak and understand Russian at a basic level. She points out that in general, Chinese students are respectful of their teachers. She said, "I

cannot remember a day when I had to carry a heavy bag myself up the stairs to my apartment. They try to help immediately, as soon as they see me. They show empathy in any possible way”. However, she says that in Russia, students also respected her. “But may be not that strongly”, she laughs. Different cultures have different attitudes towards their elders. Although in Russia large extended families are still common and pensioners are rarely living in retirement houses, Chinese still treat pensioners with greater respect than do Russians.

Twice a year, the whole family goes to Russia, to their home town. They did not sell their flat as Katerina’s husband lives there. When they go there, they always want to return to Heihe again. She says, “I think we all got used to Heihe being our permanent home. At the same time, we always anticipate going to Russia and waiting for these trips with eager anticipation”. Katerina points out, “When we travel there and back, we go with my parents. They help me a lot. Here and there my dad looks after the children. The children can always go to their apartment and spend some time there”. Their apartments are on the same level, which is particularly convenient.

It was only at the end of our interview that Katerina told me that they were leaving Heihe in a few months and moving to Moscow. She did not say anything about her husband, but I assumed he will also go with them. The fact that they are going soon was hidden from their colleagues because they were not sure whether the move would be accomplished or not. When they had bought an apartment in Moscow they can announce it. She said that they have to go for the children. There are more opportunities for them there, than either in Heihe or Blagoveshensk. She says, “The boys should go to a good school. I have already received an offer of work in Moscow, this experience of teaching in Heihe has only played a positive role in finding a new job”.

During our second interview in her apartment, Katerina talked a lot about her children. The boys were in another room, and came to meet me in turn, telling me stories and sharing their impressions of movies that they recently watched and books they had just got from Russia. Although there were many toys around and even an aquarium with fish, the flat was more of a holiday type apartment, so a sense that it was a temporary home was apparent. Our interview always turned to the topic of children, and I saw that, as for so many mothers, children play the biggest role in her life. Children are a part of the family, which I explore in detail in Chapter 5.

Even though Katerina says that everything suits her in Heihe, she cannot stay for longer because of the children. Katerina does not know whether she will ever come back to Heihe, but she says that she will always remember this experience positively. Although Katerina said that her



children are coping easily with living in China for most of the year and then spending time in their home town in the holidays, I got the feeling that this was not quite true. However, this might be my own biases. I think that children missed their original homes, toys, their father and their country. When they saw me, they were so excited. I never saw children so happy to see someone they never knew before. Of course, they communicate with other Russians living on the same level, and with their family, but this is probably not enough and they may experience some social isolation. Later I realised that problems with schooling in Heihe might have been a reflection of difficulties in cultural adaptation that they had.

## **Conclusion**

Three cases, three lives which share similarities and differences, and each of them is unique. While Elena, Katerina, and, Lana are from the same town, Lana did not know the others in Russia. They met in Heihe and now work together. They communicate with each other inside and outside of work. They go to concerts, exhibitions and festivals organized by the university. They also celebrate birthdays together and communicate with each other like neighbours when they are not teaching. As a group, they share memories and experiences of living in Russia, and of moving to Heihe where they are now.

The opportunity to go to Heihe to teach Chinese students helped them to change their lives. They all desperately needed a lifestyle change, but all for different reasons. Their individual circumstances are complex, and all of them will have to return to Russia one day. In the following chapters, I will explore exactly how they relate to the concept of 'home' and sense of place in the process of transmigration.

## Chapter 4: Physical spaces, food and other materiality

### Introduction

Having introduced my research participants, I now explore how physical places, food and other materiality, matters for the perception of 'home' of my research participants. First, I will draw on the literature that deals with the issue and then I will explore ethnographic examples and how these concepts apply to my research participants.

After visiting my research participants at their apartments, and discussing what 'home' is for them and what factors help them to feel at home or to construct a new 'home' in Heihe, I found that issues surrounding 'home', translocality and transmigration are far more complex than it initially seemed. I found that the 'homes' of my research participants were 'fixed' and 'mobile' at the same time and that this was dependent on the themes I discussed with participants - materiality of physical spaces or the influence of social communication and memories which influence ideas about 'home'. Moreover, the concept of 'home' itself is a complicated one, which does not have a simple definition or meaning. Materiality of 'homes', is implicated in the process of memory and remembering of physical spaces, food and also non-material aspects that often work simultaneously. Together with my research participants, I constructed and reconstructed my ideas about home through analysing and interpreting their individual situations and ways they experience 'home'. I found that the ways my research participants constitute their 'homes' living in a bordering city with their home country are diverse and are reflected in their dwelling environments which I could observe while visiting them on campus. Their experiences around food and their daily routines were also explored. My analysis is based on my research participants' own interpretation of 'home' and my personal observations and my own family experiences.

### Theoretical background

As Wiles (2008, p.122) points out, "people experience home in many ways – as concrete fixed locations, as specific practices and routines, as social relationships, or as emotional connections and symbolic concepts". My research participants also experience 'homes' in different ways to each other, although all of them are placed in a similar physical situation, and there are many features that they have in common. Their perception of 'home' and the way they constitute ideas about 'home' were reflected in the stories that they shared with me during our interviews. The way they constitute their 'homes' represents the dynamic relationship between the material home

and processes of memory, a sense of nostalgia and remembering which are experienced by them being away from their home country. The importance of the built environment and its materiality is important as it shows the interaction between social and spatial form (Morton, 2007). Materiality of places is embedded within larger cultural and social contexts. These include non-material aspects, such as family ties, social networks and others which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Bonisch-Brednich and Trundle (2010) argue that the place itself matters, and focus on localities as sites within which the social fabric of migrant lives is woven is crucial. Thus, it is essential to explore how transmigrants make 'homes' in a new place, as "place remains a deeply contested and symbolically-rich site in which to constitute the self, even for those on the move" (Bonisch-Brednich & Trundle, 2010, p.1). I have artificially separated material and non-material aspects of 'home' in this research. However for transmigrants the experience of 'home' involves both of these aspects simultaneously.

Memory and materiality of places are closely related. Brickell and Datta (2011) argue that migrant experiences and identities are not straightforward articulations centred on any one scale, but consist of a multi-scalar repertoire of connections between 'here' and 'there' that span across imaginations, practices, and affects. These experiences emerge as a result of memory and nostalgia. According to Ahmed (2003) "memory is a primary ground of identity formation in the context of migration, where 'space' is decentred and exploded into multiple settings" (Ahmed, 2003, p.123). Therefore, memory serves as a significant means in returning 'home' through arising images of places, people, physical places, events, "all of which attach 'home' to physical locations, things and bodies" (p.124). This perception is also influenced by a feeling of nostalgia and other broader factors, such as social and cultural background, gender, family, age, and social status. There are other reasons which might be unrecognised even by them.<sup>11</sup>

After examining theoretical literature on the subject of 'home' in the context of translocality and transnational places, I found that scholars approach this issue from different perspectives. They consider translocal places as either 'fixed' or 'mobile'. However, from my research participants, I found that people can experience home as both 'fixed' and 'mobile' at the same time. Ahmed (2003) also argues that, "movement does not only happen when one leaves home, and that homes are not always fixed in a single location. Home and belonging may involve "attachment and movement, fixation and loss, and the transgression and enforcement of boundaries" (Ahmed, et.al 2003, p. 307). Materiality of places that surround my research participants here and now and

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<sup>11</sup> Bourdieu's (1977) concept *habitus*

their lived experiences of this is a focus of this chapter. The next chapter covers another side of the question of 'home' which applies to my research participants, as well. It explores in detail the importance of non-material aspects of 'home' such as social relations and family, sense of familiarity of place, communication, language, and memories about home which also happens in fluidity and fixedness of transmigrants' spaces. In this chapter, I explore the environment in which the physical place is crucial. Material aspects play a significant influence for the making of 'home' for my research participants, and this takes place in both fluidity and fixedness.

## **Making of home**

Place is crucial for making of 'home'. However, 'What is place?' and 'What is 'home'?' questions with no single answer. Is 'home' a house, a physical space or is it the whole country in which we live? Massey (2005) proposed that space is a "simultaneity of historical trajectories", or, "the sphere of multiplicity, the product of social relations" where social relations are "real material practices, and always ongoing" (Massey, 2005: 61, 95). Thus, 'home' is the place through which "many trajectories pass" (Brickell and Datta, 2011, p.38; Massey, 2005). Place is an ever shifting constellation of trajectories. The way we consume space (of 'home') depends on what is "thrown together" in a particular time. The place is perceived not only through images of natural and built environment, but by the cultural impositions (Brickell and Datta, 2011).

'Home' as a material place with all the objects that constitute our everyday lives can reflect on other aspects of homemaking. The physical surroundings and 'things' that affect migrants' everyday life reflect the complex process of 'homemaking'. A home does not simply exist, it can be made, and this process involves both material and imaginative elements. This process involves the construction and reconstruction of previous ideas about 'home' and living, which result in "new structures formed, objects used and placed" (Blunt & Dowling, 2006, p.23), all of that compose the daily lives of transmigrants. Moreover, 'making of home' is about maintaining links between past and present and is about "creating both pasts and futures through inhabiting the grounds of the present" (Ahmed, 2003, p.9). This will be shown below in the example of my research participants.

Also, as Brickell points out (Brickell & Datta, 2011, p.27), "home is an actual place or nodal point of social relations and lived experiences, and it is a metaphorical or discursive space of belonging and identification". Material aspects of migrant homes can show a significant expression of power and identity. As Hatfield (2011, p.59) points out, "exploring the material aspects of this has the potential to reveal more than just the material itself, although this is also

an important agenda in foregrounding translocalities”. So exploring the importance of material aspects for my research participants will lead to more questions which cannot be separated from non-material aspects which will be further explored in the next chapter.

## Research participants

Before I met with my research participants, my friend Oxana (the journalist) told me a little bit about them. She told me that teachers who work in Heihe University live in ‘hostel flats’ on campus. I was surprised at first, because the hostel flats that I knew of in Russia are far from comfortable and lacked privacy. They usually accommodate more than two people in one room and all share the same bathroom. Kitchens are also shared by more than one household, one kitchen is shared by three or four rooms. Russian hostels can be of a student or family type, but even family hostels share facilities. Family hostels are usually very noisy, especially if there is more than one family who have children in a section. Since the space in hostel flats is limited, children run around in the corridors to play. So, my impression of university hostels, based on what I have seen in Russia, was negative. When we met with Katerina for the first time, I was even more surprised when she told me that she also lives in a hostel with her three children. Since I knew that rent in Heihe was cheap, I did not understand why they had to stay in a hostel flat.

During my first trip to Heihe, before I had a chance to see where they lived, my research participants told me that they did not have to buy or rent apartments in Heihe, as the university provided them with free accommodation in flats for the time of their contract. When I came to Heihe to meet my research participants again for a second interview, I could see and understand why they were satisfied with their living conditions. Their homes looked like ordinary apartments, which did not share any facilities (toilets, kitchen or laundry) as is the case in Russian hostel flats. So my incomprehension about living in a hostel apartment and all the unpleasant associations went away. Each apartment has two bedrooms and a small kitchen, toilet and shower. First, I visited Lana’s apartment, then Elena’s, and finally Katerina’s. My research participants shared with me ‘what is home?’ for them, so coming back to each of them allowed me first-hand to see the small details of the concept of ‘home’, which are often invisible when considered from a general perspective.

My research participants appear to experience ‘place’ and its boundaries as powerful and real. Despite the fact that their mobility is not limited and they can go across the border as often as they want, their mobility is of a different degree compared to other Russians who do business

with Heihe or come to purchase goods and cross the border very frequently. So Lana, Katerina, and Elena are physically and materially attached to their 'homes' in Heihe, as they work in a government organization and are lecturing every week day. Through transforming place and engaging "in the small politics of daily life" (Bonisch-Brednich and Trundle, 2010, p.1), they are able to perform their usual roles in Heihe – that of a mother (in the case of Katerina and Elena), of a teacher and of a woman who looks after a household as they had done in Russia. After lectures, they return home where they have routine and everyday tasks, such as cooking food, and other household duties as well as preparing for lectures. It is through these routine tasks that these Russian women include 'home' in their new environment.

Lana lives alone, so she is freer than Elena and Katerina, who looks after three children. When she returns home, she can do anything she wants: watch TV or browse the Internet. However, she is also still engaged with some routine tasks on a daily basis.

## Physical 'homes'

### *Lana*

I had visited in September, when the weather changes quickly and at this particular day when I visited Lana's place, it was extremely windy and cold outside. The floor inside her apartment was very cold, as it is tiled without under-floor heating. Lana was wrapping herself up in a warm, thick sweater and complained that after the hot summer comes unpleasant months of cold weather with temperatures in winter between minus 15 to minus 40. She offered me a warm sweater. Also, green tea warmed us up and we could sit on a sofa and talk. She told me that until the central heating is turned on, they have to put extra layers of clothing on while at home. I told her that this weather is typical of a New Zealand winter, but there is no central heating in our New Zealand houses and that we used heaters most of the time and we wore fleece and merino clothes.

When I went to Lana's apartment, my immediate impression was that the place was different from any Russian homes I had seen. It was more like the apartment of my friend (who worked as a translator of Russian and Chinese in Heihe), which I visited during my previous trips to Heihe. My translator is a young woman, who also rents her apartment. I noticed that her interior decorations were minimal. Also the place that I rented while I was in Heihe was similar to my translator's and Lana's place inside. In the past, I have visited four other Chinese homes, and I

could see some similarities between these ‘homes’ and those Chinese ‘homes’. I found the following similarities between theirs and Lana’s apartments: for example, there are tiled floors in most rooms instead of carpets common in Russian homes and bare walls without photos or pictures or any other decorative or symbolic figures. This was a surprise for me because such material objects are usually accumulated during one’s lifetime.

Lana has spent three and a half years in Heihe, which is not a short period of time, but I did not see any objects in her apartment, which I could ask about. So she held to minimalism in her home interior furniture. I did not notice any Chinese art in the form of pictures or symbolic objects that I have seen in the Chinese apartments of my father’s friends, such as a paunchy Buddha figure or a frog which symbolizes happiness and wealth in China. Neither could I see any traditional Russian objects.

All the appliances Lana uses are provided by the university. Lana’s kitchen is very small, and it is separate from other rooms. Most Russian apartments which were built 20-30 years ago also have very small kitchens, separated from other rooms. In comparison, in modern Russian apartments kitchens are similar to New Zealand kitchens, which are adjoining a living room (so no separate space with a door). However, Russian kitchens are still smaller in size. Chinese kitchens that I have seen before, both in modern and in an older style apartments have a separate space close to a living room, but not adjoining a living room. So, since Lana was alone in this apartment in Heihe, the kitchen size was enough for her. She told me that she uses her kitchen, but she does not like to cook. She has to cook though as she quickly became tired of Chinese food in the university cafeteria.

She told me that when she moved in, the only things she had to purchase were linen and a dinner set. When we talked about the sparse living environment, Lana told me that she was indifferent about it. “For instance, I don’t care much about purchasing something from an appliance or homeware store, because everything here suits my needs. I am happy with what I’ve got, considering that the things that I came with this flat are not very old”. She continued, telling me of her friend’s experience: “I will tell you about our colleague and a very good friend from England. He came here with his wife and daughter to teach English. If you go to their home, you will see a tremendous difference between mine and his home. He certainly made his apartment a ‘home’, an ‘English home’ as is my understanding. They bought everything to feel at ‘home’ – a new fridge, they put up curtains, lots of framed pictures, and they bought all new linen, whiteware and carpets. To create more privacy, and be more comfortable, they have recently purchased their own apartment in the center and now live there. So, unfortunately, we do not

communicate as often as before with them now outside of work”. In short, this English family tried to bring their ‘home’ with them, using material means, but Lana refused to do so because she was unwilling to make this place like her home in Russia. One of the reasons for that might be the fact that she did not own this apartment, which was provided by the university. Lana did not feel that it is necessary to change anything dramatically, by buying appliances, carpets or furniture. Basic furniture was included in the apartment, so this was enough. I wondered if another reason was that she had always lived in worse conditions in Russia, and her Chinese flat seemed pretty good compared to her family house. Lana said that she also did not want to waste money on this. Transporting or relocating material items can help to make home in another location. Hatfield (2011, p.59) argues that “these ‘qualities’, which allow objects to maintain connections beyond their own physicality, combined with a materiality that allows them to be transported, means that they can be valuable homemaking tools on migration”. This seemed to be what Lana meant when she told me about her English friends.

It would be interesting to know whether this English family felt they achieved a sense of being at ‘home’ or not, which was probably what they were looking for in Heihe, even if they were going to stay there temporarily. When I listened to Lana, I thought that she made the distinction between “to be at home” and “feel at home”. At the end of our discussion, she did say, “home is a safe place, where my family, parents and childhood are. Also, home is where all my things are”. Her ‘things’ in Russia are meaningful to her and she will not replace them with the new ones as she realizes that this is temporary.

Lana says that ‘home’ in Heihe means an independent life for her. Before she moved to Heihe, she had been living with her parents and did not have a chance to be responsible for her own life. Her mother cooked for her, cleaned the house and washed her clothes, because Lana always came home terribly tired after working at school. Lana said, “I always got a feeling of guilt that being thirty years old, I am still living with my parents and my mother does all household duties, since she is retired and wants to help me. Of course, I wanted to have my own house where I could do everything the way I wanted. I am sure that I would find time for this as many other women do, who combine work and other home tasks. When I went to Heihe, I actually got a chance to have my own physical ‘home’. Even though, it is not completely mine, because I do not own it, I still enjoy the freedom of being on my own.” She talked about other things a lot, such as social interactions, friends and people which will be explored in the next chapter. From her story, I found that there are certain things about the concept of ‘home’ that she cannot clearly explain. She is not sure about what exactly in Russia makes her want to return there, considering that she likes living in Heihe better than in Russia. At the same time she does not want to



construct her 'home' in Heihe as she said that she will return to Russia to marry and have children. Elena was the next person I visited, and her case is unique as she brought her family with her to make her 'home', but first of all I will add my own relevant reflection.

### **Reflecting on my own experience**

I still remember how I missed my original Russian 'home' during New Zealand winters, as I could not warm up myself. So material items like heaters, warm clothes, electric blankets, fleece throws all remind me of a New Zealand 'home'. In Russia (and in Heihe), the central heating is installed in all houses (due to extremely low temperatures in winter times), so if it is cold outside, you can always come home and get warm, which I could not do in New Zealand as it takes time for heaters to warm up the place, plus it is very expensive to use all the time. All of these small details compose my ideas about 'home', being at 'home' and making of 'home' because these material objects surround us every day and are embedded in our general perception of 'home'.

### ***Elena***

Elena seems to like her place in Heihe as she considers her apartment comfortable enough for her family. Also, she does not have any negative memories about her apartment since she came to Heihe. Maybe, in the beginning, she felt lonely, but it was temporary, and it did not influence greatly the way she perceived the place where she lived. Elena's house in Heihe is similar to Lana's, but I observed some differences. First, she has carpets in every room which she purchased in Heihe. Also, there are many toys around. But still it did not look like a Russian 'home' to me at first sight. For some reason it felt warmer than Lana's flat, maybe because of the carpets. This may also be because it is situated on the southern side, so the flat gets lots of sunshine during the day. There are not many decorations, which would remind someone of a Russian traditional home which usually have many decorations. Instead just a few pictures of her grandsons on both walls of the living room. I did not see Elena's kitchen, as the door was closed when I was at her apartment. Since I was there for less than half an hour, I decided not to ask to view the kitchen, as I did not feel it was appropriate. However, Elena said that she cooks most of the time at home, so it means she uses her kitchen quite often.

Elena says that she is happy with her apartment in Heihe. Her place is comfortable enough for her and her husband. She thinks that it is a little bit better than her previous apartment in Russia which they got under a government program 25 years ago. Up until recently, she thought that it was her home where she planned to go back to one day. She said, "We rented it to our friend's daughter, when we went to Heihe. But recently we sold it, as we are going to Moscow soon.

When we were returning home for a holiday, we lived at my daughter's apartment as we did not want to bother the current tenants. However, I miss my apartment as a large part of my life is connected to it. So many memories, every single item in my house would remind me of something. I took as many things as possible that were valuable to my heart when I went to Heihe with my husband and Katerina, but most of the things were left there. I took my clothing, photo albums and my books. I know that it is bad to get attached to things strongly, but at my age people get terribly sentimental. I got a feeling that these symbolic items that I took with me and those which I left are important as they connect past and present". To me it seemed that Elena's sentimentality was caused by nostalgia about her life in Russia. Memories about the past were captured like photographs and reappeared in Elena's mind every time she saw things that associated with Russian 'home', her youth, children, and work. These items, like clothing which she brought from Russia, or old photographs in her photograph album, were acting as a link between her 'home' in Russian and Heihe. Ahmed (2003) calls it re-membering - it is a physical and emotional work of constituting 'affective building blocks' of 'home' (Ahmed, 2003, p.123; Hage, 1997 as cited by Ahmed, 2003, p.123). An image, photos, a favourite rug, tastes or smells are "motions of attachments" –'home' combines forces of movement and attachment at once. It is lived in motions, the motion of journey between 'homes', the motion of leaving and staying. But 'home' is also "remembered by attaching it, even momentarily, to a place where we strive to make 'home' and to bodies and relationships that touches us in a meaningful way" (Ahmed, 2003, p.123). Thus, "motions of attachment" which come from the past "are imagined from the standpoint of the present" (Hage, 1997, p.107 as cited in Ahmed, 2003, p.123). So, 'home' is perceived as not what we are leaving behind, but what we conceive "as a contingent product of historical circumstances and discursive formations of class, religion, ethnicity, nation – that individuals negotiate in the process of creating 'home'" (Ahmed, 2003, p.131).

When Elena reminisced about her life in Russia, I felt sadness in her words. Yes, she is an exceptionally strong woman many would say she has an 'iron character', but at the bottom of her heart, she is an ordinary woman in her sixties who is filled with memories about her youth, about the hard life in Russia over different periods of her life and uncertainties about her future in Moscow. In Moscow, she will need to be strong again and show her 'iron character' to survive in the big capital where people are not as kind and respectful as in Heihe. In Moscow she will have to construct her new 'home'. But she will always remember her apartment in Komsomolsk-on-Amur, Russia, where she lived for 25 years and which has a strong symbolic meaning for her as a place, which cannot be brought with her but which she can 're-member' in her memories and

which appear as ‘motions of attachment’ in the form of material and non-material contexts in her mind (Ahmed, 2003). Also, she will remember Heihe where she lived for the past four years and also considered a ‘home’.

### **Reflecting on my family experience**

My mother does not have her own permanent physical ‘home’ in New Zealand. Since 2001, my parents are also between two countries. They have not purchased a house in New Zealand yet for a variety of reasons. One of which is that my father still has work commitments between Heihe, Blagoveshensk and New Zealand. They would remain in New Zealand permanently, but my father cannot work as a doctor in New Zealand. So, in order to buy a house in New Zealand he has to go back and forth for another couple of years to save the money to afford a ‘nice’ house. Therefore, all the things they have accumulated in New Zealand are kept in storage when they go back to Russia. We share our lives between Russia and New Zealand and usually come back to New Zealand in the summer time to escape the severe Russian winter. The fact that we come and go on a regular basis makes us addicted to this lifestyle. We can no longer be in one place for a long time. We have all got used to being ‘fixed’ for half a year in one place and half of a year in another, which makes us dependent on both places. So every time my family comes to New Zealand, they rent a house and my mother starts carefully unpacking all the boxes with kitchen tools, linen, clothing and many other little things which she keeps. Every item reminds her of something, and she values them so much. I have been there during these moments of unpacking, and I remember that these things are of great importance to her. She is indeed extremely tired of having to pack and unpack things again every time they come and then go back to Russia. Of course, she dreams of having her own permanent ‘home’, and I think for her and for many women including Russian women who I know, a physical ‘home’ has a significant meaning. Its meaning is culturally constructed; in Russia it is associated with children, cooking, family dinners and even smells which come from the kitchen. So the place itself with all the contents makes a ‘home’ for them. However, since I am younger, I feel I have adapted more easily than my mother. However, in recent years I have started to get tired of changing ‘homes’ in New Zealand every year we return from Russia. I consider New Zealand my ‘home’, but the New Zealand ‘home’ is a whole country for me until we buy our own property. So every time we return to Russia, where we have our own house, which we built with my husband before our first child was born, I realize that ‘home’ is also where the physical house is. The house which is full of things which we accumulated over the years, where our children were growing up, connects all the memories, together with the place, and it all makes it ‘home’.

These are ‘motions of attachment’ which allows feeling at ‘home’ and constituting ‘home’ being in multiple places at the same time by projecting memories from past to the present and to the future (Ahmed, 2003, p.123). Pascual-de-Sans (2004, p.350) also writes about the significance of memory and attachment to objects:

Past places are subject to modification by memory. Memory is often imprecise, it lapses and invents, whether unconsciously or deliberately. Moreover, one must take into account that the human capacity to imagine and to fantasize is so intense that sometimes, paradoxically, the absence of a place (or of a person) becomes more intense, more meaningful, than its presence. Absence can make what is absent more present than presence.

This shows why it is hard to forget previous ‘homes’ and create new ones. It does take time, as the absence of place is only strengthening the attachment to previous ‘homes’ and people.

### *Katerina*

Katerina’s apartment looked more like a ‘home’ to me, because there are a lot of toys all around, children’s books, monster trucks and an aquarium with little fishes. It reminds me of my own home. There is a computer in the second bedroom, which was being used by the boys when I came. Katerina sleeps in the smaller room with her youngest son and her twins sleep in the second bedroom. A small kitchen is built in separately. Katerina says that the kitchen is not very convenient as it is too small. The toilet and a shower looked quite new. In general, it looked like a small, relatively new two bedroom apartment. Katerina says, “If my mother and father did not live on the same level, I would go crazy with the boys in this flat. Sometimes when they get tired of this space, they go to mom’s place; after all, it is difficult to live here, because as the boys grow up they need more space”. I empathised that I understood her. She continued, “When they play together, it is extremely loud. We have to restrict them constantly, so they will not disturb others returning from work in the evening. In these moments, I feel that it is not my ‘home’ as we are not free to do whatever we want”.

Katerina points out that ‘home’ for her is the place where her children feel good. She says: “Heihe is a temporary place, but it is a ‘home’”. This left me with further questions as I recognized the complexity of this issue. Temporary or permanent, they call it ‘home’. What my research participants really feel I might never know, as sometimes their views contradict one

another and they seem to be lost in the space of translocality. So, all of them think that Heihe is a nice place to be, as the better conditions of living and materiality of place almost satisfies them, however at the same time, they pointed out that they were not planning to stay in Heihe for that long and did not imagine themselves in Heihe in the mid to distant future. Bourdieu (1977) offers an explanation for this phenomenon. He argues that all our physical and social senses are the result of the remembering practices and embodiment which are highly influenced by our culture and environment in which we grow up. Food, the cooking of food and its consumption appear to be directly embedded in our culture, it is also one of the aspects which is inseparable from other materiality, this is perhaps especially so for transmigrants. Or at least they are more likely to be conscious of the place of food in their idea of 'home'.

## Food

Stoller (1989) argues that the sensual aspects of the social life of the people anthropologists study, particularly tastes and smells, are significant for relating to 'home'. I found this a useful idea to think about when I started discussing food with my research participants.

Elena, for example says she has adapted to Chinese food without problems. She prefers Russian dishes to Chinese. However, she enjoys going to a Chinese restaurant from time to time or eat in the campus cafeteria which serves only Chinese food. She says, "We buy Russian bread in a bakery. Although it is quite far from the campus, we go there regularly". I asked whether she misses any particular Russian foods that she cannot get in Heihe, she replied: "We all miss dairy food, which is not particularly good in Heihe. The milk here is artificial, or it is made of soy. There are only soft cheeses, but I like hard cheese. Also, sour cream or cottage cheese is hard to find in a Chinese supermarket. I like the yogurts here. Some of them are delicious, but I certainly miss other dairy products". According to my research participants, there is a great diversity of products in the biggest supermarket which is situated in the city center, with lots of imported exotic fruits and vegetables. As recently as just four years ago the choice was not particularly great, so my research participants have noticed this growth in the range of products in the process of living in Heihe. This change was due to the economic development of Heihe which is growing rapidly. Many improvements were made which are visible both to locals and Russian visitors. So over the past years, changes have been tremendous. When I go to Heihe, and I go to this supermarket, I notice that this place has become extremely popular with among other Russians; both tourists and those who live there. People go there to buy everything from food to

clothing. I can find some foods there that I cannot get in Blagoveshensk, such as Goji berries, different kinds of seaweed and lots of exotic fruits from the South of China.

When I asked Lana how often she cooks at home, she said, “Sometimes if I am hungry, I will just go the nearest Chinese café or *chufanka* as Russians call small Chinese restaurants. I can pay just 50 yuan and eat some yummy dishes. But I get tired of Chinese food quickly, so I try to cook at home most of the time”. I asked Lana about eating spicy food, she said, “I avoid eating spicy food. Instead, I buy lots of vegetables, fruits and cereals. I don’t mind having a bowl of noodles if I am very hungry and do not want to cook”.

I asked whether she brings specific ingredients and food from Russia, so she can cook Russian dishes. She said, “No, I don’t make a fetish of food. For example, the Chinese are crazy about food, if they go to live to Russia they bring with them Chinese rice, sauces, spices, starch noodles and everything else they need to cook Chinese food, so they can feel at ‘home’ in Russia”. I told Lana that I have seen a few traditional Chinese food shops in Blagoveshensk, so those Chinese people who bring food with them must go to distant regions rather than the centre; probably to the fields where they work or to small villages which are far away from Blagoveshensk.

A Russian bakery opened two years ago in the centre of Heihe. It is immensely popular among Russians who live in Heihe either permanently or temporary. However, I talked to a Chinese woman who works in this bakery, who said that Chinese people also buy Russian bread and sweet buns. I have not seen the baker, who is Russian, while I have been there, but I was told that he lives in Heihe permanently and makes bread every morning. I am not sure whether he owns the shop or not.

My research participants told me that having a Russian bakery in Heihe was particularly good, because Chinese bread is entirely different from Russian bread. This was not a surprise for me, as bread is what many Russians miss when they are away from their original homes. I personally can understand my research participants and others whose food memories turn to traditional Russian bread. Sutton (2001) argues that food memories of migrants are a powerful source for understanding nostalgia and globalization. As Sutton (2001, p.159) points out, “food offers some of the most quotidian points of entry into the blended temporalities of experience”. Food is about everyday tangible experiences of people. It accompanies people in their travel across national borders (in movement) and it stays with people when they settle in one place (in fixity). The

topic of food might be analysed as a cultural site and it is a useful way of constituting memories of 'home' (Sutton, 2001). When I immigrated to New Zealand, I also craved bread, especially dark rye bread or white bread with a crispy crust. The only alternative to it has been found in one German bakery, which is popular among Russians. They baked dark rye bread which was very similar to the Russian bread we were all used to. In *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* McGuire (2008) talks about memory, "Traveling to Norway a few years ago, I smelled fresh-baked brown bread, and it kindled a memory of a wonderful loaf I had bought thirty years earlier in Monnickendam, Holland. The olfactory memory was so vivid that, unbidden, it instantly awoke dozens of related memories – sights, sounds, and tastes of my first experiences in Europe" (McGuire, 2008, p.99). Although in his case, these memories are not in relation to 'home', still they can show how particular places are remembered as a result of smelling or tasting certain foods.

### **Reflecting on food memory: 1**

I saw myself in a similar situation when one day I found the German bakery in New Zealand, the smell of the brown bread there awoke many memories about Russia and my childhood. I particularly remember one Wednesday when at the end of the day of dieting I saw how my mother was slicing fresh white bread with a crust. This was my favourite bread. It smelled like heaven. It was a little bit sour and I can still describe this taste as I remember it precisely. I remember the taste of it in that particular moment because my dad said that I can eat it if I really wanted, so I did, I ate it with a glass of kefir (unsweetened yogurt). It is fascinating how such things can make you happy. Moreover, the memory that I have about this particular day is very strong, it comes back to me from time to time and reminds me of other things which are associated with our family 'home' and childhood at this 'home'.

When I miss my home, I always dream of food that I cannot get in New Zealand, so my thoughts about my home in Russia turn to food from time to time. When a Russian shop opened in Auckland, many Russians can satisfy their cravings for traditional food and special ingredients that are unavailable in New Zealand supermarkets, although it is an extremely expensive pleasure.

Bread is not the only thing that came to the minds of my research participants when we discussed what food they missed most and to what degree it affected their perception of 'home'. For example, all my research participants told me that they bring lots of Russian chocolate when they come back from holidays in Russia (knowing this I also brought them some chocolate as gifts). Lana said with a smile, "Chocolate is sweet and it often raises my mood. It is a comfort food for

me with a specific Russian accent. Russian chocolate melts in my mouth, Chinese chocolate is like soap. I don't like it". I told Lana that in one shopping center near the customs clearing center, where many Russians buy goods wholesale, I saw Russian chocolates, in the original packaging. I asked Lana about that. She said, "I believe it is fake, as somebody told me that it is a bit different from original chocolate. I have never tried it. I am scared to try it".

### **Reflecting on food memory: 2**

When I return to New Zealand from Russia, I also buy lots of traditional Russian chocolate for my friends and my relatives who live in New Zealand. I am not sure whether chocolate is directly associated with 'home' for my friends in New Zealand and my research participants in Heihe, but it brings lots of memories to people, about their childhood, New Year holidays and life in Russia. Chocolate is usually consumed with a cup of tea or coffee. In Russia, chocolate is a holiday food. In my family we ate chocolate strictly on special occasions, such as birthdays, New Year holidays where we gathered at a big table with the extended family.

Therefore, food appears to be an interesting way to associate with 'home'. It was important in a number of different ways: comparisons that my participants made between Russian and Chinese food, cravings for bread that were shared by all research participants, sweet memories about chocolate that associated with childhood and holidays, familiar smells that triggered memories about the past. My research participants considered food to be another important materiality but none of them believe that it is the principle aspect for constituting a 'home', although some foods, such as bread, are directly associated with their original 'homes'.

### **Other materiality**

As Rapport (2010) points out, "the identity of locality, the making of a home locale, is something that comes into being. Making a home locale is an act of human creativity, individual or collaborative character: it is a manifestation of a human nature, of a human capacity" (Rapport, 2010, p.184). Russian women who live in Heihe identify themselves with more than one locality. For instance, Lana constantly talked about three localities – her home town, Blagoveshensk (where she studied and always wanted to live) and Heihe, where she lives now. Although our discussion did not touch on all aspects of making a 'home', those things that we had a chance to discuss with each of them reflects that the creation of 'home locale' is a natural process for these women.



Thus, it is clear that all of them experience a need for making a home. But each of them does this in a different way. This is particularly visible, as they try to adapt to changes in their lives and at the same time construct and reconstruct ideas about 'home' which they had before and now. So, for Katerina, who says that 'home' is where her family is and where it is better for her children, the materiality of physical places is still very important as it surrounds her and her family every day, and it helps her to feel 'at home'. Since she is not planning to return to her home town in Russia, memories and attachments that she felt about her original physical home in Russia will be added to the memories about her Chinese 'home'.

For Elena, a decision to be in Heihe and leave it soon, is also inseparable from family ties. She says, "To a great extent, materiality determines where your home is but in our case, materiality is directly linked with family". Being in Heihe allowed them to save money, and they can now go to Moscow where they see a future for the children. So, a new 'home' will be constructed again. Perhaps, for this reason, Elena did not want to be attached to her Heihe house too much. She did not want to buy many things, which she would have to shortly leave.

My research participants all said that they planned to go back to Russia in the near future. According to Brickell and Datta (2011), a true return to a place of origin is not necessarily achieved by the repatriation to a home nation or homeland, but by returning to a specific house or piece of land. My research participants, while constantly thinking of returning to their home country one day, also spoke about particular places where their physical homes are in Russia. This supports scholars (Blunt & Valley, 2004; Brickell & Datta, 2011) who argue that there are a variety of scales and trajectories at which 'return' to home takes place, from domestic to the global.

Places of attachment of my research participants represent translocality of smaller scale places. In this context translocality offers the view of local rather than national (Brickell & Datta, p.58). In Lana's case, thoughts about physical 'home' are not the same as of Elena and Katerina who have their own property in Russia. Elena and Katerina are women who had their own households in Russia where their children were growing up and where every item had a particular meaning and history. So each piece of furniture has a symbolic meaning for them, kitchen appliances and tools that they chose and bought themselves and other interior decorations, all comprise ideas about the physical space, a physical 'home'. For Lana, on the other hand, furniture, kitchen tools and other household items are not significant.

When we discussed materiality of physical places, at some point I realised that I try to relate myself to my research participants, and when it happens I try to find meanings of my own

perception of 'home'. In my case, when I miss Russia, being in New Zealand for more than half of the year, I think both of physical home and, also, I think of my home country and all the aspects that relate to ideas about nationhood<sup>12</sup>.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I explored the importance of materiality of physical places, including home interiors and other surrounding objects. Then I explored food memories and meanings of food, even familiar smells in everyday routines of my research participants which all appear in their memories and bring feelings of nostalgia. I further discussed the need for finding and making of 'home'. These 'motions of attachment' (Ahmed, 2003) connect the past and the present and result in an unceasing process of 're-remembering' which influences the perception of 'home' of my research participants. Defining 'home', constituting 'home', making of 'home' and relating to 'home' appeared to be a complex and uneasy process for my research participants. My research participants' examples provided three cases distinct from each other. However, there were certain aspects that they shared. I also shared my own experience of perceiving 'home' in the context of materiality of physical places. All three women pointed out that since they became transmigrants, they belong to two places at the same time and both places are important for the general perception of 'home'. All research participants experienced a need for finding 'home'. They pointed out that they consider both places a 'home'. So my research participants get attached to materiality of one place along with non-material aspects, which fixes them in this location for a certain period of time, but they also have their original homes in Russia to which they are also attached and at which they have other material and non-material things (which are still important for them).

I found that materiality is one side of this topic which has been explored in this chapter. However, living near the border makes it not a physical barrier but an opportunity for mobility and openness, which is one of the topics of the next chapter. It also allows locals to create a form of "social symbiosis" because both cities are dependent on each other (Ryzhova, 2008, p. 324), which is reflected in the ability to feel at home not just physically, but socially as well. Thus, the next chapter explores how social interactions, family ties, imaginations and memory, language use and other non-material aspects influence on perception of 'home' of my research participants.

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<sup>12</sup> The idea of nationhood has not been explored in this thesis, the focus of which was on a more domestic level. However, its importance for the discussion of transnationalism, diaspora and cultural identity is recognised.

## Chapter 5: Family ties, social networks, communication and practices

### Introduction

In the previous chapter, I explored the perception of 'home' in the context of materiality of physical places and things that surround my research participants. Such aspects as food, physical places and other materiality have appeared to be very important for all of them. Also, it has been pointed out that the way they perceive their 'homes' is greatly influenced by their memories and nostalgia which all of them experience from time to time. These memories go beyond materiality of physical places and food. So here again I will look at the three women who give three different examples - three different cases of perceiving 'home'. I will also draw on my personal experience of transmigration as in the previous chapters. My research participants pointed out that there are ties that connect both physical places that I have explored above and all other invisible aspects between 'here' (Heihe) and 'there' (Russia) which concern social networks, family and imaginary ideas about 'home'. Thus besides materiality which plays a significant role in the making of 'home', other factors which also surround my research participants on a day-to-day basis appeared also important for their perception of 'home'. One of these factors is the significant concern for many people – their families, some of whom they left in Russia, while others were brought with them to Heihe. I also look at the role of language and communication which can help to feel at 'home' in a foreign country. In this chapter, I will also explore how new technologies and social networks are shrinking distances between adopted and original 'homes'. This chapter will conclude that the perception of 'home' is shaped by various factors and it is impossible to look at this issue without considering both material and non-material aspects together as well as combining forces of movement and attachment (statis) which are not mutually exclusive.

Mobility, advanced information technologies and transmigration are a part of our everyday life. Globalisation and greater movement of people makes 'home' more than just a physical place (Nowicka, 2007; Appadurai, 1996, Chacko, 2011, Clifford, 1997). Many transmigrants perceive 'home' as an unstable entity as stability and embeddedness in a single place are not prevailing in a modern world (Lam & Yeoh, 2004). My research participants also appeared to experience a sense of instability of place in their years of living "between" two countries. This influences their ideas about 'home' which in turn relate to other relevant issues that came into the minds of my research participants.

Brickell (2011) distinguishes many scales of translocality. One of the scales of translocality is its value for highlighting localities as specific situated places of connectivity that enable mobility within and beyond the nation. This means that materiality of specific situated places overlapping with movement creates another way of perceiving 'home'. So 'home' involves "motions of attachment", as 'home' of transmigrants is experienced and lived both in movement and attachment to people and places (Ahmed, 2003, p.123). Brickell also (2011, p.27) argues that even if migrants settle in one place, their lives are not necessarily immobile, "rather their lives can be transformed without the need for physical mobility". Memories and nostalgia of transmigrants are a powerful way for constituting their lives which does not require physical mobility. Instead, they experience cognitive mobility which helps in connecting the past and present and result in the situation where people are "at home in movement, but the movement can be one's very home" (Rapport, 1997, p.73).

As I have already mentioned in the previous chapter, my research participants talked about themselves as attached to the places where they live and work in Heihe. Nevertheless, in their thoughts they are always between the two countries. They imagine themselves in their native 'homes', they have dreams and memories about their past, and they always compare and contrast their life in Russia and Heihe. Basch et al (1994) shows the dual state of life of transmigrants and it explains their different ways of perceiving 'home'.

The process by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement. Many immigrants today build social fields that cross geographic, cultural, and political borders. Immigrants who develop and maintain multiple relationships-familial, economic, social, organisational, religious, and political-that span borders we call transmigrants (1994, p.7).

Transmigrants develop multiple ways of perceiving 'homes' and as Pourmehdi (2001) argues, many migrants identify with more than one location at the same time. As a result, "it seems that the majority retain several identities which bind them at once to more than one space and location" (Pourmehdi, 2001, p.6). The social ties transmigrants keep, are another way of connecting memories of the past with their present life.

## Family and a sense of familiarity

Family plays a crucial role in constituting ideas about ‘home’ for people who migrate. My research participants’ families in Russia connect them with their ‘homes’ which they left when they went to Heihe. When my research participants talked about ‘home’, they invariably associated it with family. I even got a feeling that in some instances, when they talk about ‘home’ they mean a ‘family home’ because they talk about parents, children and themselves as an integral whole. Also, communication and practices also appeared to be arising in the memory of my research participants. All of them differentiated between ‘home’ as a country and ‘home’ where their family is. As I explored in the previous chapter, materiality plays an important role in making of ‘home’, and in Russia, family was a part of their home environment. In some sense these two aspects were interdependent and indiscrete because the materiality of ‘home’ is embedded in memories about family. My research participants found it was hard to talk about ‘home’ without talking about family. This was particularly evident in Lana’s case, because she came to Heihe alone.

### *Lana*

Lana did not have her usual family environment around her in Heihe, and this is reflected in her unwillingness to surround herself with material things as she did not see Heihe as her ‘home’ in the future. She said that ‘home’ is where her family is. By this, she meant her family in Russia (her mother and father) and also she meant her prospective family, a new ‘home’ which she was going to create when she gets married. Thus, until she has her own family, she did not see the sense of making a ‘home’ in Heihe. At this point, she did not mind living in a ‘home’ which is not completely hers.

Lana says that her parents come to Heihe twice a year to visit her. She also goes back to Russia at least twice a year. The visa regime between Blagoveshensk and Heihe allows traveling as often as people want. Lana says, “Of course, what is happening in the world favours a greater mobility of people. It is not very expensive for my parents to come to visit me in summer time. In winter I go to visit them. When they come here, they buy things which are much cheaper than in Russia, so they always bring a lot of things from Heihe. It is very convenient for them too. My brother is here, but I cannot say that this fact helps me to feel at ‘home’ as in Russia, as we live independent lives in Heihe. We are no longer in our parent’s house together. But when we

are together in Russia, we become a family again. So the place unites us”. I wonder if Lana brought her mother and father to Heihe, she would feel at ‘home’? Probably not, because Lana pointed out that place and the environment under which the family united were crucial. Although her brother lives in Heihe, Lana says that she feels that she is united with her family (including her brother) only when she goes to Russia.

When I asked Lana about other Russians who come to Heihe and whether their presence helps them to feel at ‘home’, she said, “I prefer not to interact with Russian tourists and visitors. I know that people are different, and there are many good Russians who come to Heihe, but the majority that I see here avoid communicating. So I don’t fall upon them when I see them in town. Moreover, I have some strange feelings when I see other Russians. It is not particularly negative, but it is not positive either. I cannot explain it”. Probably, these feelings arise as a result of acknowledgement that these people are *other*, they are just visitors, and they will return to Russia tomorrow or the next day. But Lana will stay here. They live in Russia permanently; therefore, they are different to her.

#### **Reflecting on my experience**

When Lana told me about her strange feelings towards other Russians whom she meets on the street, this reminded me of myself. Every time I come back to Russia from New Zealand, the first place I encounter many Russians is in Heihe because we always travel back home through Beijing or Hong Kong. In particular, I remember the case when I had not been to Russia for two years. I felt extremely uncomfortable in the presence of Russians when I saw them in restaurants, in the sauna and in the shops, at first day back in Heihe. I think this happened because I tried to position myself in relation to them. I looked at how other women were dressed and how they spoke (their tone and use of language). Women in Russia, dress differently from New Zealand women. There is a more relaxed style of clothing in New Zealand compared to Russia. Also, most Russian women wear makeup. And Russians are not as friendly as New Zealanders with whom I have become used to. Every time I go back to Russia, I experience the shock of seeing how rude some Russians are. Of course, not all Russians are unfriendly, but I will agree with Lana, that in Heihe the contingent of people is diverse. Their goal is often to carry the load for someone for money and use this trip for their personal purposes – to eat in restaurants, go to a sauna, shop, get drunk, and relax. Thus, it is not surprising that these people seem unpleasant. So, when I saw them in my first day back in Heihe after arriving from New Zealand, I felt very uncomfortable. On the way to Blagoveshensk, or during the customs clearance, I was scared to speak as I might have sounded different from other Russians. However, I must admit, that these

feelings did not last for long and I adapted very quickly to the Russian reality and nothing seemed unusual or unfamiliar to me after a few days in my home country.

### *Katerina*

Katerina's case is different from Lana's, as she lives in Heihe with her children, her mother, and her father. Almost all of her family is in Heihe. The way she defines and perceives 'home' reflects the importance of having her family near in the process of transmigration. She says, "my home is where my family is, where it is better and safer for my boys". This helps her to feel secure and confident being in a foreign country. Although she might experience hard times adapting to Chinese culture, food and language difference, her family presence has been of great support to her. However, at the same time, a sense of responsibility for her boys does not make her life easier compared to other people who migrate without their families. In fact, she started to feel a sense of guilt for bringing them to Heihe. Although, she never stated that clearly during our discussion, but from Elena's and Lana's words about Katerina and her children, I understood that Katerina was disappointed with the education, their inability to communicate freely with the Chinese community, and language issues that were experienced by her children. Maybe in the beginning Heihe was perceived as almost an ideal place for the construction of 'home', as everything seemed better than in Russia. However, in the last year, many things have changed, the problems which seemed surmountable in the beginning have grown into major problems. Also, the fact that Katerina's husband lives in Russia is not particularly favourable for her children as they see their father only once a month. Katerina did not say much about him. As I understood, he is also going to Moscow with them soon. However, for the past three years of being in Heihe, he was not with her, which seems to have greatly influenced the way she perceived 'home'. Having her mother and father nearby is one thing, but the presence or absence of one's spouse is different. If they were to be considered a family in Russia they should be living under one roof.

### *Elena*

For Elena, making a 'home' without a family was not an option, so she brought it with her after living by herself in Heihe. Her husband, her daughter and her grandchildren needed to be near.

So once she had done that, it made a tremendous difference to her perception of 'home' compared to the time when she was alone in a foreign country for the first time in her life. She says: "For a woman of my age, it is extremely important to have relatives near. Also, moving to another country, especially to China, without knowing the language, was not easy. It is critical to feel secure, and family is one of the means for that". Thus, she did not deny that when she moved to Heihe, she was unaware of the extent her family plays in the perception of 'home'. She says, "When I brought them here, I virtually brought my 'home' with me. My family is my 'home'". Elena made it very clear that for her, it was impossible to make home without her family. So she did not try to build her 'home' using primarily material items, as the English family from Lana's story, but she was more concerned with having most of her family (not just her husband) which included her adult daughter and three grandchildren with her. It is fascinating since I used to hear stories where children move to another country and then bring their parents with them, but not the opposite as is the case with Elena. I admire her strength and her willingness to live a full life at an age when most people are considering retirement.

Elena says, "Now Heihe is my second 'home'. Here, everything satisfies me, quality and level of life, attitudes of students and colleagues. My family lives with me, so I do not feel detached from my 'home'. I brought it with me". Elena does not have many Chinese friends. She said that she missed her friends. Her husband can tell a different story, as not everything is as easy for him, as it might seem by looking at Elena's experience. He is more isolated from the society than Elena, who teaches every day at the university and communicates with other teachers and students. Her husband is limited to the Russian community of other teachers who live in the hostel apartment complex. As Elena said, "He misses his friends, of course he does. Here, he has a role of a babysitter, which was not particularly familiar to him before. Sometimes I feel that it is very hard for him, but then I realize that there are many benefits for both of us here. People respect me and him. He says to me that in Russia his life would be more boring. Being a retired person in Russia is not the same as in the West, and it is not the same as in China, where people show an exceptional respect to elders". I realized that Elena's husband would make for an interesting case by sharing his own perception of 'home', but it would be a completely different story in a different research project.



## Shrinking distances: new technologies and social networks

According to Appadurai (1996, p.33), the suffix "-scape" signifies transnational distributions of correlated elements whose display can be represented as landscapes. In relation to technologies he proposes the term 'technoscape' which bring new forms of cultural interactions exchanges of ideas through the power of technology, which can now happen at speeds unknown to people before (Appadurai 1996: 33). As Chacko (2011) points out, "the idea of locality and the place is sometimes considered fragile in an era of increasing mobilities as linkages are forged and maintained across boundaries" (p.163). With the emergence of globalization and new technologies, the installation of mobile phone and internet networks even in remote regions of the planet, the distance between localities is shrinking. As a result, it is now possible to make contact with people in other countries and experience other places without physically leaving a location (Gielis, 2009). This allows maintaining ties with family and friends who are geographically spread and very different from communication ten years ago. Therefore, places and 'homes' have become closer than ever before for people who migrate or permanently live in another country. People have an opportunity to see their 'homes', to see their loved ones and virtually this experience can bring them back. In his discussion of the role of imagination Appadurai (1996) explores the role of mass media and video technology on the imagination in social life. The imagination which can be experienced in dreams, stories and fantasies is an integral part which prevails in every society. Due to globalization and the emergence of information technologies, imagination takes a new form. My research participants communicate through the internet with their family, they can see them through Skype video calls, and they call them every day if needed. Phone calls are affordable and Skype calls are free.

### **Reflecting on my memories**

I remember when I was six and my parents went to China for half of a year, and there was no communication between us. I talked to them twice on the phone when they called from the Beijing Embassy and twice we received a parcel from them which was passed on by another Russian doctor who was returning from China. The inability to contact my parents anytime we needed and anytime we wanted was upsetting for me. I still remember that I missed them. As a child I thought that they went 'nowhere', because there was no news from them. Of course, this affects the way they also perceived 'home' when they were away. As my mother remembers,

'home' had become a place which was so far away, and which was difficult to get back to. She told me that she imagined home many times every day: the house, where the family was, where her bed and kitchen were.

Today, the ever changing world, provides us opportunities to experience 'homes' in a different way. As Pourmehdi (2001, p.1) points out,

We can no longer portray immigrant communities in terms of people who have left their home and country, because many have kept their contact through networks with multiple connections and linkages which span international borders and identities. The country of origin and the country of residence are connected by rapid means of transport, cultural exchanges and electronic communications.

According to Nowicka (2007) "mobility challenges the notion of home" (p.69). To a greater extent, new technologies also challenge the notion of home. All of these are relatively new phenomena. I am still amazed by the ability to see my relatives almost every day in other parts of the world. I can see not only them but all the surroundings, and those surroundings can give an actual visual view of the place and setting. So, instead of imagining places and people, I can see them through video calls. No, it is not what it was just a few years ago, it is so new and it does challenge ideas about 'home', and perception of 'home' of original and host country. Therefore, "conceptualizations of home require the broader perspective of pluri-local attachments", as it does go beyond physical borders and physical places (Nowicka, 2007, p.72)

## **Language and communication**

The next important issue identified by my research participants is the importance of language and communication which also affects the perception of 'home' of my research participants by making them feel at 'home' and in the wider environment. Basch et al (1992) argue that within their network of social relations, transmigrants create fluid and multiple identities that are deeply-seated both in their society of origin and the host societies. My research participants said that they experienced a 'social vacuum' as the communication with other Russians was limited to the teaching community of Heihe University. From their stories, I found that although they get along well with both their Chinese and Russian colleagues, during off-work time they mainly communicate with Russians from their teaching community. All of them point out that during the first years they had many joint activities: they went to movies, cafes, exhibitions, theaters and

other places in Heihe. However, in the past year, they no longer go to movies, cafes and to the theatres together, and Lana pointed out that now they do not communicate as friends as often as before. However, they communicate as neighbors, as they all live in one building. Lana noted that, “Here I do not have a choice and I have to communicate with all those people who work and live here. Maybe, I would find Chinese friends, but my Chinese is not good enough. In Russia, I would never become friends with some of the Russians who surround me here, but due to my situation it is my best available option”. I have heard that many times from my Russian friends in New Zealand, especially from those of older age. So, here the situation unites migrants from the same country through language, culture and activities, such as watching of Russian movies and reading of Russian books.

Katerina noted that, “As many other migrants do, we experience certain problems in communication due to the language barrier. Yes, Chinese are friendly and respectful but it does not change the situation, we cannot communicate on an equal basis with them”. The difference in language and culture do not make them confident and secure in another country. In fact, a sense of security and confidence are essential for associating with ‘home’. My research participants are teaching Russian at the university, therefore, they are in a better position compared to those who teach arts or other subjects; nevertheless, they do experience problems in communication with their students. These problems are hidden, as Chinese students never show that sometimes they do not understand their teachers. Also, I wonder whether the lack of Chinese can lower teachers’ self-esteem, as the chance to be misunderstood or misunderstand someone can happen at anytime. They have not learnt Chinese beyond ‘survival language’ during their stay, so they cannot communicate freely. Their unwillingness to learn Chinese may show that my research participants do not see themselves in China in the future. Lana is young and does not have a family yet, so I do not understand why she has not enrolled in a Chinese course or studied at home. She says, “I have learnt Chinese from my students, so I can express myself, at least I try”. But she did not say why she has not learnt it at an advanced level.

When I came to visit Lana in her apartment, I had a brief opportunity to observe how she speaks Chinese. In order for me to enter the hostel I had to leave my passport on the security desk, and Lana had to explain who was I and where I was going. Since I used to study Chinese I listened attentively to her pronunciation, and I understood what she was saying. She expressed herself on a very basic level. I think that since she did not know that I could also speak a little bit of Chinese, she felt particularly confident in front of me. I know from my mother’s example who has struggled with English ever since we came to New Zealand, the language barrier for her is only a problem if she is with someone who can speak better than she can. She loses confidence

and becomes extremely nervous and forgets even basics. However, she says that when she is alone, she uses all her vocabulary, is not afraid of using different phrases and practicing with sentence construction. However, there are many people who are not afraid to speak in a foreign language incorrectly. I know many Russians who speak with a strong Russian accent after living in New Zealand for a long time and feel confident in communicating with others. For these people, it is much easier to adapt to a new culture. For these people, it seems easier to make a new 'home' in a foreign country, as knowing the language is a tremendous advantage for social communication and establishment of social networks. Language is inseparable from culture and its aspects as everything is closely tied to language. If one does not know the language, it is very difficult to feel truly at 'home'.

### **Realisations: about creating or not creating 'home'**

At some stage, doing this research, I wondered why many transmigrants including my research participants refuse to learn local language in order to feel at 'home' in a foreign country. Then I realised that this might be because they deny the possibility of constructing a new 'home', and new social networks using a different language with people of a different culture. They keep tight to their native 'homes'. They assimilate with other Russians, watch Russian movies and speak Russian in their workplace. In other words, they bring their culture to China (or New Zealand); they bring their 'homes'. At the same time they do not set up a physical 'home' as comfortably as they could compared to the cases found in Bonisch-Brednich and Trundle (2010) book *Local lives: Migration and the Politics of Place*. In other words, my research participants do not make roots. My research participants resist constructing a new 'home' which will involve reconstructing previous ideas and beliefs, learning a new language and finding Chinese friends. They create a local space in a new place. Appadurai (1996) argues that place is becoming irrelevant as a factor in forming community, deterritorialisation emerges and results in loosening of the holds between people, wealth, and the territories. However, I argue that having more than one site of material life is not irrelevant for my research participants. In fact, this factor helped to establish the Russian community of teachers in Heihe. These people communicate as colleagues at work, as friends and neighbours in their free time, some of them closer than others. People are united through a common situation in which they were placed when they came to Heihe. The community of Russian teachers that has been formed shows the choices people make when they come to Heihe. So they communicate together at work and outside of work, they do not have close Chinese friends in their community, they speak Chinese badly, they share Russian movies and books in their free time and more importantly, all of them

share memories about Russia. Their memories and nostalgia unite them, making this particular place relevant and important for them, even if they will leave it one day.

I found that my research participants were having difficulty in defining ‘what is home for them?’ and what decided home whether materiality or the other things which have been discussed in this chapter. So they were giving me dual replies, which in the end, left them and myself confused about finding some type of truth, if it exists. Throughout our conversations, they were giving me different meanings of ‘home’ for them. At the end of our interviews, and after reading my fieldnotes, I started to think, that defining and distinguishing ‘what factors are more salient?’ for the perception of ‘home’ will not bring clarity to this issue. Mainly, this is because the concept of ‘home’ is not static, it is a complex term which is not just about one aspect or another, it is about many small and distinct things which come to mind when we think about ‘home’. It is a complex term. Thus, it cannot be just about materiality or just about social aspects and our imaginary ideas about ‘home’. It is about everything that we think of ‘home’ and things that are connected with the concept of ‘home’. I cannot say that social communication, the presence or absence of family, and other factors are more influential than materiality of physical places or food which were explored in the previous chapter. In fact, I found, based on the example of my research participants and my own experience, that these social factors complement the material side of ‘home-making’ and should be considered together for the general perception of ‘home’. My research participants’ ideas about ‘home’ seemed fluid to me. It was not until I found in the literature that instability, fluidity, uncertainty are a common theme, prevailing among most transmigrants that I could better understand my research participants’ responses. Pourmehdi (2001, p.7) points out that, “once they are caught within different cultures, they can never return untouched to the certainty (if that ever existed) of their traditional beliefs and ways of life”. I know through my own experience, I will never be able to return to the way of life I had before I came to New Zealand for the first time. My research participants also pointed out that they are different people now. Moreover, not just their perception of ‘home’ has changed but also their perception of life has changed forever.

## **Conclusion**

In the previous chapter, I have shown the meaning and importance of physical places for my research participants, which implied that these places are fixed localities. However, other aspects of home-making which are also used for construction and reconstruction of ideas about ‘home’ also appeared to be significant for the perception of ‘home’. These aspects imply that the locality of ‘home’ can go outside of physical boundaries. This chapter explored how the movement and

transmigration as a part of our everyday life makes 'home' more than just a physical place. Three women have provided three different examples of constituting 'home' and relating to 'home' from a perspective of being in-between two countries at the same time. Their memories, feelings of nostalgia, senses and imaginations are constantly reminding them about their 'homes' in Russia, which results in the creation of local spaces in a new place. All of my research participants pointed out that this helps them connect the past and the present which is reflected in the role of the family and family ties for their perception of 'home'. Also, it has been found that the role of language is also important as it helps to feel confident and secure in a foreign country, in other words, to feel at 'home'. This chapter has also discussed how the emergence of information technologies is shrinking distances and are to experience places without leaving 'home' which is also significant for my research participants. I have also included my own reflections and experience of relating to 'home', being in many ways, in a similar position to my research participants.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

Three women Lana, Elena and Katerina, three cases, similar and different to each other at the same time, as they are united by a common situation. They possess unique memories about their past and they experience nostalgia from time to time of their native 'homes'. They came to Heihe to teach Russian in Heihe University, all having different reasons to do so. Lana wanted to start living an independent life, being unable to find work and settle in Blagoveshensk and unwilling to live in her 'home' town. For Elena, migration gave an opportunity to continue living a full life, as she was of a retirement age and working in her university in Russia was no longer possible for different reasons. For Katerina, moving to Heihe allowed her to change her lifestyle as she needed a different scene from the alienation created by her work in Russia. Bringing her children to Heihe was also a brave step, which brought changes to the whole family.

In their interviews, these women shared their life stories with me, some of them I got to know more than others, but all left a part of themselves in my heart. I took their stories personally, maybe, too personally, as I started to re-think my own life situation and looked at my perception of 'home' through the lenses of their lives. I was fascinated by a strong character of Elena who revealed to be a very sentimental and sensitive woman by the end of our interview. I enjoyed spending time with Katerina and her children, who happily shared with me their impressions of new toys and books that they got from Russia. I also became a very close friend with Lana with whom I still communicate with when time allows.

All three women came to Heihe seeking changes and a better life, which in turn influenced on their perception of reality and is reflected in their ideas about 'home'. My research participants pointed out that Heihe could not replace their Russian 'homes', but since they all experienced a need for finding their own place, they had to reconstruct their ideas and thoughts about this issue. I found that their unwillingness to learn Chinese, the building block that could give them an ability to communicate with Chinese people freely, and to fully engage with the Chinese culture, meant that they resisted constructing a new 'home' which would involve reconstructing previous ideas and beliefs. Their stories provided an example of creating local space in a new place. These women are found in localities to which they belong, but global process did not leave them untouched either. Information technologies challenge ideas about places and distances, so 'home' can be experienced without a need for physical mobility. So distances between native and host 'homes' are shrinking; people and places can be seen not only in the imaginations of transmigrants but visually, for example, through Skype video calls.

'Homes' are not static, as my research participants indicated. Instability, fluidity and uncertainty are a common theme, prevailing amongst most transmigrants. So the definition of 'home' is complex and there is no single and universal answer to questions surrounding issues around 'home'. This is not just about one aspect or another, as found in the literature on transmigration, but it is about many different things – both material and non-material, small and big, visible and invisible. It is about movement and fixedness.

So "home" is both mobile and fixed at the same time, it is "neither here nor there, rather it is a hybrid, it is both here and there – an amalgam, a pastiche, a performance" (Bammer, 1992: ix). Lana, Katerina and Elena call both Russian and Chinese places their 'home'. In Heihe they perform their usual roles – of a mother, of a teacher, of a sister, of a friend - as they did in Russia. They are engaged in the daily activities such as cooking, teaching at the university, and watching Russian movies. At the same time, they let me know that a 'home' is no longer fully there (in Russia) and it cannot be here (in Heihe) forever, since they all plan to leave Heihe one day. However, they do not think about these issues all the time. As many other transmigrants or 'displaced people', they "find home in a routine of practices, a repetition of habitual interactions, in memories, and stories carried around in their heads" (Allan & Crow 1989; Berger 1984 cited in Nowicka, 2007, p.72). So they are immersed in day-to-day tasks and this is another way of constituting 'home'.

My own ideas about home have been reconstructed in the process of the reading and writing up fieldwork. However, listening to my research participants' stories I started to question my own perception of what makes a 'home', for me. I have not thought about the topic of 'home' in the research participants imagine it. Their interpretation of the concept of 'home' gave me an ability to apply that to my own life situation. Also, I realized that the perception of 'home' is not fixed and can change over time. Besides that I found that perception of 'home' in different contexts and meanings creates a complex set of interconnected parts – so there is no single way of perceiving the concept of 'home'. 'Home' as a physical space, 'home' as a part of cultural identity, 'home' as a family and many others – all constitute the concept of home.

Also, it appeared that my research participants were not aware to what extent each of these factors determined the strength of their attachment to their original and host homes. My own insight into this is greatly influenced by my own positioning, as I am able to reflect from the position of being an insider and outsider at the same time (the position which is unavailable to them). Also, the ability to see my own situation through the lenses of their stories gives me more ways of understanding and interpreting my own situation.



In Chapter 3, I introduced my research participants, in the form of three different individual cases. Through descriptions of their lives in Russia, their families and work, together with my research participants I have traced back changes in their lives, from the time they moved to Heihe. I have included their voice in the text to show their own interpretation of issues surrounding 'home'. Chapter 4 explored the meaning of materiality for the making of home, including the meaning of food; the importance of physical places where my research participants now live or lived before. These physical places contain a wide range of symbolic objects which carry memories. Of course, it is not just about physical places and materiality. Chapter 5 explored how the movement and transmigration as a part of our everyday life, makes 'home' more than just a physical place. All of my research participants pointed out that memories about their 'homes' helps them connect the past and the present which is reflected in the role of the family and family ties, social communication and language for their perception of 'home'.

My own experience has been shared and I also used my reflections throughout my research. I have constructed and reconstructed my thoughts and ideas about my 'home'. I have questioned my way of life which involves an unceasing process of arriving and leaving, remembering and forgetting. This changes people tremendously, without a chance to remain untouched. My research participants told me the same. At some point of my research, I realized that my research participants' stories are a powerful way to learn about myself and my own experiences.

My own positioning in this research has been beneficial since I have been to Heihe many times being originally from Blagoveshensk, and I now live in New Zealand for six months of every year. So throughout the research I was both a participant and a researcher of my own study. The main weakness in my research was the limited time for fieldwork and the inability to engage fully in day-to-day interactions with my research participants: to visit their work place, and to participate in their activities after work. In other words, to live their lives as they do. Although, I am also a transmigrant, the particularities of the localities to which we belong are different so I could not always relate to my research participants in the same way.

All people learn from their mistakes, so I have recorded some of the issues that I want to remember for my future fieldwork and pay attention to them in the future. One of the issues is that getting too close with research participants can be problematic. I am a very emotional person, so I take everything too close to my heart. Every problem they shared with me, every story they told me on the topic of the research and outside of the research topic, I let through to myself. They treated me as a friend and I wanted to be their friend, but this can be emotionally very hard. As Turner (1987) points out in one of the chapters of her ethnography – "I've

managed to entangle myself into it without being able to get out” (Turner, 1987, p.31). So I believe, the researcher must have the freedom “to get out” after the fieldwork is completed. If, for instance, a doctor would take each patients’ illness too close to his heart, he or she could go crazy. Rosaldo (1993) argues that if distance has certain advantages, so too does closeness; and both have their deficits. The advantages of distance, or of being a ‘detached observer’ can arguably produce objectivity because social reality comes into focus only if one stands at a certain distance. However, when one stands too close “the ethnographic lens supposedly blurs its human subjects” (Rosaldo, 1993, p.171). In this view, the researcher must remove observer bias by becoming the emotional, cognitive, and moral. However, as Rosaldo (1993) further argues anthropologists should explore their subjects from a number of positions rather than being locked into any particular one.

This research is beneficial as it explores the experiences of this particular group of multi-local people and their relationship to ‘home’ and ‘host’ country which will add a useful dimension to the understanding of other Russian migrants who live in Heihe. Besides that, the experiences of these people will add to general ideas of the concept of translocality in other countries across the world. For this particular border region, further research would be of interest to explore lives of transmigrant entrepreneurs who comprise a great percentage of all transmigrants who come to Heihe. These people are more ‘mobile’ than my research participants, as their lives are in constant ‘movement’ so they could provide a different perspective on this issue.

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