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Representing Foreignness: Encounters in the Sino-Russian Borderlands

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REPRESENTING FOREIGNNESS:
ENCOUNTERS IN THE SINO-RUSSIAN BORDERLANDS

Karolina Koziol

A DISSERTATION
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Advisers: John W. Borneman and Serguei A. Oushakine

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Abstract

This dissertation examines concepts of foreignness as they are lived, experienced, and reproduced in the contact zone in the borderlands of two empires. It is based on 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork with Russian migrants and local residents in Northern China between 2017 and 2019, as well as three months in Siberia and the Russian Far East in 2016. Tracing the tensions between colonial heritage as a generative component of local identity and the contemporary presence of a new wave of Russian migrants in the Chinese Northeast, I focus on the idea of “Russian presence” that is both physical and symbolic, as well as reproduced in media and tourism industry.

Set against the backdrop of the complex history of Sino-Russian relations and shifting power dynamics that included periods of colonization, this study is further contextualized by China’s rapid social and economic changes, the rise of China as an international migrant destination, and the legal landscape that determines the treatment of foreigners and the foreign. By attending to these entangled phenomena, “Representing Foreignness” asks how “Russianness” can be an integral part of placemaking in a country that otherwise attempts to control “foreign influence” over its territory and culture; and how contemporary migrants negotiate their livelihoods between these conflicting trends. More broadly, this dissertation is located at the intersection of postcolonial, postsocialist and borderland studies. It also discusses challenges of conducting ethnographic fieldwork under the condition of mistrust.

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Note on Language and Spelling

For Chinese, simplified characters are used with transliteration in pinyin without tone marks. For transliteration of Russian, I follow the Library of Congress standards in a simplified form without diacritic signs and ligatures; I also provide the spelling in Cyrillic when relevant.

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Introduction

“They come here from Khabarovsk, Vladivostok, and small villages; for them, this is already *zagrantsa* (Russian: abroad, foreign land).” Natasha did not try to hide her judgment as she offered me her explanation as to why Harbin had so much appeal for migrants from the Russian Far East. In fact, we were just talking about Chinese-Russian marriages, but Natasha brought interpersonal relations to a macro, geopolitical scale: marrying Chinese men and moving to China was common among Russian women because China seemed foreign, attractive. Unlike their counterparts from the Western part of the country like herself, these women cannot recognize real, proper *zagrantsa*, she maintained. Maybe they do not realize that Harbin is not that foreign; maybe they have not had a chance yet to learn that other places are more of what “abroad” should be. In any case, their visions of being abroad were myopic.

Natasha had a simple explanation as to why Russian women marry Chinese men. They think that China is abroad, and, in the strong Chinese economy, the men make good money, which further solidifies the impression that this is *zagrantsa*. The sentiment that the terms of Chinese-Russian interpersonal relationships were first and foremost dictated by the diplomatic relations between the countries is something that I had heard many times (see Pulford 2021), albeit only from my Russian interlocutors. It was not only that

both states signed the official policy of Sino-Russian Friendship in 2001.¹ It was rather that my Russian interlocutors believed that the intimate dimension of interpersonal relationships would always be impacted by the diplomatic relations between the countries. Another interlocutor believed that the attitude with which an individual migrant in China was treated was to be read as a barometer for the general political atmosphere.

“It is this way: If their president says we are good, then they like us,” she said, effectively removing any personal agency or judgment from the equation on the Chinese part and falling into the same category herself. Perhaps, unsurprisingly, the question of Chinese-Russian marriages was also to be perceived through the lens of spatial mobility and geopolitical power imbalances. While I will return to the discussion on how personal encounters were mediated through “reified notions of culture (Pulford 2021: 695)” as well as essentialized categories of nationality and national “spirit,” I want to focus here on the notion of “foreignness” as a value or an aspiration.

It is the concepts of foreignness that this dissertation examines as they are lived, experienced and reproduced in the contact zones (Pratt 1991) of the Sino-Russian borderlands, such as the region’s biggest city, Harbin, and the border towns of Manzhouli and Heihe.

¹ Officially, Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation Between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation (“PA-X: Peace Agreements Database” n.d.). In 2021 the treaty was extended for another 5 years after its original expiration date in 2022 (Reuters 2021).

The foreign was clearly not just anything that was beyond the border – but what was it then? Why was Harbin not foreign enough for Natasha? Did she assume that Northern China should seem less “foreign” to these coming from across the border, from the Russian Far East and Siberia? What made a place real *zagranitsa* if not the international state border and the distance – did the distance even matter?

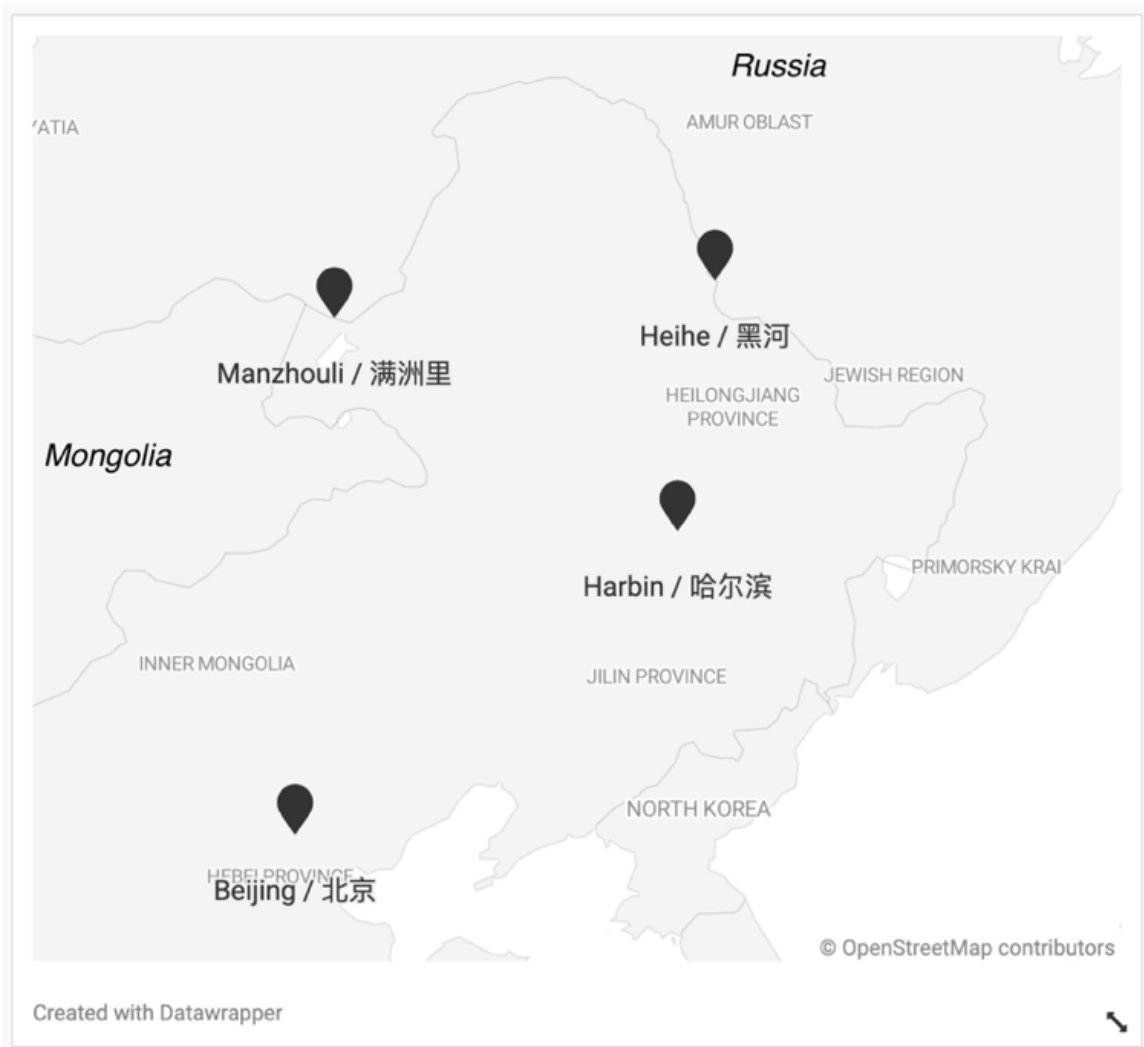


Figure 1: Map of Northern China. Figure by the author, created with datawrapper.de.

It could be easy to brush this judgment off as a display of the perceived superiority of the Western, “European” part of Russia (or sometimes just the metropolitan region of Moscow and St. Petersburg) over the rest of the country: a sign of a national divide that my interlocutors spoke about sometimes, claiming that “people in Moscow do not know anything about us.” But even so, why was the term “foreign” so emotionally and morally charged?

As a matter of fact, we were both abroad. This fact was not easy to overlook: We both had to secure visas for our respective stays in China, a daunting task at times. At the time, I was a holder of a student visa that gave me the opportunity to conduct my ethnographic fieldwork in China, and Natasha had a long-term business visa that allowed her to run her own business between China and Russia. Different types of visas, their validity and the time they allowed one to spend in China was a quite common conversation topic for my interlocutors and me. So was learning and speaking Chinese, a Sinitic language that was so different from Russian, a Slavic language. Did one really need more reminders that this is a foreign country?

Yet, *zagranitsa*, a word that lacks a clear translation into English but “literally means beyond the border and in practice means ‘that which is abroad’ (Yurchak 2006: 158)” clearly denoted something more than simply what is outside of a country’s borders. This itself is hardly a revelatory statement: As Alexei Yurchak already showed in his analysis in

“Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More,” in the Soviet Union, *zagraniitsa* “signified an imaginary place that was simultaneously knowable and unattainable, tangible and abstract, mundane and exotic (2006: 159).” In other words, it was a locally rendered product of people’s cosmopolitan desires confronted with limited mobility potential. At first glance, I could pose the question of the – yet another – local version of imaginary foreignness fueled by cosmopolitan desires and hampered by local limitations. However, here in Harbin, in 2018, some cosmopolitan desires must have been realized to some extent: after all, we were both *there*. The *real* “abroad” could be encountered and experienced, or it could be misread and misrecognized like in Natasha’s judgment. Whatever it was, it was a powerful object and a subject of constant reconfiguring.

The question of this imaginary foreignness, or rather, the question of various, sometimes conflicting, versions of foreignness is central to this examination. I show that the cosmopolitan imaginaries are not always, as scholars such as Yurchak and the anthropologist Ivan Small (2012) showed, a direct product of denied mobility. They might be, on the contrary, fueled by the existing mobility modes where the local and provincial becomes alluringly conceptualized as global (Pulford 2021: 701). As I will show, these imaginaries might even be preferable to the actually existing, available mobility options.

Given the complex history of Sino-Russian relations and shifting demarcation lines (Billé, Delaplace, and Humphrey 2012, Billé 2016, Urbansky 2012, 2020), who and what was foreign in this region is far from self-evident. Harbin was founded in 1898 as an

administrative base for the Russian-owned Chinese Eastern Railway. Since then, Northern China experienced the Russian/Soviet presence in many forms: from settlers and colonizers, exiles, “the older brother” and a benevolent guide to socialism, to poorer neighbors who abandoned socialism. Throughout the last decades, not unlike other major cities in China, Harbin hosted thousands of migrants from the Russian Federation, who organized their own cultural and social life. But the afterlife of the Russian colonial heritage took an interesting turn (if not a detour): in Harbin and throughout the Northeast, a number of Russian-themed tourist attractions popped up. Some of these spaces draw upon the historical presence of foreigners; some seem to be devoid of any discernible link to anything in the past or even the present. This tension between Russian heritage as a generative component of local identity, the colonial reality of the Russian past (Koga 2008, 2016, Zatsepine and Victoir 2012), and the contemporary presence of Russian migrants in the region is central to my dissertation.

In the background of my research is the long tradition of curbing and shaping foreign influences in China, whether pre-1949 or in the PRC. Scholars such as Anne-Marie Brady (2000, 2003) and Yan Li (2018) showed how the foreign had been used as a political tool by the Chinese government. When I conducted my fieldwork in 2018-2019, it was visible that China attempts to control almost every facet of “foreignness” and “foreign influence” over its territory and culture. By investigating how it is possible that “Russianness” can be an integral part of not only local identity (Peshkov 2018, Wang and Wang 2017) but also

placemaking, I arrive at the central question this dissertation attempts to clarify: What is “foreignness” in Harbin? And what does it stand for?

The Others and the Foreign

The foreignness, to draw from Julia Kristeva, “can only be defined in negative fashion (1991: 95).” It is a concept that is “always relative to the inside, the domestic, the familiar, a boundary (Saunders 2003: 3).” The question of what is foreign is a search for - or an attempt at establishing - boundaries, just as assigning the label of foreign to someone or something is to decide what is familiar, domestic, one’s own – and what the object is *not*. In the contact zones, everyone becomes an Other, as “just because one is a foreigner does not mean one is without one’s own foreigner (Kristeva 1991: 24).” In the world captured by this ethnography national categories play a significant role; especially citizenship, the state-recognized and enforced difference.

The concept of foreign is marked by “remarkable semantic fluidity (Saunders 2003: 9),” as it “may refer to an experience, a state, an attribute, a concept, a metaphysical status or a species. More often than not, it refers to some theoretically unholy mixture of such meanings (Saunders 2003: 9).” The foreign that is the object of this study is indeed characterized by such fluidity. What is it opposed to, then? What is the counter-concept of the foreign (Koselleck 1985)? On the most superficial level of analysis, the foreigner is one that is not a PRC citizen or one that is not a Russian. Yet, there are degrees of foreignness,

as foreignness is a value (Saunders 2003: 8). Just one example of this is the distinction many of my interlocutors evoked: between the closer and further *zagranitsa*. The former was, generally speaking, the countries of the former Soviet Union, the latter everything else. Once, an interlocutor said that it is “prestigious” to live abroad (*zhit’ za granitsej prestizhno*). I asked whether every foreign country counted. Some of the countries that were considered prestigious were Germany, France, Italy, Spain, America, Canada, China, Japan and Korea. But China was only prestigious if one worked here, as in, held a proper work visa. And working in China was especially prestigious if it was not close to the border.

Legal Landscapes of Foreignness

On another, superficial level of analysis, the quest of studying defining and negotiating foreignness, foreigners or anything foreign in China might seem redundant. After all, one glance at the Chinese law system will reveal that there is a distinct - although sometimes confusing - set of practices and requirements for the foreign nationals. Given the Chinese state’s official attempts to clearly delineate the boundary between its citizens and foreign nationals (Barabantseva 2019), the subject of foreignness might even seem self-explanatory. With the ever-expanding state bureaucracy in the PRC, this question is perfectly suited for legal (anthropology) or political sciences research, especially given the nuanced distinctions between citizens of the PRC, citizens of Hong Kong Special Autonomous Region, Macao SAR and Taiwan, so-called “overseas Chinese” (foreign

citizens of Chinese descent, *huaren*²) and then “other” foreigners (Y. Liu 2021), each of whom is subject to other rules.³ Upon arrival at any international airport in Mainland China, one will see that departures and arrivals are divided into domestic and – unsurprisingly – international, with an addendum: “Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan,” reflecting the PRC’s official policy of “One Country, Two Systems.” This nuanced boundary already indicates that the foreigners are not simply outsiders or that the boundary is constantly re-drawn.

Nevertheless, the shifting legal landscape is always in the background, as my interlocutors tried to negotiate and take advantage of what is permitted and what is possible. As a researcher and a fellow foreign national in China, I also tried to follow and adjust to the rules. At the risk of stating the obvious: in every country, certain rights and privileges depend on citizenship status, but in the People’s Republic of China, an individual’s citizenship opens up a completely different legal landscape that in turn shapes their everyday experience (Barabantseva 2019). The citizenship rules over various aspects of life: from, perhaps least surprisingly, employment, schools they can attend,⁴ real estate market, to sometimes even access to hotels, or, however rarely, special tourist attractions.

² For a discussion on the terms 华人 *huaren* and 华侨 *huaqiao* (Chinese citizens overseas) see Suryadinata (2017).

³ For more information, see Yen-Fen and Wu (2011).

⁴ There are certain limitations in place for both PRC and foreign nationals: for example, Chinese nationals can only enroll in private “international” schools that teach a specific curriculum, but only certain public school accept foreign nationals. I discuss this further in Chapter 5.

Most notably for my research, one of such attractions is the Chinese Border Gate park in Manzhouli that is located too close to the actual international border with the Russian Federation.

Finally, the Chinese immigration policy offers few opportunities for long-term, stable residency. Ten-year long residence permits (so-called green cards) are still rare and hard to get. Naturalization pathways exist only for foreign nationals who “have settled in China, or are near relatives of Chinese nationals, or have other legitimate reasons (Low 2021: 503),⁵ yet the requirements are notoriously hard to meet (Barabantseva 2019: 454, n.9). Like many other countries, China does not allow dual citizenship (Low 2021). Children who would be eligible for two passports (for example, by coming from Chinese-Russian marriages) have to eventually decide on their citizenship; yet until then they are often considered solely Chinese citizens by the PRC authorities.⁶ At the same time, were they to be treated as foreign nationals, such children would not enjoy full rights to public schooling and other social services (Barabantseva 2019).

Nevertheless, to brush “foreignness” off either as merely bureaucratic categories or as subjective identification would be detrimental not only to our understanding of the society in the People’s Republic of China, and the Chinese Northeast in particular, but also to our understanding of the anthropological terms such as Otherness and foreignness. While the

⁵ The first category of foreigners might be limited to citizens of Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan.

⁶ I was told that the age to pick the passport and declare citizenship was 14.

legal considerations constitute a significant component of my dissertation, I want to pose another set of questions. China is not a monolith; it is a country that is culturally, linguistically, geographically and economically diverse. While the rule is relatively centralized, the actual execution of the law (and even local legislation, to an extent) can differ. In this dissertation, I focus on a region that has its own long, complicated relationship with foreignness. In other words, the particular socioeconomic and historical conditions of the Sino-Russian borderlands make it a place ideal for a study of the different, sometimes conflicting constructions of foreignness.

Capturing the Data

The ethnographic fieldwork for this dissertation took place between May 2018 and July 2019. It was preceded by short-term research trips to Siberia and Russian Far East in the summer of 2016 and to Northern China in 2017. The time period is not without relevance here: As such, this work focuses on a specific historical period that is now sometimes referred to as “pre-pandemic” or “pre-COVID-19,” - a period just before the disruption that the global pandemic brought on. This is extremely significant for the study of the People’s Republic of China as the country was locked down less than a half a year after my departure. That meant that the borders were effectively shut down, ending any international travel. Whereas citizens coming from abroad and foreign nationals on select visas would eventually be allowed in - after a round of tests and quarantine - other

foreigners found themselves locked out of the country. As the PRC started to reopen and allow foreign nationals in, the newly admitted foreigners were not necessarily the same group that left at the beginning of the pandemic. All the previously valid visas were deemed suspended or expired and not eligible for re-admission (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2020). I cannot answer how this impacted the phenomena I examine in this dissertation, but I suspect that a lot of the trans-border traffic vanished. Foreign nationals who worked on proper work visas were often able to stay.

My doctoral fieldwork captured life as it was before the outbreak of COVID-19. While the pandemic-related restrictions imposed around the world and especially in China might make this data look irrelevant or outdated, I argue that my research did provide an insight into social relationships and attitudes that were only intensified by the dramatic events of late 2019 and onwards. I can only speculate that the newly imposed immobility caused the “foreign” themed spaces and phenomena to flourish. However, it is not just the soon-to-be denied mobility and shutdowns around the world that make this time period relevant for the research of migration and imaginaries of the foreign. Although I had no way of knowing it at the moment, the time of my fieldwork (2018-2019) was the period where the record high number of foreigners working in China was noted; almost one million foreign nationals (Richter 2020). Of course, one million becomes less significant compared to the total number of Chinese population; it is still less than one percent.

But, as every anthropologist would probably attest, statistics and numbers do not tell

us the whole story. In fact, any attempts to measure “the number of foreigners” or migrant flows will crash against the lack of a clear definition of who *lives* in China. The legal criteria for a “resident” are based on the residence permit, issued for any period between six months, and would exclude a number of people who nevertheless stay in China for an extended period. Currently, Harbin hosts several thousand Russian nationals. While a community member estimated this number to be around 20,000 to 30,000 people in 2019, the actual number is impossible to determine; it might as well be 10,000 or less. Given that the PRC rarely issues permanent residence permits, also sometimes called [Chinese] green cards, any estimate would depend on multiple criteria. The most essential question would be what constitutes “living in Harbin.” Do full-time university students live in Harbin? Exchange students? What about people frequently travelling between China and Russia who do not hold temporary residence permits?⁷ From a legal standpoint, a person that goes on regular visa runs, this is, crosses the border every 30 days to “reset” their immigration clock, is not a resident, but do they live in China? The very definition of what an established life is remains one of the threads in this dissertation.

A popular term for Chinese domestic migrant population is 流动人口 *liudong renkou*, floating population. The name has been originally coined for domestic migrants traveling

⁷ However, the 2020 Population Census, once detailed data is released, should provide more information on the number of foreign nationals living in China, albeit only these “qualified.” Heilongjiang is not listed in the top 10 provinces with the highest foreign population size, so it must have had less than 20562 officially registered foreign residents in the tenth province on the list, Liaoning (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2021b).

throughout the country in search of work and opportunities yet barred from permanently settling down in the city due to their *hukou* status (household registration system) that ties them down to the countryside. According to the Chinese National Census, floating population is defined as “population who lived in places other than their household registration areas (Ning 2021).” Without delving into the intricacies of the household registration system, it is important to point out that it effectively divides the Chinese population into two groups yielding asymmetrical powers. Holders of urban hukous enjoy more mobility with a certain spatial hierarchy (and are, theoretically, free to move to the countryside); the rural hukou holders are subjected to significant limitations. In her book “Strangers in the City,” the anthropologist Li Zhang maintains (to simplify her argument) that the presence of the floating population has resulted in a creation of “a new mode of governmentality in managing a third kind of subjects... neither strictly rural nor urban (2001: 3).” As she points out, the word *liudong* has two meanings: the first translating to “lively and unencumbered; the other is to be rootless, unstable, and dangerous (L. Zhang 2001: 33).” In English, the word “floating” can denote movement, as workers who are (seemingly) mobile, always on the move, following factories and seasonal jobs. But “floating” might also mean the state of not being captured in statistics and controlled by either the rural or the urban administration (L.Zhang 2001: 27). Both notions invoke a rapture from stability, lack of attachment to a certain physical location. Similarly, there are foreigners in China who come on tourist visas, visa waivers or business visas sponsored

by institutions that might or might not be their legitimate business partners. By the law, holders of these visas do not need the temporary residence permit; even if they prefer to have it, they are ineligible for it. Technically, they might not live in China, as in “establish their residence.” While I do not want to create a parallel between rural migrants and foreign citizens in the city (as different within and to each other as they are⁸), there is the aspect of relative (in)visibility that both groups share. Similarly to the domestic “floating” migrants who settle down in cities without local *hukous*, the foreigners without permanent residence permits are present and visible in everyday life. I build on this discussion in Chapter 1 by showing how the notion of “floating” can be also applied to migrants’ strategies of (non)socializing and building limited social networks, based on suspension of trust.

This quantitative data does, however, provide us with much-needed background information when combined with other numbers: namely, the population number and density on both sides of the border. The Far Eastern Federal District, a region that borders the Heilongjiang Province in the north – and takes around 40% of Russia’s land area – has merely 8 million residents. Given the vast area and location in the Arctic Circle, the low population density is no surprise; nevertheless, the biggest city is Vladivostok with

⁸ As Li Zhang (2001: 30) points out, “People classified under this category often do not view themselves as sharing any fundamental common traits or class consciousness.” Neither do foreign residents in China, at least as far as I can attest from my fieldwork.

around 600,000 residents. West of the Far East is the administrative region of Siberia⁹ with 17 million residents. In comparison, the Heilongjiang Province, far from the most populous in China, has around 32 million people in an area that would compare to less than one tenth of the Russian Far East's territory. Of course, this is not to claim that the departure of 10,000 people would make a significant dent in the population of the Russian Far East. Rather, my goal is to highlight the vastly different demographic circumstances on both sides of the border that provide some insight into the allure of the cities in the Chinese Northeast.

The focus on statistics and numbers helps me flesh out one crucial question: If there is only – hypothetically – 15,000 migrants from Russia in Harbin, why does it matter? This new wave of migrants might seem insignificant compared to the over 7 million or more of Chinese residents of Harbin. Nevertheless, consisting largely of Slavic people, the group of “non-citizen ethnic Others (Pulford 2022: 38)” remains visible in an otherwise relatively homogenous city. I am convinced, however, that it is not merely the demographic data that makes the topic of Russian migration to China particularly important. Rather, it is the destination of these migration flows: firstly, it does not attract any other major group; secondly, it used to be ruled by Russia.

⁹ Not to be confused with the historical region of Siberia that spreads east of the Ural Mountains to the Pacific Ocean: my interlocutors surely distinguished if they were coming from Siberia or the Russian Far East.



Figure 2: Major cities and border crossings in the region.

Figure by the author, created with datawrapper.de.

Domestic Brain Drain, International Destination

Historically, China has been considered a migrant-sending country. At times, the country barely allowed foreigners; for decades, the PRC mostly hosted foreign diplomats, experts and teachers (Brady 2003, Kurto 2013). In the wake of the opening up reform, China became an attractive international migrant destination (S. Lan 2022, Pieke 2012), and Harbin hosts several thousands of Russian nationals again. This might not seem surprising, but there is a certain paradox in the foreign presence in Harbin. Generally speaking, the whole Northeast region does not attract many migrants. In fact, it struggles

to keep the existing population in place.

After the founding of People's Republic of China, Harbin and the Northeast became the major industrial base of the country, which, combined with a relatively small population numbers, facilitated an influx of workers from other regions. For years, the economic growth in Northern China depended on resources extraction and heavy industry (Cho 2013), and these played such a crucial role in Chinese economy that the region was called “eldest son” of the republic. Similarly to postsocialist countries in Eastern Europe, state-owned enterprises (SOE) in China went through a process of restructuring in the 1990s. As elsewhere, some SOEs went bankrupt; given their high concentration in the Northeast, the region experienced a wave of mass layoffs (Cho 2013: 27-28).

Heilongjiang's population is shrinking and aging, and the percentage of persons with higher education degrees is lower than the national average (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2021a).¹⁰ In Harbin, it might be easier to meet a migrant from Khabarovsk than a transplant from Beijing or Guangzhou: at least I have never met one. Rather, I met middle aged parents whose children moved to Shanghai, or university students who were planning to look for jobs in the South. Even the Harbin Institute of Technology, a prestigious technical university, had its branch in Shenzhen. Once, an acquaintance of mine posted a link to an online forum, where users discussed a pressing question: “Is there

¹⁰ Based on data from the 7th National Census that took place in 2020.

hope for the Chinese Northeast? (Zhihu.com n.d.)” The first answer was “No” ending with the statement “It just feels like life [there] has neither quality, nor dignity, nor a sense of security.”¹¹

These characteristics paint a somewhat gloomy picture: in both popular and academic English-language press, the Northeast is even called “the Rust Belt of China” and Harbin is compared to Detroit.¹² Yet, this moniker remains contested (Global Times 2016). It is easy to notice that the city lacks a robust business sector, or characteristics such as the global finances of Shanghai or the concentration of money and wealth typical for the capital city Beijing. It did not develop an IT industry, such as Hangzhou or Shenzhen. Lacking access to sea, it did not “bounce back” like Dalian, another city in the Northeast (that was also ruled by Japan and Russia in the past). Nevertheless, the economic situation in Harbin has to be seen in the context of the rapid development of the whole country. Xuefei Ren, a professor of global urban studies, classified it “not as a city in decline so much as a city playing catch-up.” She stated that “[Harbin] is still developing, just nowhere near as quickly as first-tier cities like Beijing and Shanghai” (Y.-L. Liu 2019).

It is important to note here the tier-system used to classify cities in China. It is not an official government ranking, but rather a shorthand used by analysts, who take into account the GDP, local administration systems, infrastructure, population size and other

¹¹ In Chinese: 就是感觉生活的既没有质量，也没有尊严，还没有安全感。

¹² See the research project “Detroit in China.”

factors (Juan and Laine 2019, The Rising Lab 2019).¹³ The rankings might vary depending on the purpose and the target group (let's say, venture capitalists versus English teachers versus IT outsourcing), but the idea of highly stratified space remains. As of now, whether Harbin is considered a second-tier city or not, young people, particularly high-skilled workers, leave the area at noticeable rates. They usually aim for Shanghai, the Southern coast or Beijing (Jiang 2017). The Liaoning, Jilin and Heilongjiang provinces have net out-migration and a very low natural increase rate.

Yet, the northern provinces are still considered an attractive migration destination for migrants from Siberia and the Far East, regions that are also peripheral to wealthier, metropolitan centers within Russia and the larger global economy. The migration from Russia does not solve the structural issues causing the brain drain. Neither can it replace the population loss caused by the out-migration of local residents. However, since a qualified work visa holder has to have at least a bachelor's degree, many Russian migrants coming to the city are educated. Nevertheless, it seems to be common knowledge that with a background in business or IT sciences it is better to seek employment in the South.

The broad subject of international migration to China is currently gaining some recognition among scholars. However, while so called first-tier cities – the ones characterized by the highest economic development and political significance, such as

¹³ For an overview and visualization, see Hernández and Bland (2016).

Beijing or Shanghai – unsurprisingly attract the biggest numbers of foreign workers and students (as well as young residents of Northern China), scholarship focusing on this specific demographic only tells a part of the story. Besides the geographical focus on the first-tier cities, the existing studies run into another set of limitations, also caused by the interest in a certain vision of “global” or “cosmopolitan.” By this, I mean that the existing research on migration to China tends to focus on predominantly Western elite “expats,” highlighting China’s role as a postsocialist recipient of Western globalizing efforts (Farrer 2019, Lehmann 2014, Yeoh and Willis 2005). Even as Angela Lehmann discusses in her ethnography of foreigners living in Xiamen what she calls “meddling migrants,” it is largely people coming from the West: Western Europe, North America, and Australia. Another significant trend is research on African traders traveling to Guangdong (Castillo 2016; S. Lan 2015, 2017a, 2017b; Lin, Yang, and Mathews 2017; Mathews 2015, 2017).

The topic of Russian, Eastern European or post-Soviet migration to China is largely absent from this scholarship. Besides the scholarship on marriage-based migration (Barabantseva 2019; Barabantseva and Grillot 2019), I am only aware of one, Russian-language, publication, “Русский мир в Китае: исторический и культурный опыт взаимодействия русских и китайцев” (My own translation: “Russian World in China: Historical and Cultural Experience of Interaction Between Russians and Chinese”) by Olga

I. Kurto (2013).¹⁴ It is, of course, not a question of mere representation: the arrival of “Western expats” was largely made possible by factors such as the opening of the Chinese market and introduction of foreign capital, including opening company subsidiaries in China, as well as the demand for English-language education. The former Second World was largely excluded from this sector; it was, rather, a recipient of foreign capital (for example, see Dunn 2004). As such, migration from these countries follows a different route.

There is also the question of ethnic identity: Russians are one of the recognized minorities in the PRC, and as such, Chinese Russians have been continually present in the Northeast and Xinjiang for over a century (for more information, see Kurto 2013). Yet throughout my research, I have not witnessed any interactions between these two groups, as many of the Chinese Russians live in rural areas further away from the cities. I have only heard that both groups meet at the Orthodox Church in Harbin. This differs from, for example, the experiences of the South Korean diaspora and Chinese Koreans (also a recognized minority), who come in contact in Korean enclaves in Beijing (Yoon 2021), and, as I suppose, in the smaller Korean community of Harbin.

It is not the first time Harbin hosts a sizeable Russian community. This study is

¹⁴ Interestingly enough, the topic of Chinese migration to Russia and the Russian Far East in particular is more researched: see for example Akaha and Vassilieva (2006), Balzer and Repnikova (2010), Horie (2013), Kireev (2016), Nyíri (2007).

situated against the backdrop of the historical migration processes in the region, but my insistence on exploring this seemingly tenuous at times connection to the past requires some further explanations. To put it briefly, whether and how Harbin's history matters, what version of it, and to whom, remains a controversial topic. As I show later, in many instances the connection to the past are downplayed or rejected; some tourist attractions are presenting as almost ahistorical. Yet, there is a certain paradox in this "condition of historical disconnect from originary contexts (Oushakine 2019: 39)" when it is these historical contexts that made many of the phenomena I discuss here possible.

Historical Background

Harbin remains a place where the entanglements between both empires become particularly visible. The capital of Heilongjiang Province is a former administrative seat of the Chinese Eastern Railway founded by the Russian Empire in 1896. The Russian enterprise received de facto concession rights to the land along the railway for 90 years (Gamsa 2020) but as the history shows, the prosperity of the foreign community did not last quite that long. By early 20th century, neither Tsarist Russia nor the Russian concession existed anymore; by mid-century, hardly any foreigners remained in Harbin.

The scholarship on Harbin's history and the foreign legacy is well-developed and still expanding (Bakich 1986, 2000; Ben-Canaan 2018, Gamsa 2010, 2020, Kajdański 2000, Kradin 2001, Koga 2016, Meshcheryakov 2021, Zabiako 2016). Furthermore, both the

international community and Chinese writers produced multiple (auto)biographical works (Kajdański 2013), memoirs and essays (Ah Cheng 2014) that provide additional information about everyday life in Harbin.

But why was Harbin even founded? A short answer would be that the city was founded in 1898 as an administrative center for the Chinese Eastern Railway that was operated by the Russian Empire. In the following section, I set out to briefly delineate the cumulation of events and processes that led to the founding of this extraordinary city. More importantly, however, for the sake of my theoretical argument, I want to make a case for analyzing Harbin and the borderlands as postcolonial and postimperial. None of this is obvious; neither China nor Russia are typically included in the postcolonial framing. This omission is a part of the larger issue of “division of labor” between the postcolonial and postsocialism studies.

Making of Harbin

As the historian Sören Urbansky (2020: 4) points out, in contrast to the European colonial powers, both China and Russia were land-based, continental empires that gradually incorporated territories on their margins. It was the attempts to conquer Eurasia that brought the Qing (established by the Manchus coming from the North) and the Romanov states in a proximity, leading to an “interempire clash over space (Cooper and Burbank 2010: 214).” The Treaty of Nerchinsk, delineating the first boundary between the

states, was signed in 1689. In 1729, the Treaty of Kyakhta further clarified trade regulations. However, until the late nineteenth century, the Qing authorities maintained a migration ban for Han Chinese settlers in attempts to preserve “the Manchu way of life” (Cho 2013: 27). The transborder region – by today’s geographical demarcation – that is the geographical setting of this dissertation had then been a contact zone between both empires for a long period of time: in other words, a frontier (Urbansky 2020). It was only made into a border area later in the 19th century. In 1858, after signing the Treaty of Aigun, Russia annexed the lands along the Amur River (黑龙江 *Heilong Jiang*), and in 1860 with the Treaty of Peking, the Qing state lost parts of Outer Manchuria, including the Ussuri Krai, today’s Primorsky Krai, where the port city Vladivostok was founded in 1860.

The loss of territory to Russia was not the only defeat that China experienced in the 20th century. Beginning with the Opium War, and including the treaties signed with detriment to China (including the afore mentioned Aigun and Peking agreements) as well as series of military defeats, this period of foreign imperial forces encroaching over Chinese territories is often referred to as the “century of humiliation” (Cohen 2003). In 1896, Russia secured the senior statesman Li Hongzhang’s approval to build a railway line through the Chinese territory (Gamsa 2020: 4). The railway was supposed to facilitate mutual defense in case of a Japanese attack (Nield 2015: 118; Wolff 1999: 5; F. Zhang 2003: 47). Conveniently, the Chinese stretch of the railway was built to connect Chita with Vladivostok, Russia’s port on the Pacific. At the same time, no longer subject to the

settlement ban in wake of drought and famine in the heartland, Han migrants were arriving in Harbin area in search for jobs. They settled in a shantytown outside of (or predating?) the new city and headquarters of the CER; the settlement was first named Fujiadian and gave beginnings to the contemporary district of Daowai (Gamsa 2020: 5). On the Russian side, it was also the liberation of serfs in 1861 that caused a mass movement of peasants to the East in the 1880s. These new migration flows brought Russian settlers in search for greener pastures to the new territories of the Empire, and even across the border to China (Gamsa 2020: 4).

Although the Chinese government was given administrative and financial control over the railways on paper, virtual power remained on Russia's side (Wolff 1999: 6). Additionally, "[o]n both sides of the track, tsarist Russia enjoyed virtual concession powers over land defined as the CER alienation zone, a right-of-way that it had leased for ninety years under the treaty of 1896. In this zone, the Russian inhabitants and their institutions were under Russian jurisdiction (Gamsa 2020: 5-6)." The city grew rapidly and by 1913, it had over 65,000 residents: 43,000 subjects of the Russian Empire of various nationalities,¹⁵ and 23,000 Chinese,¹⁶ followed by 757 Japanese (Gamsa 2020: 6). "Only a few years later, the Chinese would become the ethnic majority in Harbin, though

¹⁵ For example, Gamsa uses the term "Russians" for "*Rossiiane*, the inhabitants of Harbin with roots in the Russian empire, who spoke or understood Russian (2020: 10)."

¹⁶ Similarly, the category of Chinese should be understood as subjects of the Chinese empire, as opposed to the Han ethnicity.

thanks to the presence of Russian schools, churches, newspapers, hospitals, and theatres, the Russian residents would continue to regard the city as essentially Russian (Gamsa 2020: 6).”

After the October Revolution, Harbin was no longer a subject of the Russian state – now a Bolshevik state –, effectively becoming “the only Russian city in the world outside the Soviet Union (Wolff 1999: 8).” It was no longer a Russian city, though – at least from a political standpoint. The Bolsheviks did not manage to assert full control over the railway administration, but neither did General Khorvat, the manager of the CER at the time; the city and the railways fell under the Chinese control (Carter 2002: 71). The tsarist passports were deemed invalid by the new government, making Russian residents effectively stateless; their extraterritorial status was abolished. Soon, Harbin was teeming with White Russian emigres who wanted to escape the Communist rule and the Russian community in the city reached its all-time peak of 185,000 people. This number dwindled by two thirds by the end of the decade, as many refugees returned to the Soviet Union, or moved to other cities in China or other countries. The Chinese community grew to around 100,000 people, and the emigres soon lost control of the city (Gamsa 2020: 7). For a while, however, it was “a somewhat self-conscious, partially self-regulating community (Wolff 1999: 8).”

In 1931, the Japanese military invaded Manchuria, now Manchukuo, taking control over Harbin. In this period, both the Chinese and Russian political and cultural autonomy

was severely limited. Many Russians left for other Chinese cities; some were repatriated to the Soviet Union. In 1945, following Japan's defeat in the Second World War, the Soviet Army invaded Manchuria; a year later, the Chinese Red Army took over. Russian *Kharbintsy* were leaving the city – more often than not by force.¹⁷ In 1954, the Soviet Union started repatriating Russians from China: it is estimated that around 100,000 people moved to the Soviet Union between 1954 and 1960. Others moved to Australia; some Jewish *Kharbintsy* settled in Israel after its founding in 1948. Some remained longer, only leaving in wake of Cultural Revolution, some would spend their whole lives in Harbin.

The Postcolonial Dilemma

There remains the question whether these developments should be seen as imperial or colonial in their nature – and this is exactly where the case of foreign presence in Harbin and the historical region of Manchuria as well as the country as a whole slips from these established power dynamics. With the fragmentized nature of foreign concessions and colonies, China has never been systematically colonized, even during the “century of humiliation.”

Following Chinese sources, I have been referring to the period of Russian presence as

¹⁷ *Kharbintsy* (singular: *Kharbinets*) is a Russian term for “residents of Harbin.” While the term does not indicate nationality, it is sometimes used to denote Russian residents in particular. See “Émigré Identity: The Case of Harbin” by Olga Bakich (2000) for a discussion on the local identity.

colonization, with the Russian colonial period lasting from 1898 to 1931 (Geng et al. 2021), yet there has been different schools of thought regarding the nature of this colonial experience (Mommsen and Osterhammel 1986). Chinese Marxists, including Mao Zedong, used the term “semicolony (*ban zhimindi*);” Sun Yat-sen preferred “subcolony (*cizhimindi*).” Similarly, pointing at the multiplicity of the foreign powers ruling China, the Marxist thinker Qu Qiubai coined the term “international colony (*guoji de zhimindi*)” (Shih 2001: 32-34). As Shih points out:

[Both Marxist and Nationalists – KK] felt the need to modify the term “colonialism,” which points to its essential limitation in the Chinese context. Most significant is the term’s inability to describe the rivalry among foreign powers, and the multiple layers of domination among the foreign powers and China. Also significant is its inadequacy in reflecting the relations of cooperation among the foreign powers in China, which had the effect of snowballing exploitations (2001: 32).

Furthermore, Shih commented that “[t]he ‘semi-‘ here is not to denote ‘half’ of something, but rather the fractured, informal, and indirect character of colonialism, as well as its multi-layeredness (2001: 34).” But to Vladimir Lenin, “semi-“ stood for transitional phase leading to a complete colonial takeover (Mommsen and Osterhammel 1986: 296). Russians in Harbin and Manchuria were, of course, just one of the foreign powers whose competing interests lead to domination of China that was “partial, multiple and layered (Cohen 2010: 145).” Just as foreign imperial forces competed and sometimes cooperated

with each other, so were the Chinese attitudes toward them varying, leading to yet another fragmentation of colonial experience. Given the varied experiences of colonial presence, there is no grand theory that can be applied to the position of China to 1949. The focus of my dissertation is the aftermath of the Russian expansion; but the more repudiated, violent Japanese colonialism remains in the background.

In “To the Harbin Station (1999)” David Wolff offers a meticulous discussion on the nature of the – not only Russian – colonial presence in Harbin. Making the case for including “railway imperialism,” Wolff highlights the CER’s role in transplanting chosen elements of Russian society, culture and law into the railroad-adjacent territories.¹⁸ “The railroad technocrats, it seems, imagined themselves social engineers (1999: 3),” he notes. The railway expansion facilitated (and legitimized) the development of a Russian-speaking colony. In fact, Sergei I. Witte, minister of Finance and a former railroad manager who oversaw the CER construction saw colonization as crucial to the success of the Trans-Siberian railway (Wolff 1999: 78). However, to be adapted into this context, the general concept of colonialism requires several modifications:

The first [*caveat – KK*] is that an examination of the Manchurian case in the early twentieth century will leave us unclear regarding the identity of both the colonizers and the colonized. At the beginning, it was Russian capital and expertise invading Manchuria, but within a decade or so, both the Chinese and the Japanese had responded with railway endeavors of

¹⁸ For a discussion on competing railway imperialisms, see also Elleman and Kotkin (2009).

their own. In the course of fifty years, each of these three countries experienced a period of passing dominance, coupled with intolerance, during which citizens of the other countries were persecuted in the manner most resembling a crude version of “cruel colonialism.” Thus, as a strictly binary hierarchical relationship, over any reasonably lengthy time span, the term colonialism becomes inappropriate.

A more general definition of colonialism, simply requiring “central” control (or the illusion of control) over “peripheral” space can be adopted, but even then we must allow for multiple, alternating centers. Therefore, it is the international competition into which the CER intrudes that becomes the dominant trait (1999:2).

As such, railway imperialism is still also competitive colonialism. Wolff emphasizes the fluctuating nature of power relations in the region, characterized by periods of “passing dominance.” This continued to be true in regard to the Sino-Soviet and then Sino-Russian relations.¹⁹ For years, Soviet Union and People’s Republic of China were allies on their path to communism:

Following Soviet experience and directly supervised by Soviet advisers, China launched its first five-plan built around industrialization and the socialist transformation of the economy... What is equally striking but often overlooked, however, is that China was culturally Russified at the same time: school education was reformed; Russian became the foreign language

¹⁹ Here, I am considering the Russian Federation to be an “heir” to the Soviet Union; but Yan Li (2018) also suggests definition of “Soviet culture” that expands beyond the historic period of Soviet Union and Soviet Republics of 1922-1991, making a case for investigating Sino-Soviet cultural exchange that extends after the fall of Soviet Union. In this work I focus on the Russian that Soviet might be a component of (but might as well be completely absent from), as my approach comes from a vantage point of the borderlands, and a specific historical location that experienced a different kind of Russian/Soviet presence. Seen from this perspective, my work is also a voice of support toward a scalar, fragmented approach to history of borderlands.

of choice; new architectural styles emerged; film and literature were revolutionized; people's tastes changed in everything from music, dance, and fine arts to food, clothes, and hobbies; and new concepts of gender, youth, family, and social relations gained traction, all along Soviet lines (Li 2018: 1).

What plays a particularly important role for phenomena discussed here, however, is the notion of Sino-Soviet friendship (中苏友好 *ZhongSu youhao*), followed by the portrayal of Soviet Union or the Soviet Communist Party as a “big brother” or an “older brother” to China. Perhaps nothing can encapsulate the changing nature of Sino-Russian relations as the afterlife of the slogan: “The Soviet today is our tomorrow” (Li 2018: 11).²⁰ As Li shows, the Chinese “Soviet dream” was “a dream about material abundance, self-determination, and the delights of leisure and cultural enrichment” that “as sustained the Soviet legacy in China long after the Chinese government repudiated the Soviet model at the end of the 1950s (Li 2018: 2-3).”

The historical events discussed in this section provide a much-needed context to my interlocutors' stories. The geopolitical and economic aspects constitute a sort of structure that my interlocutors have to navigate and negotiate as they try to make a living in China. As such, they are an indispensable part of this dissertation and the bigger story it attempts to tell. However, following scholars such as Yan Li (2018) or Mark Gamsa (2012), I also pay attention to “the cultural and personal dimensions of Sino-Soviet interactions (Li 2018:

²⁰ Chinese: 苏联的今天是我们的明天 *Sulian de jintian shi women de mingtian*.

3). These areas are not mutually exclusive; in fact, I argue that the fascination with the “Russian” – whatever it might come to signify - is precisely what allows some of my Russian interlocutors to find a profitable occupation in China and legitimizes their presence.

What I find particularly interesting about this historical period is the entanglement between China, the Soviet Union, and the West. The PRC’s engagement with the Soviet Union and within the East Block was an attempt to take part in the “socialist cosmopolitanism” and “become an international player (Li 2018: 8).” And so, given the limited mobility and exposure to third countries, the encounter with the Soviet Union would be the only experience of the “cosmopolitan” for many people (Li 2018: 11). In other words, despite the ideological rift, the Soviet Union stood for the West, or rather for a politically acceptable version of the West:

Another important aspect of friendship propaganda was that, amid Cold War isolation, it fed the desires of Chinese people, particularly the intelligentsia, for the foreign and exotic, even though few openly acknowledged much...More importantly, cultural imports from the Soviet Union opened a window to the world and offered a much-needed means of learning about Western countries. Although for centuries, it has been debated whether Russia is a part of Europe or not, in Chinese eyes during the 1950s (and even today), Russia culturally was the exotic “West” personified. Its arts were rooted in Western traditions, and its people were similar to Europeans in almost everything from food to clothing to manners and etiquette. The connection with the Soviet Union thus allowed the Chinese to experience in politically legitimate terms what was otherwise off-limits because of China’s confrontation with the West. For many Chinese in the 1950s, the Soviet Union was the West without capitalism. To

modernize China on the Soviet model was to Westernize without borrowing from the West (Li 2018: 11).

Finally, Li suggests that the “Soviet culture” frenzy in China gained significantly more popularity than the previous cultural movements (for example, the May Fourth New Cultural Movement in 1910s and 1920s), claiming that it can only be compared to the opening-up reform (2018: 7).” Li also draws a comparison between the fashion to learn Russian in the 1950s and the contemporary emphasis on studying English (2018: 47).

Nevertheless, in the Chinese Northeast, some new cultural trends were not as warmly welcomed. There remained the question of Vladivostok and Sakhalin, disputed territories that Soviet Union kept following the 1860 Treaty of Beijing between the Russian Empire and the Qing Dynasty. *Dongbei* residents could recall Soviet soldiers’ violations that party officials found hard to dispute: “China’s shameful losses of territories to tsarist Russia, the imperialist conduct of Russians in China, and Soviet chauvinism all cast a negative shadow on the image of the Soviet Union and fueled widespread resentment of Russians (Li 2018: 33).”

It is striking how the Sino-Russian relations are on one hand based on the borderland exchange and the disputed legacy of colonialism, and on the other hand, on the more centralized legacy of communism and top-down approach of party officials, which included an engagement with the Soviet ideology. In case of contemporary Russian

migration to China, and particularly Russian teachers in Harbin, both these trends seem to matter decades later.

There is little genealogical continuity between the contemporary Russian community and the historical Russian diaspora in Harbin. In other words, Russian people who moved to Harbin in the last three decades were not following in their ancestors' footsteps. This is not to say that there has not been any contact between these groups: in fact, Soviet experts who were invited to teach in Harbin had a chance to meet with the old residents. It is not merely a question of delineating migration "waves." It seems that the one group left before the other started coming, and the manner in which they were arriving was different too. Needless to say, it was a different Russia they were coming from to a changed China. This disconnect in biographies would create many tensions I discuss in this dissertation.

Dissertation Outline

This dissertation pursues two trajectories that might seem disconnected yet are in fact parallel. They both deal with the question of "Russian" presence in one region. On one level, it is a study of transborder contemporary migration from the Russian Far East and Siberia to Northern China, drawing from the scholarship on international migration to China. On another level, this work approaches the question of colonial afterlife through an examination of material heritage and new developments in tourism industry. These threads come together in a discussion on how migrants negotiate their livelihoods in two

most popular industries (for foreigners) in the Northeast: language education and tourism.

In the first chapter, entitled “Encounters with the Foreign,” I argue that relationships between Russians and Chinese were largely transient, limited by the mutual intelligibility, and often perceived by the lens of nationality, to the extent that each side at times interacted with imaginaries and symbols in a “misdirected dialogue.” Secondly, I focus on the methodological challenges of conducting fieldwork under the conditions of general mistrust, alienation, and surveillance, arguing that suspension of trust is not a “failure” but rather a feature in such an environment.

In the second chapter, I discuss the tension between the (unsurprisingly contested by the Chinese residents of Harbin) postcolonial nostalgia for “the most Russian of the Chinese cities,” popular among some migrants, and the contemporary migration flows out of Russia. Seen from this perspective, Harbin becomes a site of conflicting interpretations and meanings, where the role of the colonial heritage is disputed.

In a continuation of this thread, in the Chapter 3, I focus on female labor migrants, who reject the nostalgic narrative, embracing the “foreignness” as liberating and full of possibilities, even though their presence as foreigners is always conditional. However, one of the conditions is precisely their link to Russia.

Returning to the question of colonial heritage, in Chapter 4, I discuss the parallel processes of, on the one hand, ruination and, on the other hand, “reconstruction” and creation of an “atmosphere of a foreign country” labeled by variations of the word “Russian”

in popular tourist destinations such as theme parks, museums, and more in the proximity of the Russian border.

Chapter 5: “Working as a Russian” is where both trajectories converge. As migrants from post-Soviet countries find employment in the afore-mentioned tourist enterprises, they find themselves “working as a Russian,” this is, fulfilling various tasks while looking what is considered “Russian.” At the same time, given the demand for English teachers, many migrants work at language centers with the opposite goal: keeping up the appearance of the accepted (and allowed) kind of a foreigner.

This leads me to an important remark about my use of terms “Russia,” “Russian” and so on: they turn into a sort of floating signifiers, as do terms “foreign” and “foreignness.” I prefer the concept of “foreign” as it is open to a broader interpretation; I think simply designating these elements as “Russian” is somewhat limiting and also leading to another discussion: what is Russian? In this sense, it is perhaps safer to just mark it as an open-ended “foreign” category, especially as to avoid discussions on essentializing the nation and its culture. Nevertheless, a significant part of phenomena I describe here is designated as “Russian” by its creators. Sometimes, the “foreign” aspect is heavily emphasized, overshadowing the connection to “Russia.” Here, “foreign” and “Russian” are partially overlapping, or perhaps in opposition?

It is precisely this relationship between the “foreign” and the “Russian” that requires more attention. Observing Eastern Europeans in 2018, performing early-20th-century

Russians in a Russian-themed resort outside of Harbin with a reconstructed St. Nicholas Orthodox Church, one might grapple with possible interpretations and series of connections emerging one after another like the Russian nesting doll that became one of the region's symbols, if not obsessions.

Coming to Harbin: Fieldwork and Logistics

An anthropological work is based upon ethnographic fieldwork; it draws upon participant observation, the physical - and yet elusive - being there (Rabinow 2007: xi; Borneman and Hammoudi 2009). As my first anthropology teacher at the Humboldt University told us, as ethnographers, we are our own tools. This is also one of the reasons why each fieldwork experience is largely irreproducible - against the grain of the replicable experiment results in positivist sciences. Of course, "being there" comes with its own set of challenges that may or may not seem related to the goal of the study. I argue, however, to paraphrase Mary Louise Pratt's words, that the conditions of fieldwork cannot be seen as "an impediment to the task of doing fieldwork;" they should be rather approached "as part of what is to be accounted for in fieldwork (1986: 41)." Nevertheless, it is hard not to consider certain conditions as limitations if not impediments, at least initially. Here, I want to highlight two interrelated points about my fieldwork experience:

Firstly, being an "other kind" of a foreigner in a space that was largely divided by two nationalities, my presence attracted people's (even if fledging) attention, judgment and

interpretations. While I always strived to be as transparent about my goals as possible, my presence was rarely invisible, which becomes clear throughout this work. I argue that attending to my interlocutors' interpretations placed upon me as well as my own responses and reactions is integral to understanding the tensions shaping my field of inquiry. This emphasis on the researcher's positionality is not without its drawbacks: obviously, it could be chalked as self-indulgent or downplaying interlocutors' voices. Yet, I hope to make it clear that these are not mutually exclusive. To ignore it would be to overlook a part of the fieldwork experience that I believe leads to new insights (as well as poses new questions) on conducting research under the conditions of distrust and alienation.

Secondly, it should also become obvious throughout this text that I did not observe a community or an organization; no entity per se. On one level, of course, a category of "migrants" is a group; but it is a group of loosely associated people. It is a visible group, defined by its Otherness, but it is also a collection of dispersed people who share nothing except nationality, passports and native language (that is spoken in many other countries, anyway). But on the one hand, there is very little options of foreigners to engage in civil society in China (see Farrer 2019), and on the other hand, many of my interlocutors were very careful about building their social networks and associating with others. Ironically, the closest I could come to an experience of a bounded, physical "fieldsite" was if I went to one of the tourist attractions that pretended to be old, quaint Russian-in-a-way villages; but as the workday was nearing its end, so did many of the relations.

Just as I would ask my interlocutors about their journey to Harbin (figuratively and literally), I should present mine. The following doctoral dissertation is a result of an ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Harbin, Beijing, Heihe, Manzhouli, Irkutsk and other cities between 2016 and 2019. In the summer of 2016, I spent three months in Siberia and the Russian Far East, working on my Russian skills and learning about the life on the other side of the border. Some of the people I met back then ended up moving to China, so that I would meet them again in 2018-19. In the summer of 2017, I went to Harbin to polish my Mandarin Chinese skills. A year later, I returned to stay for over 13 months.

In his “Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco,” Paul Rabinow states after his arrival in the country: “After all, now that I was in the field, everything was fieldwork (1977: 11).” But what was included in the “everything”? My fieldwork was largely unstructured; this is, I followed people and tried to attend whatever I was invited to. There was no one particular institution I studied; every day was different and the events largely unplanned. During the weekdays, I would meet people after work; the only exception was these working irregular schedules (for example, teachers in private schools) or unemployed (often, Russian wives of Chinese men, who were in China on family visas). That meant that I had free time during the working hours Monday to Friday. I joined a gym, where I attended an informal fitness class with Russian women in their 20s and 30s. Occasionally, I took individual Chinese language classes at a private school in Harbin, where I was usually trying to work on my

fluency on whatever topic I was pursuing. I also took trips to many of the places I describe in this dissertation.

On the weekends, my schedule was usually more packed. Almost every Friday and/or Saturday I was meeting someone for dinner and beer at the local bars; a situation lending itself for many insightful informal interviews. Saturday and Sundays were usually the days when many cultural events organized by the Russian community took place: history lectures, poetry readings, holiday celebrations and so on.

While I stayed in touch with around dozen interlocutors, my fieldwork experience was characterized by many fleeting encounters. I had initially planned to pursue a study of trans-border encounters, which would necessarily include perspectives of both sides, Chinese and Russian people. However, once I had established ties with my Russian interlocutors (since they constitute a minuscule portion of the city residents in general), I noticed that either their contacts with the Chinese *Harbinren* are limited or – more often than not – my access to them was limited.²¹ I discuss these difficulties with “snowballing” and the nature of many encounters I observed in the following chapter.

²¹ 哈尔滨人 *Harbinren*: resident of Harbin.

Chapter 1: Toward an Anthropology of Encounters

Encounters with the Foreign

It is a Saturday afternoon in a Russian-themed amusement park in Northern China and the dance and music performance is on. It might be the second session of the day, but the room is almost full, with casually dressed guests taking up most of the seats well in advance of the spectacle. The small yet well-equipped theater with air conditioning and pleasantly dimmed lights offers refuge from the relentless August heat. Surrounded by a leafy park, the auditorium is near a river and quite isolated from the city. But inside the building, balconies on the side and extravagant chandeliers suggest a more sophisticated, urban look. It could be a theater in the city's historical center. The white covers on the chairs, tables and a KTV (karaoke) sign, in turn, make it look like it could also be an event venue, for weddings, galas, and banquets. But once the lights are turned off, we are reminded what the real occasion is for this performance.

Throughout my fieldwork, I saw this show a couple of times. Each time, it followed a similar script with little variation, perhaps adjusted for the season or the next big holiday. Some old songs stayed, and some new skits appeared, but the main idea was to showcase the general idea of Russian cultural heritage, "the best of" Russian culture. The show's

contents switched between fast-paced, informative videos (most notably, “Famous Russians”) on a huge display behind the stage, and choreographed performances accompanied by choirs, duets and solos, all played by a highly skilled group of young artists.

The spectacle was moderated by two people. One of them was a Chinese man, perhaps in his 40s, wearing a modern black suit; another one was a younger white, light-haired girl clad in traditional Russian garb. The outfit was so big and sturdy that she could hardly move; the big, embellished headdress, *kokoshnik*, looked like it might fall down with any sudden movement. Yet, every component of this performance had been meticulously planned and prepared, regardless of how spontaneous and playful it might have seemed.

As we soon learned, the girl was Russian, spoke fluent Chinese and served as a sort of guide to the male moderator. She had to explain the nuances of Russian culture to the man, who was wondering where and how he could meet a Russian girl. The staged courtship dialogue has been used in “ethnic” performances in China for a while now – as noted by Louisa Schein, who worked on “packaged ethnic performance[s] (1997: 69)” in the Chinese Southeast in the 1980s. The fact that the minority was represented through a young woman put in a conversation with a male, adult, presumably Han, Chinese man, allowed for the staging of the following scene:

“We Russian girls like heroic men” (我们俄罗斯女孩喜欢英勇的男人, *women e’luosi nuhai xihuan yingyong de nanren*,) says the woman, emphasizing the word “heroic”

(yingyong).

Suddenly, a bunch of male dancers with pikes run onto the stage and started to dance in a style reminiscent of martial arts. Drawing upon military traditions, the performance emphasized the masculinity of Russian men, who will perhaps have more success in socializing with Russian women and seducing them. The message was clear: these were the exemplary braver men. Not coincidentally, Russians are sometimes referred to as a 战斗民族 *zhandou minzu*, combative people/nation (also see Pulford 2022: 52). Not everything was lost for the Chinese men though. The dancers then picked a random young man from the audience's first rows, invited him on the stage and tried to teach him the choreography. In comparison to professionally trained artists, his moves with the pike seemed more awkward, which made the audience burst out laughing. The short skits alternated with choreographed music performances; the show went on.

In the next scene, the Chinese moderator wondered whether another female member of the band would be interested in seeing him. The object of his interest, as we learned, did not speak Chinese, so again, the help of the Russian moderator had to be employed. Speaking to the interpreter who serves as an intermediary in this encounter, the new girl vehemently refused to go on a date with the male actor, making the audience laugh again. Later on, a video in the background showed scenes from a wedding between a Russian man and woman; the celebrations taking place in the same park we were in.

The show, displaying a peculiar selection of Russian cultural heritage, was centered

on the figure of the Russian woman, an attractive but somewhat mysterious and unavailable object of desire (S. H. Lu 2001). The male Chinese moderator's (failed) attempts to meet and seduce women were used as a narrative to display fragmented performances of what is considered "Russianness:" partially sentimental and accompanied by love songs, partially theatrically hostile and militarized.

In the very beginning of the spectacle, before the artists appear on the stage, we saw a short slideshow with pictures and names of famous Russian men from different historic eras and walks of life, as if the show was a direct continuation of encyclopedic achievements of Russia, from Dostoyevsky to Tsars to the theme park. Although this performance was supposed to represent the essence of "Russianness," many artists engaged in this show business were actually not Russian citizens. As I learned afterwards, some were from Ukraine, Belarus and other post-Soviet countries.

On another trip to the same park, I signed up for an organized tour with a guide. It was a big group, consisting of tourists from out of town, from Beijing and the South of China. The young, energetic guide fit a lot of general information about Harbin and Heilongjiang into her talk, starting as soon as we got onto the bus. She pointed sightseeing attractions as we drove past them: the Dragon Tower, a convention center. After an introduction to the park, the guide moved on to the topic of Russian culture. After all, our destination was "Volga Manor (伏尔加庄园 *Fuerjia Zhuangyuan*)" marketing itself as a place of Sino-Russian cultural exchange (*Zhong E wenhua jiaoliu jidi*).

“Do you know what Russians like to drink?” she asked enthusiastically with a broad smile I could see from the back of the coach bus.

Some guests started murmuring, “*fu..*”

“*Fu-te-jia* (伏特加, *vodka*)!” exclaimed the guide. “You will get a chance to try Russian vodka at the Vodka Museum!”

The Vodka Museum did, in fact, offer a complimentary vodka tasting to all guests. Upon presenting a coupon attached to the ticket to another young Russian-speaking man, everyone received a small tasting platter of cold cuts, some veggies and a portion of vodka in a little shot glass made of ice. Walking between pavilions and exhibitions arranged in wooden houses, villas, and little palaces, one could learn not only about the history and social significance of vodka, but also the great Russian literary traditions and the life of the Russian diaspora in the early 20th century Harbin. In this sort of a Russian kaleidoscope, everything came together at once, bond by the sole quality of being “Russian.”

It might be tempting to ignore this kind of cultural production, or to write it off as a product of a highly commercialized tourism industry. Indeed, this show might lack the intellectual gravitas of the theatrical productions on renowned stages in Beijing or St. Petersburg, or the rigorous studies accompanying exhibits in museums. While performed by professionally trained artists, it would most likely never be displayed in their own countries. Why should we pay attention to such performances? Why approach a profit-

oriented phenomenon, staged for mass tourist consumption, with an ethnographic sensitivity?

Surely, my goal is not to distill any knowledge of Russia – whether as a country, a culture, or a nation – from these representations. Apart from the common anthropological knowledge that – despite seemingly didactical functions – representations might tell us more about the actors and sites of productions, I have also encountered a share of opposition and resistance toward these circulating imaginaries. As many of my Russian interlocutors – whether people I encountered myself during the fieldwork, or anyone who I ever discussed my research with – would be quick to point out: the connection to the Russia *they knew* was tenuous at best. As I have already indicated in this chapter, the tasks of performing “Russia” would sometimes fall to people who were not Russian citizens; something that surely makes more sense once we suspend the category of “Russianness.” I will return to these crucial points later on; for now, I want to suggest that while perhaps more useful for learning about the intentions and imaginaries of their producers, invoking these representations serves yet another goal I am pursuing in this dissertation.

Therefore, I ask the reader to consider these performances as a form of a cultural encounter: in the words of Liuba Faier, “the coming together of different discourses, genealogies of meaning, and forms of desire (2009: 1),” or, as in this example, the bus full of tourists about go to and try ice-cold vodka, the actors in the play, and the migrants trying to make a living in China. I argue that similar encounters largely make the social

fabric of this contact zone of the Sino-Russian borderlands. Some of them are more quotidian, short interactions: between shopkeepers, restaurant staff, and visitors, or even between passersby in dense, lively cities. Some are ascribed more gravity, such as encounters with border control and police officers. Some are, of course, between friends, acquaintances made anywhere in this contact zone. Yet, other encounters are embedded in forms of cultural productions; they range from intimate to staged performances to encounters with objects and imaginaries. Many of these encounters take place within the broadly defined tourism industry. I suggest that the existence of Russian-themed tourism industry is by itself a sign of curiosity toward the Other; especially given the proximity to the Russian border. On the other side of these interactions are the post-Soviet migrants, (largely Russian and from the Far East specifically), who explore cultural meanings and negotiate their identities in another country.

Misdirected Dialogues

What do I mean by encounters with objects or imaginaries? Are such encounters truly impersonal?

Sometime in November, Oksana invited me to a live music show at one of the bars in Harbin. Most bars in Harbin known to me (through my interlocutors) were conveniently located in the central districts and drew many customers on the weekends. With a few exceptions, they were usually dark rooms with some booths and tables, some neon lighting

and promotional posters from alcohol producers; most of them more similar to dive bars than to cocktail lounges. Unlike Beijing, Harbin was not subjected to a smoking ban in public places, and few bars introduced regulations on their own, so almost every time I entered a bar, I was hit with a heavy cloud of cigarette smoke. Near the restrooms, as the evening progressed, the smell of cigarettes would mix with the odor of urine and sewage that could not be masked by the scent of detergents and hand soap, if there was any soap at all. Most buildings were older – as in perhaps from the 1950s or 1960s – as indicated by the uniform, *khrushchovka*-resembling style that came to shape most of the central district's urbanscape.

The bar we went to this time was located near the Heilongjiang Institute of Technology, the most renowned university in the city and one of the best technical schools in the country. As such, the location was attracting local and international students and young professionals, including English teachers, alike. Older people in Harbin preferred to drink at dinner in restaurants and rarely ventured into bars. For young people, this was the heart of Harbin though: no matter how dusty, how many layers of old paint were peeling off the facades of buildings from the 1950s, and how many tiles were missing off pavements, this is where most of the city's nightlife concentrated. It was a happening area during the days too, with restaurants and small cafes full of young people with their laptops and notebooks. At the end of my fieldwork, even a small *blinnaia*, a bistro with Russian crepes, opened up in the vicinity.

Although very energetic and social, Oksana was not a person to go out and party a lot. She preferred daytime activities, but this was not a regular night at a bar. Live music was relatively popular in Harbin, with many young people forming their own bands, most notably either rock/indie or hip-hop, and casually playing in bars. The concert in particular was widely advertised on social media as a student event, and most of the bands on the line-up consisted of international students. As I entered the bar, a young man on the stage was singing a cover of a popular song. The audience was cheering.

I had been to this area a couple of times before, but it was the first time that this particular bar was that packed. It surely was a popular event; I could barely make my way through the crowds. I got a beer at the bar and stood next to my acquaintances, trying not to be get burned by anyone's cigarette. Next, a big group entered the stage: a sizable collective consisting of some Russian students I had previously seen hanging out at different bars, and a number of Black and Asian musicians. The moderator announced everything exclusively in Russian, although when prompted, some of the Black performers gave short speeches in English. The audience was not exclusively Russian; I heard Chinese and English spoken. It was safe to assume that some guests did not know what's being said at all times; I'd wager that some performers did not know either.

At a certain point the moderator, still speaking in Russian, exclaimed proudly, "We all come from different cities!"

The audience cheered again, led by the part that understood Russian.

“Chinese say that they have 55 nationalities [*natsional’nosti*], but we have *over 200* nationalities!” the man continued.

I waited for the next utterance: where was this speech going? Was this a praise of Russian diversity? Was this a prelude to introducing a new artist on the stage? I had seen Sakha people performing the traditional throat singing elsewhere in Harbin. But nothing in this vein happened. The moderator moved on to praising the vibrant international student community in Harbin. The audience cheered again, or at least the part of the audience that understood these words. Alcohol was flowing and soon others followed.

It was not a false statement, although not an entirely correct one either, given certain incompatibilities between each state’s use of the “ethnic minority” category.²² Given how surprised or oblivious foreigners can be at the ethnic and linguistic diversity of Russia, I cannot deny the educational message conveyed in this claim. But it was not the accuracy of the claim that unsettled me. Spoken in Russian, it was clearly directed at Russian people present: the recipients who probably already *knew it*. And yet: How many of these minorities were present at the show, or even in Harbin? What were the minorities supposed to symbolize? Was he trying to establish Russia’s superiority over China? Finally, given the Russian Empire’s expansion to the Pacific Coast and over Mongolic, Turkic, and

²²The Chinese word *minzu* is usually translated to English as “nationality” or “ethnic group.” The PRC approach to nationalities is influenced by the Marxist-Leninist theory and Stalin’s thought on “nation/nationality.” Therefore, the concepts Russian *natsional’nost’* and Chinese *minzu* are related, although an in-depth discussion is beyond the scope of this dissertation. See Hirsch (2003), Joniak-Lüthi (2013), Kholi (2019).

Uralic language speaking ethnic groups, is it a proof of how much space each of these countries conquered? But Russia having a bigger territory than China has never been up to a debate (even if conspiracy theories about the planned Chinese takeover of the Russian Far East came true), and neither has the number of ethnic minorities. So, what was there to dispute?

Dispute is perhaps not the best word here. There was no dialogue, because only the Russian-speaking public could understand the speech, in a mode of (mis?)communication that isolated much of the audience.

Throughout my fieldwork, I noted that there was a small subset of Chinese-speaking Russians and Russian-speaking Chinese that served as sort of contact brokers between communities. Many of the Chinese-speaking Russians were women married to Chinese men who had lived in Harbin for multiple years, and gained considerable social and cultural capital needed to successfully negotiate life as a foreigner. Being married to a Chinese citizen and being a part of a local family usually gave one more insight into *how China worked*. Some of the liaisons were university students who studied in Chinese. Some of the Chinese speakers of Russian were the spouses of Russian-speaking migrants; others were graduates of Russian departments at local universities. Both newcomers to Harbin and long-time residents who did not speak Chinese well would turn to the Chinese speaking Russians for help and advice, which the “brokers” would usually try to provide. A big part of this help-seeking and mutual-aid of sorts took place online and quasi-publicly,

in many WeChat group chats whose networks spread all over the city, the country and the trans-border region.

I am not able to provide a full account of mutual perceptions here (see Wu 2020). It seems rather that not only was the power relationship between the local residents and migrants imbalanced, but so was also the *attention*. I argue, in this particular case, the power imbalance was skewed toward Chinese nationals as they had the privileges coming from the citizenship (and the language skills) and due to the economic dependency. They were largely the employers of foreign nationals, whose work permits had to be sponsored by their companies. Just as any other foreigners living in an environment dominated by the “host society,” that is, not being surrounded by a specific service sector catering to “expats,” migrants in Harbin had to negotiate their everyday life with local residents and institutions. Some of the professionals hired by universities and private companies had language assistants helping them with necessities. For the Chinese residents, on the other hand, Russians were a presence – but not necessarily one they engaged with. That means that while many Chinese people I talked to had opinions on foreigners and representants of particular nationalities, contact with Russians or any other foreigners was not a common occurrence or a significant part of their lives.

What is more, as I show in Chapter 5, sometimes Chinese people did not know that they were interacting with a Russian or Eastern European migrant; most notably, when it comes to English teachers who had to keep up an identity of a native English speaker. At

other times, the designated “Russian” figure was not Russian at all. On the one hand, the “Russian” identity became essentialized – partially through the local tourism industry – as a certain reified version of “Russian culture,” consisting of idyllic pastoral living, palaces, classical music and so on, and as the “archetypical” foreigner in Harbin. These were the easily accessible forms of encountering the Other. On the other hand, the actual Russian citizens coming to China were not (or did not want to be) always recognized as such.

What is important here: “Cultural encounters include interpersonal encounters, but they also involve historical interactions that extend beyond single individuals or cultural groups (Faier 2009: i).” In each of these vignettes, we can observe a sort of misdirected cultural dialogue, in which the Other cannot actually respond; or a re-enacted dialogue, in which all responses are already scripted. In the theatrical performance, the Chinese people are themselves; the Chinese moderator wears a suit, and the participants are invited from the audience. The Russians (who might not even be Russian, to begin with), however, are dressed up in historical costumes to highlight the difference. During the student concert, the Russians are themselves – but China figures as an abstract entity. But despite the miscommunication, there is an interest to engage with the Other, even in a form of a somewhat imaginary dialogue. A part of this transnational encounter is happening in a commercial context, with economic implications for those involved. Now, this is not to make a totalizing claim. Transnational friendships and relationships existed and thrived in Harbin. Had I been conducting research with children (a task I do not feel I was

qualified for, and a research activity not allowed by my IRB permission), I would have surely observed different patterns in interactions between Chinese and Russian schoolchildren in Chinese public schools.

Encounter also presupposes a difference, which has been very visible here: that everyone is either Chinese or Russian. It was noticeable that in this borderland setting people did interact with each other as representants of their respective nationalities “first and foremost (Pulford 2021: 693).” In other words, everyone was Russian or Chinese. (And I was neither, which came with its own problems.) The major linguistic divide made communication harder, so that people sometimes interacted more with the idea of the Other, or representations of the Other, than an actual person. Sometimes it might be very visible when I refer to my interlocutors’ sweeping assumptions: sometimes these encounters were very much impersonal.



Figure 3: Friendship: a souvenir.
I bought this magnet on the Olkhon Island (Lake Baikal) in Russia in 2017. The Chinese text says 友好 *you hao*, “friendship.” Photo by the author.

Yet the encounters were interesting to people. The curiosity, if not desire, was reflected in several works of fiction that depicted Sino-Russian romantic relationships and the connected intimate geopolitics (Barabantseva 2019). Following the methodological approach of Marvin D. Sterling, I also do not attempt to analyze these texts as a literary or movie critic would (Sterling 2011). Similarly to what I undertake in the next chapter, I treat these works as ethnographic materials.

During my fieldwork, a new movie came out in the Harbin cinemas. Entitled “How I Became Russian (*Kak ya stal russkim* / 战斗民族养成记 *Zhandou minzu yangcheng ji*),”²³ it was a comedy about a romantic relationship between a Chinese man (as it happens, living in Shanghai but with roots in the Northeast) and a Russian woman (dir. Sakhelashvili and Xia 2018). Ira, a young blonde woman is on vacations in Shanghai, where she meets Peng Peng, who saves her from choking on spicy food. While Ira does not speak any Chinese, Peng Peng learned good Russian from his father who studied abroad in the Soviet Union. After Ira returns home, Peng Peng travels to Moscow to propose to her; first, he needs to secure her strict father’s approval.

The father, a hypermasculine grumpy patriarch named Anatolii, who became rich in the 1990s, is shocked to see that his daughter’s fiancé is Asian, uttering, “Buryat? Bashkir?

²³ Note the masculine form, as it is the male Chinese protagonist who recounts becoming Russian, although in fact he resists becoming one. In the Chinese title, “Russian” is replaced by the phrase “combative people” I mentioned earlier.

Definitely not an Armenian. Who else is there? Khanty-Mansi?” Not trying to hide his racist attitude, Anatolii calls Peng Peng “Ping Pong” and organizes a series of competitions in order to scare the fiancé off. While not as stereotypically masculine, brawny or physically strong (hence the nod to the combative nation), Peng Peng stands up to the father with wit and dignity, even as he risks hypothermia. Of course, Peng Peng does not want to become Russian; he is surprised at the father’s possessiveness toward his daughter. After many questionable, racist actions (after all, what Anatolii does not like about Peng is that he is Chinese and ethnically different from the Slavic family) the father agrees to the marriage; and many Russian viewers left the theater quite disgusted. Note the somewhat familiar dynamics of patriarchal, hypermasculine – if not embodying toxic masculinity – Russian men who defend Russian women (who do not necessarily want to be defended), from (consensual relationships with) Asian men.

A perhaps lesser known, but an interesting example is also “Russian girls in Harbin” (俄罗斯姑娘在哈尔滨 *E’luosi guniang zai Ha’erbin*), a TV show (dir. Sun 1993) and a novel under the same title (Ba 1995). Set in significantly less glamorous circumstances than “How I Became Russian,” “Russian Girls” is a story about female economic migrants escaping poverty of the early 1990s and coming to Harbin in search of work. “Russians have a special relationship with the city,” a Chinese man ensures a newly arrived Anna, whose estranged aunt is one of the old Harbinets still living in the city (1995: 6). However,

despite the difference of over two decades and income levels, both stories end with the romantic union between a Russian woman and a Chinese man.

If the desire for a Russian woman might seem to be in the forefront of this chapter, it is mostly because this was a recurrent topic throughout my fieldwork. In fact, this misplaced desire led to my own encounters, beginning in the first weeks after I arrived in Harbin. One day, as I was walking down Zhongyang Dajie with Zhanna, a Russian woman in her 60s, we were approached by a Chinese man in his 40s.

“Can you speak Chinese?” he asked in Chinese; and when I confirmed, he followed up with: “Are you looking for a husband?”

Dumbfounded, I said, “No.”

“Is it because you already have a Russian husband?” he asked and pointed at Zhanna. “Is this your mother?”

At this point, Zhanna, who did not speak Chinese, started to impatiently ask me what was going on. As I switched to Russian to relate the dialogue to her, the man lost his interest and left. Zhanna was not as confused as I was; in fact, she was somewhat relieved she knew what was going on. She had heard that some women were coming to China for sex work, so he might have just thought I was one of them. Why the talk of marriage, then? Just a euphemism, maybe. Later, I followed up with a Chinese friend, who said that Zhanna’s explanation was somewhat plausible, but believed the man could have really been looking for a wife; or at least to introduce me to the pool of eligible bachelors who

were looking for an Eastern European wife. After all, Harbin had its weekly matrimonial meetups, where young single Chinese (or perhaps more often their parents) would go and exchange contact information; why couldn't Russian women be included in that?

The world "encounter" has a temporal dimension: it is an event, but it is not necessarily lasting. In fact, my fieldwork was characterized by a lot of transient relationships; and I was also interested in more than my interlocutors' long-lasting relationships. By this I do not mean that people did not make friends or bond with each other. Rather, I draw upon scholarship in urban anthropology and human geography, and focus on everyday interactions and brief encounters, brief, momentary coexistence, sharing resources and anything else that might arise. Such an approach gives me a wider frame of reference for what I am researching.

Melting Snowballs: Ethnographic Fieldwork, Mistrust and Alienation

This disconnected-ness meant that navigating fieldwork came with its challenges. Perhaps the most pressing question that arises from the presented materials is: So, *what* is there to study? What is then the object of this inquiry into the Sino-Russian contact zones, if many forms of this contact are, in fact, indirect? How does one study encounters?

In this section, I want to reflect on the practice of ethnographic fieldwork that (in this case) was composed of seemingly disjointed and accidental encounters. As I mentioned in the Introduction, I did not work with any particular institution and lacked a certain anchor

or footing “in the field.” Mostly, it was that there was no institution to follow: Russian migrants lived all around the city, worked at different workplaces, attended various schools; perhaps the more unifying activities were those belonging to the leisure sphere: either the cultural events, or the – relatively small for a city with a population size of New York – nightlife scene: bars, and a couple of nightclubs. Elsewhere, I discuss the difficulties establishing cooperation with the tourist attractions.

In the environment I was in, an institutional backing – beyond the necessary academic affiliation, of course – could have been a double-edged sword. To put it bluntly, there was no institution involved in the lives of my interlocutors besides their employers, schools or various state organs, such as the local police, the Public Security Bureau [PSB] or, perhaps most importantly, the Entry and Exit Division of the PSB, which is the department responsible for processing residence permit. Only the first two types of organizations were somewhat voluntary, and the latter ones figured as the embodiment of the Chinese state power.

Foreign citizens in China have very limited options for creating their own associations or charities – for example, I heard of animal welfare organizations that arranged transporting pets from animal shelters to North America, but lacked any state recognition and were not legal entities. The only organization for Russians in Harbin was so called *Russkii Klub*. I have attended and helped organize (mostly running errands, setting up and cleaning after the meetings) some events that usually comprised of “cultural part,”

this is, an invited talk, a poetry recital, a song and dance performance etc., and a *poobshanie*, a social mixer of sorts. Especially the second part was an opportunity for me to meet new people. Yet, once I met someone using the opportunity, I had no arranged channels, so to say, that would facilitate repeated encounters.

This lack of “rootedness” reflects the lived environment of migrants. Previously in this dissertation I invoked the category of “floating population.” Foreign nationals in the PRC constitute yet another kind of subjects, whose specific treatment I delineate in the Introduction and Chapter 5. Obviously, foreigners are not citizens, they are aliens: by the default of being foreigners, they only have residence registration. The term “floating population” does invoke, as Li Zhang noted (2001), some objectifying notions. Yet, the question arises: how does an anthropologist work with highly mobile people?

In introductory classes to ethnographic fieldwork, we are usually told about the so called “snowballing method,” As the SAGE Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods explains, in this approach:

[A] participant recruits people he or she knows to be in the study, those new participants then recruit people they know to be in the study, and so on. This technique is referred to as snowball subject recruitment because, much like a snowball is made, as the participants share contacts, more participants are added to the study and there is an accumulation of participants over time (Tenzek 2017).

Snowball method is also known as “snowball subject recruitment,” “snowball sampling” or “chain referral” (Tenzek 2017). The key feature of the snowball method is the reliance on well-oriented interlocutors, or, in more sociological approach, key research subjects. I am referring here to a chapter titled “Meeting a Friend of a Friend: Snowballing with Mr Hansen in Naples” of Hans Lucht (2019), an anthropologist who also worked with (largely undocumented, at that) migrants. The reason for this exploration is that having been confronted with the limitations in my fieldsite, I want to know how others managed – but even more so, to face another question: Why did I think it would work?²⁴ In other words, I found myself confronting one of the unspoken (or not discussed?) assumptions.

Thus, by way of chain referral, the ethnographer acquires the characteristics of an insider who is led from informant to informant, snowballing the field, and in this way works from the ground upwards, and sideways, through unknown social worlds, as opposed to descending on a given field with a master plan (Lucht 2019: 130).

²⁴ At the risk of pushing this metaphor way too far: Any snow-related metaphor should seem particularly apt in a region such as Heilongjiang, known for its harsh, long winters and below freezing temperatures from October to April. After all, Harbin hosts the famous annual Ice and Snow Festival, where mounds of snow are sculpted into monumental buildings and structures: if any place is suitable for using snow for our own benefits, it should be here, where the freezing climate becomes a commodity, luring tourists coming from places where they do not have to be cold. Incidentally, it did not snow very often throughout my fieldwork. While the temperature on most winter days was ranging between -20 to -30C, there was little precipitation. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the pristine, clingy snow used for sculpting the enormous replicas of famous pagodas and sculptures was manufactured.

The snowball metaphor requires some imagination: Is it building snowballs with our hands or is it rolling it on the ground covered with snow? In any case, just like building a snowball by collecting more and more snow as we roll it, we should “gather” our interlocutors based on initial contacts we make and relationship we build. In other, more crude words, the longer you “roll it,” the more should stick to it. In the “snowballing method,” to put it simply, we largely count on other people’s established networks; we are left to depend on the kindness of strangers, who could introduce us to others.

This was not the case during my fieldwork. Not that I did not experience other people’s kindness – in fact, without them, any research would not be possible. But the process of self-fueling chain-referral never happened; while some people did indeed introduce me or connect me with others, it yielded little results. At times it felt more like the snowball is melting instead of expanding. Why was it the case? Was working with migrants in China too sensitive a topic? Was I simply failing as an ethnographer, unable to forge connections in the field?

Reflecting on his work with undocumented migrants, Hans Lucht notes that snowballing approach is particularly useful when studying transnational migration, this is, with mobile individuals, whose time might be limited at a given place (Lucht 2019: 132). Under such circumstances, “a reasonable amount of reservation is not unusual, *which is why snowballing sampling works* (Emphasis mine).” These statements are precisely what I seek to challenge through my own research experience. Lucht’s chapter presents a sort

of a negative of my fieldwork experience: we both researched relatively mobile migrants. This is not to draw any parallels between the two separate research processes – besides the obvious point of the impossibility of replication, there are many other differences between our projects. A comparison between them is only insofar productive, as it allows me to critically examine the snowball technique's feasibility especially under the condition of surveillance.

Lucht explains: "The key to unlocking a situation during snowball sampling is often having one insider who can vouch for the ethnographer and create moments of quality engagement; that is, moments of relatively free and uninhibited exchange facilitated by a research assistant (2019: 131)." Here, the snowballing method seems to depend on the initial trust between the researcher and the designated key interlocutor who can vouch for his new companion (and employer). It rings true: the most important requirement for the snowballing method to work is trust – both trust between the researcher and their interlocutors, and trust between said interlocutors and people they know. From this perspective, trust is something that can be earned and established; in other words: trust is a possibility. Even if not explicit sense of trust, there should be a sense of security.

Despite all the attention that anthropologists pay to culturally specific phenomena and local moral economies, in many studies discussing fieldwork methodology trust remains a universal quality, open to permutations, but nevertheless always present. In other words, this approach presupposes the existence of social words united by trust like

by glue. When Lucht hires²⁵ a research assistant, the latter “agrees to make available his social world and vouch for the researcher’s integrity (2019: 131).” Lucht emphasized that what is needed is “rather the assistant’s social capital and the extent of his or her social network that coproduce the data. The data is thus not really ‘collected,’ but rather created in the interactions that the assistant sets up (2019: 131).”

...access to knowledge is itself social, in that it activates social networks, and the degree of success of one’s research is very closely tied to the temper and social prominence of one’s research assistant. This means that the assistant, if a process of snowballing is to be successful, has to be able to put social pressure on potential informants; he must use his social capital to set up meetings and convince informants to share their private affairs with an anthropologist (Lucht 2019: 136-137).

Lucht learns it the hard way when he has a new assistant, whose social capital and ability to “put any social pressure (2019: 139)” are lacking. This claim rests on the assumption that there exists a social world where the chosen interlocutor has their share of social capital. One explanation could be that the initial contacts I had were not positioned well-enough to provide contacts to others. But they did know people; some of them just preferred they did not, or at least that is the impression I had. While I did hope to connect with people working in specific industries, I was also interested in talking to any Russian migrant.

²⁵ I did not hire an assistant and did not compensate interlocutors for their time, although I would always offer to pay for the meals.

It is not usual that a researcher might not be able to establish a sense of trust with their research participants, and effectively this is what happened to me. The unwillingness to connect others might also be emblematic of lack of trust within the approached interlocutors' social networks. But maybe it was also just a general lack of interest that translated to unwillingness to engage in more conversations. From my own position it is impossible to come to a conclusion what was the root issue here. A couple of interlocutors – all female – signaled that they find me trustworthy and encouraged me to “ask them anything” or declared that they feel comfortable talking about their lives. Gender might be an important – yet not decisive – factor here: in words of Viktoriya, whom I introduce in Chapter 3, “a man could not admit that he was struggling.” While the emphasis on “struggling” might denote an inherent notion of suffering in the narratives, it also indicates a level of intimacy and vulnerability that perhaps seemed out of place in interactions with a female researcher and interlocutor. On the other hand, for these who did not feel this way, avoidance strategy makes perfect sense; after all, they were not obliged to ever interact with me. As such, I can only remain thankful to these who were willing to share their lives with me.

With more organically developing relationships – in vast majority with other women – the task of interviewing or asking for help with my research was not that convoluted. It could lead to situations where the person refused to talk “on the record,” yet we kept up friendly relationships.

One Friday evening, American friends of mine were in Harbin and wanted to have dinner and drinks together. As it was extremely cold, we went to the bar that was the closest to the restaurant. I knew the bar had a pole dance show on some evenings, and a violin soloist on another, so I warned them that I had no idea what to expect. The space was hard to classify in any established categories of entertainment venues. It was located in a historical building, this is, one that was built around one hundred years ago by a Russian entrepreneur. While the decorations alluded to the early 20th century history, with wooden panels, and displaying old photos, the waiters were wearing cowboy hats. The menu featured a variety of Russian dishes, fast food like French fries and some Chinese snacks. And, as mentioned, next to one of the sitting booths was a very inconspicuous looking dancing pole.

I was somewhat relieved to see that this evening's artist was a saxophonist, who approached us after he finished his show. He spoke some English, but not very good, so I told him that I can speak Russian and he switched to Russian quite enthusiastically. At this point, we alienated my American friends, who could not participate in the conversation; meanwhile we were getting to know each other. I told Boris that I was writing my dissertation about Russian migrants in China and asked if we could meet up again and talk.

"I am not a migrant," he responded.

“But you are an artist working in China?” I asked. It turned out that Boris’ presence in China was seasonal: every year, he would come and play at different venues, and then return home, therefore he did not see himself as living abroad, even as he spent multiple months here. To my surprise, Boris immediately introduced me to his manager, a middle aged, elegantly dressed Chinese man, who spoke fluent Russian and introduced himself as Vanya. I repeated my dissertation elevator pitch, switching between languages in a desperate attempt to build a connection.

“That is very interesting,” the manager said in Chinese and returned to talking to another employee of his that I had not noticed until now, although she was wearing something resembling a ball gown. Boris meanwhile sat with us, and while he was not too eager to discuss his work, he was happy to discuss other subjects, for example if people in Poland liked Russians. I was not discouraged, since I was mostly happy that I met someone who would maybe agree to work with me in the future. When I gave my somewhat diplomatic answer that people did not generally like Russian politicians, but regular people were not a subject of any strong feelings, Boris agreed that “normal people” will always get along with other regular people, and that gave me some hope. We chatted about the politics for a while. I should point out here that “talking about politics” in field – and by this, I mean with Russians - rarely meant discussing current geopolitical events in detail. While some interlocutors were well-informed about current events, some others saw the general sphere of politics as useless – “as if talking would change anything,” said one of

them. More often than not, it boiled down to expressing our dissatisfaction with politicians: a universal complaint that brought about a feeling of solidarity and overlooked ideological or political differences (see Ries 1997). When I said that there were no politicians in Poland that I truly liked, Boris stated that he only liked two politicians, Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, after which he looked around and started laughing. Unsure what to do, I chuckled. Then I looked around too, not sure what he had just seen. Then, we exchanged our WeChat contacts.

Boris never responded to my messages until he sent me holiday greetings almost a year later; at this point, I wasn't in China anymore, and I was not conducting fieldwork online. If anything, this short story is representative of my many attempts of trying to find interlocutors; eventually some of them succeeded. The awkward feature of ethnographic fieldwork is that the ethnographer is their own work tool, and so, the "results" are largely irreproducible. So, while I can ponder why it happened this way, I want to pivot toward a more productive conversation on encounters. One failed attempt at connection might be an anecdote, but what happens with a series of such events?

It would be a missed chance for an anthropologist not to ponder on the significance of this mistrust. Perhaps a more apt term would be "a lack of trust" as in "indifference," or simply being cautious. The truth is that fieldwork has changed me as well, or at least

fortified some beliefs and behavioral patterns I had. Perhaps the ideas of “trust” and “transparency” were never too obvious.²⁶

From my childhood in the 90s in Poland, I remember liberal newspapers and political talk shows discussing international rankings regarding transparency and social trust, where Poland invariably ranked low. In other words, it was showing what Poland is missing in order to become a civic society. It was not merely trust for politicians or state organs. The claims were illustrated with examples such as “pay what you want” or “leave your money in a box” schemes allegedly popular in Scandinavian countries. Would that ever work in Poland, was the question. Could we trust strangers? The omnipresent mistrust was supposed to be a legacy of socialism; something that – in the hopeful spirit of the early years after the transformation – would be eventually overcome at some point.

Like in other countries of the former East Bloc, the 90s and early 2000s brought a wave of “lustration” processes to Poland, where the identity of former informants of secret police was being revealed or speculated about. Born in 1991, I was too young to fully understand what *lustracja* was, but it surely occupied a lot of airtime during my childhood. The reason for – or a product of – the general distrust in socialist countries was often considered to be the state surveillance apparatus. Most notably, the anthropologist Katherine Verdery (2014; 2018) accessed the files that the Romanian Securitate kept on

²⁶ For an overview of anthropological scholarship on trust, see the edited volume “Trust and Mistrust in the Economies of the China-Russia Borderlands (Humphrey 2018).”

her as she was conducting her fieldwork starting in the 1970s and discovered what seemed like an intricate web of “informers” around her. At the same time, of course, as anthropologist she was maintaining her own network of interlocutors. As John Borneman and Joseph Masco comment, “[w]e call it participant-observation, they call it spying (2015: 781).” There are so many similarities between gathering intelligence and data in fieldwork.

The anthropologist Sayana Namsaraeva points out that “the Sino-Russian borderlands have experienced different scales and grades of distrust (rather than trust) over time (2018: 42).” However, I want to dismiss the notion that the mistrust was only directed at the representants of the Other; this is, the other nationality. While this might be said about the Chinese I interacted with, it would not be necessarily a fair judgement as they generally had less reasons to interact with Russians, a minority in the city, whereas Russian in Harbin had to rely on Chinese. Interestingly enough, these of my interlocutors who had the most contact with Chinese (coworkers, family members, friends) and spoke Chinese, tended to feel secure about their interactions with Chinese residents. These who did not speak Chinese and relied on other “cultural brokers” were more likely to expect “*obman*” (cheating) or unfair treatment from their side.

A lot of the anxiety was caused by the lack of transparency when it came to the authorities, the explicit distrust toward the Russian government and circulating conspiracy theories (see Holzlehner 2018). For example, one of my interlocutors told me that Putin recently gave a piece of Russian land to China. It was kept in secret in Russia so

that people would not find out. When I came back home. I looked up news to read about it (but if I read about it online, then it would not be a secret treaty, so that was admittedly a little pointless). The next time I saw her, I asked if the territories in question were the islands near Khabarovsk.²⁷

“That too,” she said, but the event she referenced took place “around two years ago” and it was a strip of land, maybe even 20 km wide. The Russian government had ensured that it is not publicized so “no one knows that Russia gave so much to China,” but an independent news channel reported about it. Did it happen? I cannot know, because it was done in secret, and I cannot find the media outlet she told me about. Some people believed that China will take over the Russian Far East, but territorial anxieties aside, it is not the content of the theory that matters. As Serguei Oushakine put it, “From that point of their ‘theory,’ conspiracy theories are all alike (Oushakine 2009: 75).” It was the notion that secret processes are constantly taking place backstage; one can never catch up with the external forces beyond one’s agency.

In the light of previous studies that explored immigrants’ reliance on “ethnic-based social capital (Namsaraeva 2018: 54),” how to explain the mistrust toward other compatriots, who, after all shared a language and culture, and were not a part of “the government?” People, who were all abroad, beyond the jurisdiction of the Russian

²⁷ In 2008, Russia transferred Tarabarov Ostrov (now Yinlongdao) and a half of the Bolshoi Ussuriiski Ostrov (now Heixiazi Dao) to China (X. Li 2008, Vasyukova 2018).

authorities? The question becomes even more pressing as any economic profits are removed from the equation.

In a different time and place, the anthropologist Charles Piot wrote about his Togolese interlocutors concealing their US visa applications from their closest relatives:

When I have asked Togolese why they feel compelled to conceal, to protect secrets, they've responded that they're worried about jealousy and spiritual attack, that they don't want others to imperil their journey. Among other things, this sensibility strikes me as a way of carefully marshalling one's energies for the trip ahead, of cultivating one's preparedness and avoiding having to spend energy on the pettiness and jealousy of others... A Togolese friend likes to chastise me for revealing things about myself or others that she considers best left unsaid. "You Americans reveal too much," she says. "When you tell others too much about yourself, it usually comes back to harm you" (Piot and Batema 2019: 60-61).

While I do not think my (potential) interlocutors were concerned about spiritual attacks, I do think there is a certain survival strategy in simply not revealing too much, which had then also become my own habitus. Would that come back to hurt them (or myself)? Maybe; after all, the world was full of possibilities that were beyond our current frame of reference. An interlocutor whom I don't want to name here once told me about her plans to go back to Russia for a couple of weeks; we chatted about ways to get there and advantages of taking the bus versus the train, and her general plans once she gets home. We browsed timetables and compared price tickets online. When I was leaving her apartment, her

roommate – another Russian woman, who I always assumed to be her friend – came back home.

As I was saying my goodbyes, the roommate was taking off her shoes and jacket in the hallway. I mentioned that my interlocutor should let me know when she decides to go, and I will see her when she is back. She gave me an angry stare and shook her head, gesturing to silence me.

“Don’t say that loud. She doesn’t know,” she murmured. It had not crossed my mind that this would be a secret, something to keep from other people. As it was obvious, she would not elaborate beyond “I don’t want her to know.” I said my goodbyes and left. Her absence would, of course, be noticed immediately; but until then, she just wanted to keep it to herself.

My assumptions that her roommate was her friend were not baseless, I thought; as my interlocutor told me earlier, they were spending time together, going out to restaurants and shops. They must have been at least *friendly*, was my unspoken belief, and frankly not something I ever thought about, taking a certain level of trust between the women for granted. Later, it became painfully obvious to me that I myself was operating under specific assumptions: that spending time together out of free will made a friendly relation, that being such friends would mean a certain level of trust.

Protection from the Unknown

The broader issue of protecting our “research subjects” is, of course, well known throughout the academic disciplines that presuppose any research with human subjects. I came to Harbin with the Princeton University’s Institutional Review Board approval that included a sample consent form in Mandarin Chinese, Russian and English. I took the questions of privacy, anonymity and security very seriously; and so, I always ensured my interlocutors that I would not name them and that I will omit any information that might help to identify them. The first promise was easy to fulfil. The latter one is, of course, a more challenging task, as *you don’t know what others know*. Especially in a tight-knit community, even a small detail can help someone find out. At the same time, I was not sure what are the sensitive tidbits of information; and since I could not tell, it could be anything. In other words it was both “the empirical and ethical boundaries (Borneman and Masco 2015: 781)” I was desperate not to cross. Some people were more interested in the privacy measures than the others, so to ensure we are on the same page, I would make hypothetical examples of how I would use their story, so that they could tell me what they are comfortable with. This led to a situation where I would be told a lot of things that I was not allowed to write or use later on, putting me in a position of self-censorship.

Although I admittedly did not always see the reasons for the “censorship,” just as I had no idea that – as in the story I just presented – my interlocutor’s journey was a secret,

it is a wish I always honored. In fact, I started developing this halting attitude myself, always trying to disclose as little as possible to others, erring on the side of caution. This included keeping my interlocutors separate: as in, if two of them knew each other, I would not tell one about my contact with the another and vice versa. It was something that a few of my interlocutors requested initially, but I decided to keep up with this security measure. If my interlocutors knew each other wanted to share it with each other (or with anyone else), they were absolutely free to: I had no stipulations on that.

Of course, this was very much counterproductive when it comes to the snowballing method. I could not rely on my interlocutors introducing me to anyone else if it was their preference not to disclose our relationship to anyone. I also did not have any backing in someone's trust: someone who did not want to admit to talking to me could not vouch for me to the other. Having someone's backing me could be helpful in an atmosphere of general distrust, at least within a small community; but I suppose it could also backfire if the person I would be associated with somehow lost their respectable position.

Whenever I recall this, I get asked: but what were they afraid of? I think at this point it is only fair to ask what I was afraid of. As I was always trying to adjust and accommodate my interlocutors' wishes – which I believe is a very elementary part of conducting fieldwork – I started to take on the same attitude:

Every fieldworker immersed in an other's world senses at some point the loss of one's own cultural and epistemological coordinates. That loss has been the generative source for much anthropological theorizing about culture, difference, and the condition of alterity. Over time one adjusts, consciously and unconsciously, to the way others do things: the way they think, eat, establish intimacy and distance, and experience desire and fear. More importantly, one often unconsciously begins the mirror of their projections, internalizing once-foreign attributes into the self. This is the point when the anthropologist might become aware of his or her fractured self, the duality of thinking with and across different sociocultural worlds. (Borneman and Masco 2015: 782).

I do not wish to say that I started believing the same things as I actually do not know what they believed; it was rather adopting a certain habitus, a certain mistrust. As such, I cannot answer the question of the source of this anxiety. Maybe you can call it learning from your interlocutors, which is what I was supposed to be doing anyway. (Again, some people call it participant observation, others would say it's spying.) But anyway, were these "once-foreign attributes" to me? Or was the idea of establishing (some amount of) trust with strangers what was truly foreign?

Ambiguous Visibility

Let me return to the question: But what was there to be afraid of? While I think some of the anxiety was an attempt to control the very unpredictable environment, some of it can be explained by the vulnerable position of foreigners (employment, visas, police etc.).

The "withholding" strategy was used to control one's image. It was balancing between being recognizable and readable to the government and presenting oneself to the

community. On the most local level, the government was embodied by the local police officers who were taking and checking residence registrations. Whether (and which) one of these factors was more important is another question.

Soon I realized an obvious contradiction between my promise to keep anonymity and the everlasting feeling that we were being seen. Note the passive voice here: I do not know who was seeing me, and I do not think it is merely a matter of individual persons. I also do not claim that I was being watched or observed, as this would suggest someone paying special attention to me. Maybe even no one was looking at all, but the awareness that one might was enough. I mean here visibility as a regime of power, surveillance, as in Foucault's panopticon (1979), and visibility as a moral category of being recognized "as a necessary means for subjects to be recognized by their fellow human beings (Boidy 2019: 445)."

My research stay was enabled by my Visiting Researcher position at the Peking University, so that I received a student visa: firstly, a short-term three-month visa, and then a long-term one that required me to reside in Beijing as my application was processed. During this time, my passport was at the Entry and Exit Office, so even if I wanted to travel, I would not be able to take any long-term train or bus, not to mention a flight, as showing a personal identity document is required to board. A university employee had also advised me to stay at my place of residence, as the police could come and check on me (to my knowledge, they never did). I knew I was being seen and I don't mean here that I was given

some special oversight: it was simply that my presence was being registered; I was told to expect being checked on. *How* I was being checked, is beyond me.

While passport is generally essential in a foreign country, in China it is a requirement for many activities. A certain irony about being “immobile” without a passport in a metropolis as big as Beijing is that one is still able to traverse vast distances on public transport within the city, but any inter-city destination (this is, crossing certain administrative boundaries) regardless of distance is out of reach I was told that travel is possible with a proof from the Public Security Bureau, but never dared to test it myself. While an identity proof verification is needed when checking in at a hotel, also the immigration status (visa, expiration date, stamps) is being checked and logged in. Some hotels do not accept foreign guests as they do not have a license to register foreign nationals with the police (when the front desk employee scans the passports and visas with stamps, the data is made available to relevant authorities). Any foreign currency exchange has to be registered with a passport. Every SIM card had to be registered under a real name, verified by a government-issued ID. Both in Harbin and Beijing, I had multiple cell phone stores refuse to sell me a SIM card as they did not have a way to verify my identity, reportedly not being able to process foreign passports. Many online services also require identity confirmation (most importantly, the social media application WeChat²⁸ does),

²⁸ To call it a social media application is still an understatement: besides messaging, calling, sending voice messages, file- and location- sharing, WeChat also has integrated functions of

and some do not even accept foreign passports. From time to time, my WeChat app would get locked, and I was prompted to take a selfie in order to verify my identity. Once, I even had to show and then write down my passport number in a paper notebook in a pharmacy in Beijing when buying a sinus medicine containing pseudoephedrine, which is a controlled substance.

Passport becomes an extension of self; not necessarily in the sense of citizenship as an identity, but rather as a material embodiment of one's *standing*, a tool.²⁹ For a Chinese citizen it is the national identification card that fulfills a similar function; yet, for a foreigner to lose their passport far from the closest consulate would cause a long ordeal that luckily I never got to experience.

Visibility on Camera: The Paradox of Security

There is a certain contradiction between the general tone of distrust and the feeling of security that my interlocutors expressed. In doing so, they sometimes compared Russia to China, constructing an image of rampant, unpunished corruption and disregard for the law in the former country (Humphrey 2002). They told me stories: In China, the corrupted government employees would be swiftly prosecuted, unlike in Russia. A bank employee in Bashkortostan run away with 23 million rubles, and some people online praised her for

online payments, ride-hailing and many others.

²⁹ Of course, as the technology progresses, the physical ID becomes less relevant: soon after I left, some stores introduced payments through face recognition.

getting rich. Housing developers could not sell apartments that have not been constructed yet and then vanish, taking your money with them, like some of Russians experienced in their country (see Humphrey in *Trust and Mistrust*). While I was able to find reports of many of these stories in the Russian media, some of them remain unverifiable: just as with the alleged land transfer to China. According to one interlocutor, a lot of crime either went unreported or reports were silenced by the authorities as to avoid creating panic. My goal here is not to prove or disprove any of these claims, but rather to present a specific narrative of law and order in China – a narrative that still did not translate to trust.

After all, the feeling of security is personal and subjective. For example, many of my female interlocutors as well as acquaintances I made throughout my various stays in the country emphasized that in China, one could walk outside even at night without risking being attacked by someone. I personally felt safe too.

“As much as I don’t like China, I have to admit: I like how it is so safe on the streets here,” said my interlocutor Irina. A woman in her 50s, she did not feel comfortable going out at night in her town in Amurskaia Oblast, as she was concerned about robberies and assaults. I agreed: I was not concerned about going out alone at night in Harbin either.

“Maybe it is the strict law,” Irina suggested.

Was it the strict law? Was it some underlying cultural principles that made even drunk men act politely – or rather just not harass anyone - on the streets? I did not know, but I would be confronted with the question many times. Another issue is that there

undoubtedly is violence and crime in China, and there are cases of sexual/domestic violence; foreign women might be more sheltered from it.

On another day, I was at a supermarket with an American acquaintance, when a white middle-aged woman came up to us, encouraged by hearing us speak English. She herself was an English teacher, who was in love with living in China. Recently, someone returned her hat that she lost on the street. There is no (or very little) catcalling, drunk men don't harass you on the streets, the lady continued. In fact, compared to any Western country, it was so safe here. She said she likes that people here "are taught values," allegedly so missing in the West.

"And cameras," said our new acquaintance. "There are cameras everywhere."

Reportedly, there are more CCTV cameras per person in the U.S. than in China (AIT News Desk 2019), but I personally never thought of cameras as a guarantor of security. My building, a high rise with around thirty stories, had one next to the elevators and mailboxes. I suppose that the security guards who were sitting in a little booth by the entrance had access to the recordings, but I doubt they paid much attention. There were cameras everywhere on the streets; and sometimes when I was sitting in a taxi, we drove through road toll gates that displayed every car's registration number as we drove through.

It is not my goal to provide a scientific overview of most recent surveillance technologies. I have never planned for surveillance to be a topic in my dissertation, yet surveillance encroached on me as it does to everyone else. Accordingly, I have never

started a conversation on police control and surveillance in China. In a way, I have never studied surveillance as a process. It is rather the constant reminder that you are observed, watched, controlled that I explore here to provide background information about my fieldwork.

At the same time, the subject is not able to view the state viewing him or her; again, both in the literal sense that few have access to footage from the security cameras on the street; and in the sense of information that is collected. However, in the spring of 2019, Harbin authorities joined the national action against organized crime, titled “扫黑除恶” (*saohei chu’e*, which roughly translates to “sweeping away [black] and eliminating evil”). Although the action was primarily directed at predominantly domestic organized crime, it was a period marked by increasing tensions between foreigners and Chinese authorities, resulting in a country-wide crackdown on foreign employees, including Russian migrants in Harbin (also see Pulford 2022). Reportedly, the local police were going through apartments and checking if everyone living there has been registered. People in my WeChat groups were exchanging news and gossip.

Sometime around March, I noticed new red banners with slogans everywhere. I can’t pinpoint exactly when it started; it is very possible that I did not pay attention to my surroundings when I was walking fast through the freezing air; it was getting dark earlier, too. But one day, the bank across my apartment building started displaying LED signs, announcing the actions of sweeping evil, and offering a phone number and email address

to contact in case you had any important information to report. The notice was constantly blinking and flashing red lights, urging readers to inform on any suspicious activities.

Soon after, I would see red banners, posters and bulletins everywhere. Even every bar I went to had a poster reminding of the current employment law and how to report on crime. No one of my interlocutors who could speak Chinese ever commented on any of these and I was reluctant to start a conversation directly. It was obviously an action directed at organized crime, but also illegal employment of foreign nationals. In other cities, there were posters calling for reporting on foreigners suspected of undocumented work; photos of them circulated around the WeChat group chats and social media.

One evening, I was sitting in a taxi on my way home from meeting someone, when a new red banner caught my attention. It was hung on a building next to a busy road in downtown Harbin, and it would have looked like many other government banners, if it hadn't been for the fact that it was in English. In all lowercase letters, it said "know your status." *What* status? The status of what exactly? The ambiguity of this seemed even more sinister, as if I should have already known.

The topics of surveillance and police control would not come up in my conversations with my interlocutors very often, especially as I was never the one to initiate it. Sometimes they would laugh at foreigners who refused to get Chinese sim cards or sign up for WeChat claiming they wanted to avoid the state control: the government would know anything by the time you get your visa anyway, so why bother? It was resignation to (or acceptance of)

being screened and surveilled. Interestingly enough, it was rather the opposition to it, or the attempts to avoid it, that provoked others' laughter. Firstly, it was that someone thought they could opt out. This idea itself was funny, as if someone could escape the omnipresent gaze of the state. Secondly, it was that they thought that their own actions make a difference; in other words that they have agency.

In a similar vein, an acquaintance once announced: "I know that I have given up my privacy when coming to China, but the thing is: they are watching you, but they won't do anything." I obviously do not have any information on the national security and surveillance agencies. I do, however, want to point out the specific stance of *accepting* surveillance: coming to terms with being seen.

Nevertheless, during my time in China I decided not to write down observations or thoughts on certain topics I deemed "sensitive" or imagined that could be used against me in case someone read them (because, yet again, is it ethnography or is it spying?). I had heard about the Chinese police downloading contents of personal computers and other devices during border passport control (foreigners included) or just at random check-ups. I also heard first from WeChat groups and then from Russian press, that the Chinese custom officers would also check Russian and Ukrainian's travelers' smartphones, allegedly to inspect their WeChat accounts (Mel'nichuk 2019). The rationale for that was that WeChat, as the basis of social life, would present proofs of undocumented work or other illicit activities, whether in chat transcripts, attached photos or in payment

transactions. In fact, it sometimes did, and the undocumented workers would face jail time and/or other legal consequences. The field of social interactions between migrants and police provides an insight into how the Chinese state's power becomes enacted and solidified on a transnational stage.

Sometime in the spring, when it was warm enough not to wear thick puffy coats (since this is how I measured the passage of time), I met Oksana for lunch in one of the omnipresent shopping malls (see Jewell 2015). As we were chatting, Oksana suddenly asked me: "Have you ever had your documents checked?" (*A tebe proveriali dokumenty?*)

I was somewhat shocked by this question, seemingly coming out of nowhere.

"What do you mean, checking documents?" I asked for clarifications.

"For example... the police checking your passport and visa on the street."

I had actually never experienced that.

"They did it in a Russian café recently... checked everyone's papers." The café was a newly opened bistro, the afore mentioned *blinnaia*, run by young Russian entrepreneurs.

Oksana explained that "nothing happened" and "they just checked it and left."

"But actually, you are not obliged to carry your passport on you," she added.

Foreigners in China have been often debating whether one is actually obliged to carry their documents with them at all times, or would a copy suffice. I myself preferred to carry my passport with me at (almost) all times to avoid any troubles in case of a potential document control, but others preferred to keep it secure at home, hoping that showing a

copy would suffice. A document check is not extraordinary – in fact, that is why you are supposed to carry your identification with you – yet the seeming lack of any other purpose and targeting a place popular with foreigners made it an immigration control.

A certain paradox here is that people were not concerned with their personal safety, yet they were often anxious of something. The anxiety was directed at the “unknown unknowns” caused by human behavior, and the law enforcement (police control, border control surveillance); yet it did not translate to fear of the state. “Trust agnosticism” is a term Edna Ullmann-Margalit (2017) uses to describe the state of “neither trust nor distrust.” In terms of religion, agnosticism is different than atheism in that it does not stipulate that God does not exist; but it does also not claim that God exists. Similarly, trust agnosticism is the zone between “trusting” and “distrusting.”³⁰ However, in common usage of the word, agnostics are also people who are simply not interested in the question of God’s existence. God may or may not exist, but that is beyond us. In a similar vein, the question of trust might be removed from fieldwork under (assumption of) surveillance. I believe it is a symptom of a broader issue at play: namely the assumption that a social world exists to be approached. What if these fragmentary encounters were all there was?

³⁰ Ullmann-Margalit proposes terms for different stages in the spectrum, such as “soft distrust” and “hard distrust.”

Chapter 2: “It is not ours, but it is not foreign:” Imaginarities of “Russian Harbin”

Just a couple of weeks after I arrived in China, I went to a conference under the title “Beloved Harbin” (Russian: *Liubimyi Kharbin*). As the name might already indicate, the conference was dedicated to Harbin’s history and Sino-Russian relations. Looking back, I came to see this event as a sort of introduction. However, it is telling that my entrance “into the field” was also a foray into the imaginaries of “Russian Harbin.”

This gathering was not an academic conference in the strict sense of the word, although it attracted several Chinese and Russian scholars studying Harbin’s history and Russian literature. Rather, it was organized to commemorate “120 years of Russian history” in Harbin, the city of Sino-Russian Friendship (*gorod druzhby Rossii i Kitaia*).³¹ The event took place in one of the hotels near the Zhongyang Dajie, the historical pedestrian mile. We sat in a conference hall, where a red banner with the title written in capital Russian letters was hung above the stage, with the words ГОРОД ДРУЖБЫ³² almost perfectly in

³¹ Here, 1898 marks the beginning of „Russian history” in Harbin – presumably to avoid discussions on the controversial topics of the city’s “origins,” but also marking the intertwined nature of the „Chinese” or „Harbin” history with the Russian presence. In fact, in 1998, organizers of an academic conference celebrating the city’s centennial did not receive a permit for the event, as recognizing the 100th anniversary in 1998 would indicate that Harbin was founded in 1898 (Lahusen 1998).

³² *Gorod druzhby*, literally “City of friendship.”

the middle. Then we ate lunch in the restaurant on site, a banquet menu largely inspired by Chinese cuisines, but with fewer spices, probably a gesture of goodwill toward foreign guests with less adventurous palates. Presented on rotating trays on round tables, the unfamiliar dishes were still a topic of conversation. Some of them belonged neither to the Russian, nor the local cuisine: vegetables chopped like for any fried or sautéed dish but covered in white sauce, resembling mayonnaise. Neither *liangbaicai*³³ nor Olivier salad, but it was halfway there.

Although the conference motto alludes to the international friendship and the intertwined histories of Russia and China, the official language of the conference was Russian. But, short of hiring simultaneous interpreters, what would be a viable alternative? Several presentations – by academics, predominantly – were about Russian literature, written in or about (or both) Harbin. Some speakers were old *Kharbintsy* themselves – people of Russian origins who used to live in Harbin or nearby, members of the old diaspora. The speakers now resided in countries formerly belonging to the Soviet Union: most prominently Latvia and Russia; some other residents ended up in Australia, the US or Israel. While the old Harbin diaspora disappeared, the new Harbin community was left with memories.

Other speakers discussed more contemporary matters. For example, representatives

³³ A cold dish popular in Harbin, consisting of finely chopped vegetables, tofu and vermicelli. Once in Chita, I saw it under the name 'kharbinskii salat,' a Harbin salad.

of the Russian Club (*Russkii Klub*), a volunteer-based organization coordinating many social and cultural events (and sometimes informal help for fellow migrants) in Harbin, talked about the Club's mission.³⁴ The honorary guest was the Russian consul based in Shenyang, the closest city with a diplomatic mission. Despite (or because?) the long history of Russian involvement in the region, Harbin did not have a Russian consulate as of 2018-2019.

As mentioned, I came to see this conference as a sort of anthropological debut, an event I could use to get to know people and to codify this new relationship in a way typical for the late 2010 Chinese social landscape. This primarily meant adding new contacts on WeChat, so that we could stay in touch, which then could result in invitations to various group chats (*weixin qun*). In order to find and maintain social connections, I had to move between the online and offline spaces. Although, given how embedded WeChat was in everyday life (especially once I managed to link my bank card to it), no space was *truly* offline. Even joining a *weixin* group required an invitation QR code, either sent by a friend or found otherwise, or at least I did not know any other way. Later, I would be added to multiple communities online, but for this, I needed well-connected WeChat friends, gatekeepers of digital spaces (Zani 2021). While I discussed the challenges of employing the snowballing recruiting method in my ethnographic fieldwork in the previous chapter,

³⁴ Similar organizations, often under the same name, can be found in major Chinese cities with a significant number of Russian migrants.

I want to emphasize how the very structure of WeChat necessitated a sort of snowballing that moved through both digital and physical spaces. This led to a paradoxical situation at the beginning of my fieldwork. I did not know anyone, so I wanted to join group chats to learn about ongoing events where I could meet someone, but I could not because I did not know anyone just yet.³⁵ It was a lucky chance that a friend alerted me about the conference, but now I had to use it wisely.

Upon registering as a visitor, I received a badge that stated my name in Russian and, below, my affiliation of sorts: Poland. *Pol'sha*. I looked at it surprised. I did not remember if I had mentioned my university affiliation while registering; maybe I was not asked about details either? Some guests had their universities listed on their badges. Since I registered by sending a private message to one of the organizers, I explained that I was from Poland, both self-conscious about my language skills and trying to position myself in the new, unknown environment – for some reason, I believed this was important information to share. As important, at least, as a random conference guest can be.

In some ways, being foreign, and perhaps specifically Polish, worked in my favor, as it quickly explained my accent and mistakes while speaking Russian. Finding myself in a

³⁵ WeChat can be used to find users nearby, so that it's possible to contact a stranger, but that was not particularly useful in my situation (see (Zani 2021)). However, once I joined a group, I learned about another group from a post there, perhaps attended an event advertised there, made new connections in person, was then added to another group, and so on.

room where the majority of guests were either Chinese or ethnically Russian, I knew I was most likely being perceived as a Russian woman. In a way, it was a simple elimination process in Harbin: not Chinese, therefore Russian. Of course, this illusion of belonging would never last longer than it took for me to utter a couple of words, at which point my accent would reveal that I was in fact someone else.

But, as my interlocutors would sometimes tell me, it was rare to meet a young foreigner (from the West, relatively speaking) that knows Russian, so how come I did? Also, with Harbin being popular among Russian citizens due to the proximity to the border, why was I here? This curiousness and confusion were more pronounced the closer to the border we physically were, because there were even fewer reasons for anyone else to be there, in (relatively speaking, by Chinese standards) small towns such as Heihe or Manzhouli. In this sense, being recognized in terms of nationality was crucial for my ethnographic endeavors. Anyone could conduct a similar research project, but being who I was, what else could I be doing there besides perhaps teaching a language? Nationality indicated who I was, not necessarily in terms of essentialized traits, but rather marked a double difference, a double foreignness.

Creating a Bond

At the conference, the interest in Poland took yet another form. When I got into a conversation with a local activist and historian, an older Chinese man, and told him I am from Poland and a Ph.D. student, he immediately asked, “Do you know Stokalski?”

“No,” I replied, confused. The name did not sound familiar at all. In fact, I did not know whether it was someone currently living in Harbin, a historical figure or a scholar, or any or all of these. An actor?

“What kind of student are you?! (*Na ni shi shenme xuesheng?!)*” he snapped, seemingly mildly irritated with my response.

“I am an anthropology (*renleixue*) student: I don’t study history...” I tried to explain timidly, hoping that I could recover in his eyes, as if declaring my university discipline could somehow explain my ignorance, as if “studying history” would equal familiarity with Stokalski. But the reason the historian mentioned Stokalski was not any academic affiliation or interests. It turned out that Stokalski was a Polish *Harbinets*’ whose significance for our conversation was our shared nationality.

My interlocutor accepted my lack of knowledge and proceeded to show me photos of Edward Stokalski that he had saved on his phone. The historian then scanned my WeChat code, added me, and texted me scanned photos with visible timestamps from the 1990s, many of them portraying Caucasian people sitting around a table. It might have been

someone's birthday party. He pointed out Stokalski to me, adding that he was Polish. Now I was in possession of a stranger's private photos. They were most likely taken at someone's home, which made me feel like an intruder. But our shared nationality must have been enough to connect us. Maybe the historian trusted that I could put these photos to good use, although I am not sure what is a proper use of private photos portraying individuals we have never met.

"Very interesting," I said, "I didn't know that." The historian was in possession of a variety of archival materials from the life of the European diaspora in Harbin, even collecting material evidence whenever possible. But interpellated into the world of Polish diaspora, I did some research on Edward Stokalski, who was born and raised in Harbin. He spent most of his adult life there and only came to Poland, a country he had never visited before, in 1993. Most significantly, he was the last member of the Polish diaspora in Harbin whose departure marked an end of a chapter. Stokalski passed away in 1996, years before I would even learn about a Polish community that used to live in China. I will return to the figure of Mr. Stokalski later in this chapter – while he did not leave behind many (published, at least) written accounts, he gained some prominence as "the last Pole of Harbin."

I reciprocated the favor, showing the historian somewhat related photos of an outdoor exhibition on the history of the Polish diaspora in Manchuria that I saw in Poland the summer before. I saw the posters accidentally when walking around in Warsaw and I

photographed all of them; I had just returned from my preliminary research trip in Harbin, so I thought it was an interesting coincidence. The impersonal character of these materials did not seem commensurate with the intimacy of someone's birthday dinner at home, but my gift was accepted. The historian requested I forward the photos to him, which I promptly did. After all, we were friends on WeChat already.

We had to stop our conversation as the next lecture was about to start; we never talked again. I felt that he was disappointed – or at least, disinterested – in me, as I proved an inadequate interlocutor. I did not have much to offer in terms of historical research; I did not have access to any archives or any hidden knowledge. In fact, it was he who had to introduce me to this topic. I had no connection to the Polish diaspora anywhere. By studying abroad, I probably was the first person in my family to have a chance to join any diaspora, but this Polish diaspora in Harbin was gone shortly after I was born.

On the one hand, it can be seen as a symbolical ordering into an imagined community (Anderson 2016): it was the national belonging that put Mr. Stokalski and me in a sort of a kinship, and that made my future (as in from the standpoint of the conference) interlocutors refer to the surviving Catholic church in Harbin as “yours” (*vashie*).³⁶ That

³⁶ Although I did not discuss my religious affiliation with the people in question, and never showed any interest in a religious life in Harbin, an interlocutor referred to the building of a former Polish Catholic Church as “*vasha cerkov*,” *your church*, Polish and Catholic identities so conflated. He followed up with a story about going to Poland in the 1980s, where he was deeply impressed by religiosity of Polish people, not suppressed by the Communist government the way it was in the Soviet Union.

should not be surprising: an anthropologist is not an invisible, detached observer. There was countertransference at play. My interlocutors took an interest in me, tried to make sense out of my presence, and ascribed it with meaning. As John Borneman points out, our own identification might have little significance to our interlocutors, who then assign us to the positions that have more resonance (2011). Granted, these comments in particular came from individuals knowledgeable enough about Harbin's history and geography to make this connection, who, in turn, constituted only a small part of my general interlocutor pool. From this perspective, simply being a foreigner (and not one of the known foreigners at that) and directly acknowledging this position opened more avenues of communication. And then, my interlocutors, being more knowledgeable than I was, could recreate the connection with the – foreign to them – imagined community for me.

Yet, the continuity of memory has been broken, and, lacking both any useful knowledge or a substantial emotional attachment, I was not the one to attempt to repair it. “While the longing is universal, nostalgia can be divisive,” wrote Svetlana Boym in “The Future of Nostalgia (2001: xiii). While the interest in history was perhaps universal at the conference, the object of nostalgia was still unclear to me. Whether there was a place for these distinctly Polish memories in the greater narrative of Russian Harbin, I am not sure: as I have indicated elsewhere in this dissertation and will elaborate on in the next section, historical narratives around Harbin differ greatly between national traditions.

Throughout the conference, I learned that there were also people who claimed a more direct connection to this diasporic memory. Perhaps they even wanted to revive or reconstruct it. I became increasingly aware of these sentiments while attending various events, including concerts and poetry readings (usually combined in a sort of an artistic soiree), some of them even at the venue of the former Russian Yacht Club (see also Meshcheryakov 2021). In fact, it was visiting the restaurant and event space at the former Yacht Club that prompted me to reconsider the relationship of some migrants to the old Harbin. Yacht Club is one of the relics of the Chinese Eastern Railway enterprise: built in 1912, it was a leisure space “not formed for ordinary workers, but for the technocratic elite and officers (2021: 191).” It is located on the southern bank of the Sungari (Songhua) river, which to this day is a popular promenade extending throughout much of central Harbin. As the name indicates, yachts were popular in Harbin, with sailing races being regularly organized. Constantly rebuilt and improved on, by 1940, the venue had its own beach and shoreline, restaurant, nightclub, and a garden with palm trees (2021: 193, 204). It surely was a luxurious space, and although the waterfront and the beach were open to the public, the restaurant must have been available only to the wealthiest residents.

As of 2018, the restaurant prices were quite typical for the touristy neighborhood of Harbin. The name of the club was written in big Chinese characters over the entrance: 亚道古鲁布水岸餐厅 – *Ya Dao Gu Lu Bu* Waterfront Restaurant, the first five characters representing a phonetic adaptation of “Yacht Club” into Chinese, rather than a direct

translation. Also on the sign was the Russian name in Cyrillic. Although the glory has faded, the Yacht Club was still a pleasant place to visit: the historical building had an enclosed garden, where restaurant guests could eat and drink in the fresh air, next to the Songhua/Sungari river. The interiors were mostly preserved, with dark wooden panels and old-fashioned furniture. Perhaps as a nod to the Russian past, the menu included a few Russian dishes, as well as some generically “Western” ones (French fries and pizza); otherwise, most of the positions offered were from the local, Dongbei cuisine.

The first time I went there, it was for an elegant ball following the conference. There must have been over a hundred guests. We were seated at round tables covered with white linens, set around a T-shaped stage that extended into the room like a catwalk. The hall had wooden panels and high ceilings, decorated with moldings and brightly lit by stage reflectors. It might have been a historic venue, but the T-shaped stage and a big screen behind it were a recent addition, suitable for contemporary Chinese weddings and banquets; so might have been the glass “lazy Susans” at every table.

Although one of the organizers mentioned to me that she had been preparing for this ball for a month, I myself was not quite prepared for the upscale character of the event. It was also because I only learned about it a couple of days before. Soon it turned out I was very underdressed as I had just arrived in China without any “formal” or even “elegant” outfits and did not have any time or opportunity to buy a cocktail dress or anything resembling formal attire. In my plain, casual cotton dress, I felt very self-conscious next

to ladies in cocktail dresses and shiny ball gowns and gentlemen wearing suits or at least collared shirts. I was assigned a seat at a random table, where I was happy to find out that my new companions were quite welcoming. Although most of the guests at my table did not know each other prior to the event, the atmosphere was not awkward. Men quickly took over the re-distribution of beverages so that a woman never had to pour a drink herself, a custom I would always see Russian men in Harbin following. I was somewhat comforted seeing a familiar sparkling wine brand, *sovetskoe igristoe*. Conversations were flowing.

The cultural program of the ball was quite impressive: some community members were musically talented or even professionally educated in performing arts. Musicians performed a number of songs, including a remake of the popular song “Moscow Nights.” (Подмосковные вечера/ *Podmoskovnye vechera*)³⁷ that was adapted to “Harbin Nights” (Подхарбинские вечера/ *Podkharbinskie vechera*). With my limited knowledge of Russian – and specifically Harbin – culture, I wage to say that some of the songs and poems were written by the performers themselves. In fact, every event organized by the Russian community I would attend had a cultural program performed by volunteers of all ages. Parents seemed very enthusiastic about musical or dance (ballet, for example)

³⁷ Known in Chinese as 莫斯科郊外的晚上 (*Mosike jiaowai de wanshang*), the song is sometimes changed into “Harbin Nights,” and the lyrics are adapted to reflect the local environment, and consequently translated to Chinese (哈尔滨郊外的晚上, *Ha’erbin jiaowai de wanshang*).

training for their children, with lessons offered at the city theaters or by private teachers. Mothers (especially ones married to Chinese men) generally put a lot of emphasis on teaching their children about Russian culture in general, including reading the classics and celebrating holidays such as Maslenitsa. Therefore, as impressive as the cultural program of the evening was, it was also part and parcel of the regular cultural life of the Russian-speaking community in Harbin. The organizers thanked everyone for coming. A professional photographer was taking photos of guests. It was a well-organized event and, frankly, a moment of relief after the long conference.

After the visit to the Yacht Club, I started special attention to the ways people identified with the past, trying to claim a legacy, claim a memory or maintain a sort of continuity between not only generations but even epochs and eras. While Harbin as a migrant destination has to be seen for what it is now and for its economic significance and regional geography, I wanted to examine people's desire to be *a part* of Harbin, or the ways in which the colonial heritage becomes a legitimization of their presence. In other words, I look at the afterlives of the Russian Harbin and the contemporary desires that – ever so subtle – permeate the ideoscape (Appadurai 1990) of the city.

Finding and Founding of Russian Harbin

A trace of this desire can be found in the proliferation of Russian-language literature discussing Harbin; perhaps the literary format lends itself to such musings. In approaching the topic of imaginaries of “*Russkii Kharbin*” as portrayed in fiction and non-fiction works, I am inspired by Marvin D. Sterling’s analysis of Japanese literary engagement with Jamaica (2011). Following Sterling’s statement that “this may do a disservice to a more properly aesthetic appreciation of these texts,” I also “address these aesthetic elements as extensions, in the opportunistic service, of a specific ethnographic enterprise... (2011: 54).”

While the re-enactment of the Russian Harbin also took place in interpersonal encounters or performances, I pay special attention to literature produced by people living in or interested in the city. Literary representations constitute a particularly significant ethnographic resource for my research due to their (as I presume) didactical or educational function and their intended audience. Given their publication and sales in Russia (as well as in China through informal networks) they are directed to any Russian-speaking reader, regardless of whether in Harbin, somewhere else in China, or Russia. The geographical distance might be of an advantage here: in some cases, the author seemingly wants to introduce and convince the reader. The literary portrayal of the city might not be as needed while the author and the reader are both located in Harbin, but it plays an

important role in creating and disseminating the myth of “Russian Harbin” to a broader audience. As such, the social and cultural worlds might be more easily readable through literary texts than through other modes of communication.

What do I mean by the myth of “Russian Harbin”? The myth here is not something that is by default false, or a legend to be debunked. In other words, I am not concerned with the veracity of the claim – which is deeply subjective and multi-faceted (and simply just unverifiable: what does it mean that Harbin is a Russian city?) but rather with the ways the image of “Russian city” is created, reproduced and circulated. More specifically, I look at narratives portraying Harbin as a distinctly Russian city, an object of deep emotional attachments. To sum up what I discussed in the Introduction, on the basis of this claim lies the conviction that Harbin was founded by Russians. Here, this statement is treated as an objective fact, which is not the case for many Chinese historians, who point out the preexisting Chinese settlements and forts, and argue against a colonial reading of history. I will return to these arguments in another part of this chapter.

To further complicate the myth of the national origins of the city, and the Sino-Russian tensions over it, I want to point out the multiplicity of similar claims that are circulating in both popular culture and academic spaces. While I am not able to present an exhaustive overview of national narratives, I will name two examples:

Firstly, in the popular Polish discourse, the Russian version is expanded by mentions of Polish engineers and thousands of Polish settlers – who were, nevertheless, initially

subjects of Tsarist Russia and quite likely speaking Russian on a daily basis (Wierzbicki 2019: 171). Interestingly enough, the aforementioned Edward Stokalski is categorized as an “old Russian resident” in some accounts (Gribin 2015: 19). However, one of the Polish engineers, Adam Szydłowski, is even named the “founder of Harbin” in an epigraph dedicated to his memory in a book on the Polish community in Harbin (Cabanowski 1993). Every once in a while, there appears a new online article on the Polish Harbin: “A Polish City in China (Cymer 2021),” “Harbin: A Polish City in China [Harbin: Polskie Miasto w Chinach (2015)]” or “Harbin, a Chinese City Founded by a Pole [Harbin – chińskie miasto założone przez Polaka (2019)].” While – surely due to the geographical distance and other geopolitical aspects, but also perhaps because there are not many historically Polish buildings left – Harbin does not attract many Polish migrants who would reinforce this memory; the city becomes a container for certain colonial desires and national pride that nevertheless – most likely, in a direct proportion to the actual population sizes - remain marginal to the Russian identity of the city.

Since Harbin had a significant Jewish population, a similar echo can be found in publications related to the Jewish history, although usually with less emphasis on the original “founding” and more on “building” the city. In the words of the author Dara Horn: “And then I discovered something deeply strange: the city of Harbin was built by Jews (2021: 56).” Dara Horn reflects on Harbin’s Jewish history in the chapter “Frozen Jews” of her book “People Love Dead Jews. Reports from a Haunted Present” where she points

out that Russian Jews moved to Manchuria to escape pogroms and antisemitic laws, and many wealthy entrepreneurs contributed significantly to the city's development (2021: 58; also see Ben-Canaan 2018).

This multiplicity of narratives leads to the controversial question of the proper interpretation of history. The historian James Carter sums it up in the following words:

In discussing Harbin's early history, I frequently engage a passionate – but misleading – debate: Was the city Chinese or Russian? Because my emphasis is on the Chinese presence, I seem enlisted automatically into the Chinese side of the argument. This is not my goal. No matter what nationalistic and nostalgic authors may suggest, Harbin has never been typically Russian or Chinese at any point in its history. Yet, to deny its Russian, or Chinese, or Japanese (or Polish, Korean, Jewish) characteristics is to omit entire dimensions of this unique metropolis. How, then, to describe without essentializing or oversimplifying (2002: 4)?

It is an indisputable fact that representatives of many nations, subjects of the Russian Empire or not, lived and worked in Harbin. And so, any research on contributions or fates of any particular group is not automatically an attempt to claim an “authorship.” As Carter points out, it is impossible to ascribe the “authorship” of Harbin to any nation. Here, however, rather than focus on the national pride, I want to think through the idea of emotional attachments and the sort of imperial memory-making that allows for these claims. In other words, why is Harbin a site of these memories? But also, more importantly: what is the agentive function of this myth?

A crucial distinction here, especially given the neocolonial undertones of this statement, is that it is a Russian city by its *spirit* (*dukh*, дух). That means that the symbolical ordering of Harbin to the sphere of Russian “character” does not result in any territorial demands; the city’s belonging to China as the country is not disputed, unlike some territories lying on the Sino-Russian border.

However, I argue that the isolation is what makes Harbin special as an “island” of Russian culture. It is an identity preserved despite the circumstances. It is precisely the *russskiy dukh* that can be felt to this day: or, at least, it *should* be felt. Here, however, I want to focus on the ways in which this affect is being re-lived today; or on the agentive properties of this affect.

Therefore, in this chapter, I do not focus on contemporaneous novels and written documents produced within the temporal and geographical bounds of the concession. These works present a wide array of “ethnographic details” almost; a multi-cultural society in its everyday life; like some of the speakers at the “Beloved Harbin” conference, they do mention poverty and some White émigrés’ alienation and disappointment, or the suffering caused by the Japanese occupation. As such, they constitute great source material for historical anthropology. Nevertheless, I am instead interested in cultural texts produced in the last decades, speaking to the idea of the “Russian spirit” that has been preserved over the years. While the first category provides insight into the life of the early 20th century international community, I am rather interested in the perception of this

community *today*. In other words, the presence of the “old” generation constitutes a base on which the myth can be re-lived today; and while the people are gone, there is also some preserved material heritage that can be treated as a witness, a proof that the old life existed.

I should also point out that there exists a relatively prolific field of literary historical fiction portraying life in the early 20th century Harbin, such as “The Winter Station” by Jody Shields (2018) or “White Gardenia” by Belinda Alexandra (2005). A quick search for Harbin-related literature reveals that the city has been quite an inspiration for various literary works, which already shows the cultural significance of the city and most importantly, its short-lived multi-national community. This is surely also due to the general fascination with the pre-revolutionary Russia and China as depositories of “unspoiled” national cultures before communism; Harbin being, again, a very apt subject of these imaginaries. Many of these positions reproduce romanticized and Orientalist tropes of a lost European colony, often focusing on international and interracial romantic relationships. These tend to be published in English and are often written by authors who lack a substantial personal connection to the city, which is not an impediment when it comes to reproducing a myth (perhaps quite the opposite) but nevertheless did not play any role for my interlocutors.

Reading Russian Harbin

In this section, I focus on contemporary non-fiction available in Russian, often recommended to me by my interlocutors who saw these books as fitting my academic pursuits, which does not necessarily mean they “endorsed” the context. For example, Polina, a Russian woman active in various cultural initiatives around the city, recommended books that “could be useful” for my research, including Olga Kurto’s “*Russkiii Mir*,” the only (known to me) monography on the lives of Russian migrants in contemporary China that I discuss elsewhere, and Nikolai Kradin’s “*Russkaia Atlantida*.” An exception from it is Gribin’s “Beloved Harbin (2015);” full title in Russian: “Любимый Харбин. Сборник рассказов о самом русском по своему происхождению и по духу из всех китайских городов — Харбине.” To my knowledge, the book has not been translated into any foreign language; I translated the title into English as “Beloved Harbin. Collection of stories about China’s most Russian city by its spirit and history – Harbin.” I first found it in a bookstore in Vladivostok in 2017, and then purchased again directly from the author who was selling copies in Harbin. While Gribin is quite a prominent figure in the Russian circles in Northeast China, I had few opportunities to interact with him personally as he was not available for an interview. Nevertheless, these books circulated within the Russian community in Harbin, although I am unable to say more about their popularity.

I have also examined works and memoirs written by long-term foreign residents (Kajdański 2000, 2013; Kuznetsov 2004) as well as media appearances and interviews.

Some of them are over 20 years old, so predating the recent tourist boom of the city; some of them remain quite removed from the contemporary Harbin (Kuznetsov 2004) some deal with topics that are related to the migration after the post-opening reform (Gribin 2015).

The category of non-fiction is very broad here: Gribin reflects on his own life as a resident of Harbin, calling himself “*diletant-samouchka* (2015: 6).” His book is a collection of essays constituting a sort of a guidebook for Harbin, inviting and preparing the reader for the travel to the “extraordinary Chinese city with a Russian soul (2015: 7).” Kradin’s “Atlantis” (Kradin 2001) is a book about architecture, urban planning and art first and foremost; featuring both detailed descriptions of multiple buildings, such as churches and temples, train stations (of course) and family houses, and biographies of Russian architects and engineers. Seemingly, these positions do not have much in common other than the geographical focus on Harbin and the Russian presence, historical or present. Yet, read together, as I read them during and after my fieldwork, they present a captivating image of the affect haunting the contemporary city residents. It is not only haunting because this certain quality is referred to as a *dukh*, a spirit; it is because this ambiguous heritage returns to us on multiple occasions.

Sergei Gribin discusses a variety of topics, ranging from the history of the city, the old diaspora, his own life and work in a “Russian Village,” a museum-like complex of old villas built for Russian officers, acting as an extra in Chinese movies, Chinese food, and drinking

culture, to the contemporary Sino-Russian relations. The approach I employ in this chapter does not do justice to the variety of topics the author covers, giving the reader an insight into his life in Harbin. Yet the emotional attachment to the city is already visible in the title: not only “beloved,” Harbin is a distinctly Russian city. Later, Harbin is deemed an “extraordinary Chinese city with a Russian soul (2015: 7),” and a “grandiose Chinese-Russian joint project (2015: 15).” In the introduction, the author explains that while only ten Russians still lived in Harbin according to the 2000 Census, “wherever *kharbintsy* would live afterward, they would always warmly reminisce over the years spent in Manchuria. Harbin would always remain their favorite city, maybe because it was their youth? (2015: 5)”³⁸ But throughout the anecdotes and stories presented in the book it becomes clear that the answer is not exclusively memories from the young years.

In one of the chapters, Gribin (2015: 14) recounts coming back from his annual trip to Russia: “...we are going back to our abroad. To a foreign (*chuzhuiu*, literally: belonging to someone else), but not alien (*chuzhduiu*) to our Russian lifestyle, country....”³⁹ The skillful play between the words *chuzhaia* and *chuzhdaia* deserves an explanation, as not only might these two words seem similar to a reader that is not familiar with Russian, but they are also semantically related. In fact, both can be translated into English as alien.

³⁸ As indicated previously, all translations of excerpts from „Beloved Harbin...” are mine.

³⁹ Russian: ...возвращаемся в свою заграницу. В чужую, но не чуждую нашему российскому укладу страну...

*Chuzhoi*⁴⁰ means belonging to someone else or related to someone else, not the subject speaking: for example, you can see a *chuzhoi* car parked in your driveway, or you can grab a *chuzhoi* coat by mistake. By reading this book, we see Harbin through *chuzhie glaza*, someone else's eyes. *Chuzhoy* is the counter concept of *svoi*, which is one's own. In contrast, *chuzhdoi* means alien, extraneous. For example, *chuzhdaia ideologiia* is an ideology that is foreign to us, not by means of ownership, but foreign to our values.

Note the tension between belonging and othering: the abroad is already familiar, *zagranitsa* becomes *svoia*, indicating a close emotional attachment to an object that should remain distant by its nature. It is not ours, but it is not foreign, which puts the object somewhere in the middle; or maybe it is both foreign and ours, making the object bridge the difference. It is abroad after all, so by definition not belonging to the subject. It is external to us, and yet we are getting as close to it. In geometry, an asymptote is a line or a curve that continuously approaches a line yet never intersects it at any point. Here, the attachment to Harbin and China and the particular quality of Harbin render the foreignness more approachable; yet it remains a foreign country, no matter how close it might appear.⁴¹

Gribin links the old Russian diaspora, including Stokalski, to the new *Kharbintsy*'

⁴⁰ Masculine form of the adjective.

⁴¹ I should add that Thomas Csordas (2004) points out that "there are non-Euclidean geometers who insist that ultimately—in the ultimate—the curve and the line do meet." This would definitely change the meaning of this metaphor.

whose timely arrival in the 1980s allows him to create a national, genealogical connection: by meeting them in person, the newcomers could carry on old traditions. Unlike administrators of the old concession, he does not claim the land but merely the cultural heritage: after all, the place belongs to someone else but remains familiar. He writes: “Here, in addition to the historical Russian roots, some aura, kind to us, Russians, has been preserved (2015: 33-34).”⁴²

To reiterate my previous point on territorial demands and colonial desires, I argue that the idea of the Russian Harbin is contingent on the fact that Harbin is not in Russia, and therefore remains and has to remain foreign. While it is important to keep in mind that the following text was written several years ago, I want to point out a certain paradox present in “Beloved Harbin.” Gribin calls his workplace, the Russian Village, an island of Russian culture (2015: 32) - within a city that is Russian-by-spirit. However, he seems to find the biggest advantage of the Russian Village in the fact that it is actually not in Russia: there is no Russian television channels or media that constantly disseminate bad news. There are no street crime, alcoholism, and drug use, so that women are not afraid to walk outside at night (a fact my female interlocutors mentioned multiple times), and there is no “bad feeling that something unpleasant is about to happen” or (somewhat cryptic) “problems from our ‘native’ authorities (2015: 32-33).” In other words, Harbin is a good

⁴² Russian: Здесь, помимо исторических русских корней, сохранилась какая-то добрая по отношению к нам, россиянам, аура.

place to live because the Russian spirit is not overtaken by the everyday life in Russia; it relies on the asymptotic belonging.

Atlantis, Paris and Moscow of the East

The second iteration of Russian Harbin is Atlantis. As a legendary lost continent, Atlantis' existence is a myth itself. It “builds on a concept of the psychologically or politically repressed, the forgotten, and the authentic. It often appears as the image of a hidden community, in some way remembered and revealed, which undermines the oppressive center, exposing its inauthenticity (Clowes 2011: 20). A sunken city, Atlantis is frozen in time, unspoiled by historical events and political trends. Of course, as a city of seven million residents that developed significantly after the founding of the PRC, Harbin is anything but preserved in its old form: literally and figuratively. As Cho (2013) notes, the “cosmopolitan” community of the city took up relatively little time and especially space in the city's history and current form. In fact, the old European part of the city, as much as it is culturally and commercially important, takes up a tiny part of the contemporary urban area of Harbin.

Kradin's “Harbin – Russkaia Atlantida” was published in 1993, and Kuznetsov's essay

“Manchuria - Rossiiskaia Atlantida”⁴³ came out two years later.⁴⁴ I am not sure whether there is any connection between these two authors (at least, Kuznetsov does not refer to Kradin). Kuznetsov’s text is perhaps the most openly politically motivated one, as he argues that post-Soviet Russia in the era of reform and “chaos in the heads (*razrukha v golovakh*) should learn from the Russian *civilization* of Manchuria. Civilization here means both a spatially and temporally delineated society as well as a degree of development that the Russian colony brought upon the Manchurian steppes. A “Russian city on the Chinese soil (2004: 94),” Harbin was a center of “Russian culture, Russian civilization (2004: 94).” Kuznetsov introduces the historical Harbin: “On the Manchurian, foreign (*chuzhoi*) soil, far from Russia shaken by social cataclysms, a Russian population lives a traditionally Russian life (2005: 95)” and lists various achievements, including both material and intangible cultural goods. These serve as proof of what “the Russian nation’s creative initiative under the direction of an honest and cultured administration (*pod rukovodstvom chestnoi i kul’turnoi administratsii*)” can achieve (2004: 89) – a lesson, Kuznetsov argues, very much needed given the disorientation of the sociopolitical system

⁴³ Kuznetsov uses the term *rossianie* as opposed to *russkie* as ethnicity as he refers to “representants of many nationalities of the Russian Empire (2004:91)” who respected each other and lived in “a civilized manner (2004:93).”

⁴⁴ I became familiar with Kuznetsov’s essay because Edward Kajdański discusses an article titled “Manchuria – Rossiiskaia Atlantida” in the conclusion of his book on the CER, published in 2000. His bibliography indicates that the article was published in 1995 in a magazine “*Russkie v Kitaie*” issued in Ekaterinburg. I was only able to access an article under the same title that was published in 2004, hence the discrepancy in publication dates. Comparing the 2004 article to the quotes used by Kajdański, I assume that both versions are very similar, but I cannot determine the extent of changes (if any) made by Kuznetsov between 1995 and 2004.

and “the changing value system” in the 90s Russia. Learning the Russian Manchurian ways of life can provide guidance for future generations to discover “civilized forms of life” so that contemporary Russia does not share the same fate as the Russian Atlantis.

Kuznetsov avoids any discussions on the colonial nature of the Russian expansion, even as conspicuous as imitating the metropolis in the new concession, or the idea of subjugating new territories (see Meshcheryakov 2021); or rather, he sees the expansion of Russian capital as unproblematic or even justified as Manchuria was “undeveloped” and “sparsely populated.” Manchuria gave the Russian settlers a possibility of creating a better Russia away from Russia: and in fact, as Wolff notes, “[a] growing spirit of experimentation made Manchuria a test case – a program whose implications could be discussed all the more freely because the region was officially beyond the Empire’s borders (1999: 79).”

Kuznetsov’s essay differs from others discussed in this chapter as it does not focus on the physical city present today; Harbin of the 1990s does not play any role in the lessons of the Russian Atlantis as the Russian civilization is not present there anymore. In other words, he does not call for or encourage a return to Harbin in the spatial sense; being in the contemporary Harbin is largely irrelevant here. Kuznetsov’s interest lies in a different temporal plane. Learning from the Russian-Manchurian civilization does not require physical visits to the area, but rather more research into the unique historical period. What this text does, however, is positing Harbin as a symbolically charged site of a unique form

of Russian civilization.

Published two years earlier, Kradin's *Russkaya Atlantida* is devoted to the architectural heritage of the Russian concession. Kradin also mentions the exceptionalism of the Russian colony that managed to recreate its national culture in a short period of time, although he does not argue for a sociopolitical significance of this heritage for contemporary Russia; it is primarily a book about architecture and architects. Yet, his expertise does have an impact on the contemporary life of Harbin: as an architect, Kradin oversaw the reconstruction of the St. Nicholas Orthodox Church. As I will elaborate in Chapter 4, the new-old *cerkev* is now located in a suburban resort outside of Harbin; a tourist village that is indeed indented to look like a Russian settlement frozen in time, albeit perhaps slightly ahistorical.

Finally, there is the variation of the Atlantis imaginary that I call the "Paris and Moscow of the East" trope. It might seem surprising if not unjustifiable; after all, Atlantis is mythical, but Paris and Moscow do exist. I ask the reader to suspend the skepticism for a while; let us return to the figure of Edward Stokalski, the last member of Polish diaspora in Harbin that became an important figure in this chapter due to my interlocutor's interpellation.

When the LA Times published an article in 1985 reporting on Mr. Stokalski's birthday party, the journalist described the city as "the Manchurian city in northeast China that once had more than 100,000 foreigners and was known as the Paris (or Moscow) of the

Far East (Mann 1985).” Mr. Stokalski is then quoted to say:

“Before, Harbin was very beautiful; it was a small Paris. Now it doesn’t look like Paris” referring to the destruction during the Cultural Revolution.

What city was not known as Paris of the East? The description has been liberally applied to many cities across the world, including Sankt Petersburg, Budapest, Istanbul, Beirut, Shanghai and Warsaw. The latter one allegedly resembled Paris, just as in the case of Harbin, only before the Second World War and Communist takeover. In a way, the world is full of lost Parises; the Parisian charm apparently cannot survive a communist makeover. But Harbin was more than just simply a Paris of the East, not even just a Moscow of the East. Throughout my fieldwork, I noted the following monikers:

Восточный Сион (Vostochnyi Sion; Zion of the East – used only in Russian, indicating the numerous Jewish community)

Восточный Петербург (Vostochnyi Peterburg, St. Petersburg of the East – used only in Russian)

Восточная Москва (Vostochnaia Moskva) / 东方莫斯科 *Dongfang Mosike* / Moscow of the East

Восточный Париж (Vostochnyi Parizh)/ 东方巴黎 *Dongfang Bali* / Paris of the East (this also applies to other Chinese cities with colonial history: Dalian and Shanghai)⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Also, a “Manchurian Paris” as mentioned by James H. Carter (2002: 11).

These attempts at locating Harbin in relation to certain, more famous, points of reference indicate the city's secondary quality: a copy, mimesis of something else. Yet, it is the comparison to other cities that experienced communism that stands out in this Atlantis imaginary: the pre-revolutionary culture and the destroyed pre-revolutionary architecture mark the temporal distance from the lost land.

Considering the discrepancies between the Polish and the imperial Russian historiography, Edward Kajdański's commentary on the Atlantis idea is particularly interesting. Although himself born and raised in Harbin, Kajdański writes: "for a Pole [living in Manchuria] will always considered a stay in China, a memory, better or worse. For a Russian, it is being at home (*"u siebie"*), in his own 'little fatherland,'⁴⁶ although so different, so unlike to the often foreign for years 'great Fatherland' in the North (2000: 178)." While Kajdański does not believe in the Russian spirit of the city, he compares the city to Hong Kong, posing the question of why the latter, unlike Harbin, can become "something more than merely 'the British Atlantis (2000: 194).'"⁴⁷ There is, of course, a myriad of geopolitical and economic reasons why, to say the least, Hong Kong is a port

⁴⁶ Kajdański uses the Russian term "*mala Rodina*."

⁴⁷ Wolff (1999) makes a comparison between Hong Kong and Harbin: "Rey Chow's comment that 'the history of modern Hong Kong could always be written as some form of quest for Chinese identity that was preempted and made impossible from the beginning, and most significantly by its ineradicable colonial taint' is equally valid for Harbin." Interestingly, Wolff's conclusion is the opposite of Kajdański's question: while Kajdański asks why Harbin did not become as successful as Hong Kong, Wolff wonders if Hong Kong might follow into Harbin's footsteps and lose much of its economic vibrancy due to the decline of "cross-border contact and cosmopolitanism (1999: 4)."

city. It is interesting, however, that colonization is still seen as the main factor of development. The comparisons of the Pearl River Delta cities and the Chinese Northeast are not rare though: especially the border city Manzhouli is compared to Shenzhen, a city that lies directly on the border with the Hong Kong Special Autonomous Region and that developed from a small village within the last decades. Throughout my research, I noted that the South always remained a somewhat elusive destination for my interlocutors, who believed it was a better place to live: more money and opportunities, a better weather.

Alienation and Foreignization: Coming to the Chinese Harbin

That Han Chinese residents of Harbin refuted claims of the distinct transnational identity of the city, offended when outsiders called Harbin “a Russian city,” is hardly a surprise. Interestingly enough, Harbin is a city known for its “purest” Mandarin (Carter 2002: 12); as residents like to remind foreigners, it is the best place to learn Chinese. It may be a city of the Sino-Russian friendship, but a Russian city?

“It’s not a Russian city” told me Yang, a born and raised *Harbinren*, a Harbin local, in his late 20s. “It is a Chinese city! It is a city with old Russian architecture.” Living in a Russian city when he was at home was an outrageous idea for Yang, and he despised the (foreign) blogs and articles he saw online praising “the Russian atmosphere” of the city. He did not dispute that Harbin was founded in 1898 or that it was the Chinese Eastern Railway that was the catalyst for the city’s founding: it was the connection to the past that

seemed exaggerated and misplaced to him. He saw some of the coverage as a cheap, ignorant marketing ploy.

“Perhaps one should say: a city with Russian history,” I said, not knowing whether I was treating on a mine, but Yang seemed to agree, annoyed by these attempts to “foreignize” his hometown and pull it apart from the rest of the country.

The Harbin-raised author Ah Cheng begins his essay “An alienated Harbin” (被异化哈尔滨 *Bei yihua de Ha'erbin*) with this short historical overview:

Harbin is a city that never had city walls. In ancient times, it was the land of the Sushen and Jurchen, then it became the expansion grounds of the Jin and Qing Dynasties. A couple of thousand years later, it was the place of recuperation and multiplication (休养生息的地方 *xiuyang shengxi de difang*) of the Manchus, Daurs, Oroqen, Xibo, Evenki and over 30 ethnicities.⁴⁸ Hundreds years ago, a lot of exiles from foreign countries arrived, escaping the chaos of war. Based on the appearance of their hometowns, these foreign exiles turned Harbin into a city of foreign qualities (一座具有异国情调的城市 *yi zuo juyou yiguo qingdiao de chengshi*). In the beginning of the 20th century Europeans and Americans called Harbin ‘Moscow of the East’ and ‘Paris of the East’ (2009: 27).⁴⁹

A quite prolific chronicler of life in Harbin, Ah Cheng wrote a number of books, essays and articles devoted to the city’s history and culture. A recurring theme in his works that

⁴⁸ Cheng uses the phrase 少数民族 *shaoshu minzu*, which can be translated to “small-numbered ethnicities.”

⁴⁹ My own translation.

include a photo essay titled “Harbin, an alienated city” for Chinese National Geography, a travel magazine similar to the National Geographic (2008) is the foreign character of Harbin or the impact the presence of foreign settlers had on the city. Cheng commemorates the built environment left by the foreigners; elsewhere, he chronicles local Harbin customs and traditions that he usually attributes to the Russian cultural influence. While documenting life in Harbin with an ethnographic sensitivity and a certain sense of nostalgia for the world of his childhood, Cheng does not necessarily long for the foreign. He tends to praise Harbin’s exceptionalism, which is partially attributed to the foreign but does not seem to celebrate the foreign presence. In fact, some of his essays show the poverty of the late diaspora period, where many Europeans were struggling and left on their own (2014). Although he does not engage in a more detailed critique of the foreign appropriation, his works provide an insight into the ambivalence surrounding the foreign presence.

Even the title of his essay raises a question. Although I had translated it as “An alienated Harbin,” the Chinese word 异化 (*yihua*) in the title has multiple meanings. One of them, perhaps the most used one, is “to alienate,” as in Marx’s alienation or social alienation. Another one, commonly used in linguistics and translation studies, can be translated as “foreignization” (Wei 2015; Yu 2016) or “dissimilation.” Tracing back to writings of the German linguist Friedrich Schleiermacher (Schleiermacher 1992 [1813]), the concept of foreignization means, to put it in simpler terms, that the translated text

retains some traces of the original language. In the words of the translation theorist Lawrence Venuti, who expanded on these concepts:

Schleiermacher allowed the translator to choose between a domesticating method, an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values, bringing the author back home, and a foreignizing method, an ethnodeviant pressure on those values to register the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text, sending the reader abroad (1995: 20).

Unsurprisingly, “foreign flavor (异域味道 *yicheng weidao*)” or “Russian flavor (俄罗斯味道 *e’luosi weidao*)” are phrases that often appear in descriptions of Harbin’s architecture and tourist attractions, similarly to “foreign atmosphere” (see Koga 2008).

Other languages do not retain this double meaning of *yihua*. For example, in German, while alienation means *Entfremdung*, foreignization translates to *Verfremdung*.⁵⁰ The first one includes the prefix *ent-* signaling the beginning of an action, undoing of something, separation or removal; the other uses *ver-* indicating a process of transition into a state, becoming, or a faulty action. While German is more precise in this case with the prefix *ver-* signaling a transition to a certain state and the *ent-* leading to undoing of this action, the word *yihua* merely indicates a process where something altered, foreign, is involved. The stem character *yi* 异 simply means “different” or “hetero” and can be found

⁵⁰ In his essay “Entfremdung, Verfremdung: Alienation, Estrangement,” Ernst Bloch (1970) translates *verfremden* as “to estrange.”

in words such as “difference” (差异 *chayi*) or “heterosexual” (异性 *yixing*) and so on. It also appears in words such as 奇异 *qiyi* and 怪异 *guaiyi*, meaning “strange,” and 异常 *yichang*, abnormal or exceptional.

In fact, my own translation of this short text could feature “foreignization” instead: Harbin is a city *foreignized*, made foreign by foreign cultures. I came to believe that it is this ambiguity of *yihua* that makes it such an apt description of Harbin, the Paris and the Moscow of the East. Perhaps Harbin has been both *alienated* and *foreignized*, and being there, one has to bear the weight of both.

Alienation is hardly a new phenomenon. Karl Marx famously wrote about alienated (estranged) labor and the alienated worker, maintaining that the worker’s activity is not his own, but merely a means to survival. The worker’s labor and its results belong to someone else; as such, they not only separate from their creator, but lead him to the loss of self (Marx 1974[1844]: 66). Martin Heidegger (1993: 243) took the discussion on alienation further, arguing that alienation is caused by *Heimatslosigkeit*, metaphorical human homelessness in the world. The assumption that alienation equals the loss of self has been later criticized for the idealistic idea that there was something whole to begin with. In his book “Alienation after Derrida,” the philosopher Simon Skempton (2010) writes:

...the term [alienation] suggests a teleological and eschatological grand ‘meta-narrative’ of fall and redemption, of the loss and hope for the

restoration of a state of originary plenitude, a state of the fullness of presence and identity that would actually amount to a dangerous totalitarian form of metaphysical closure where difference and otherness are suppressed (Skempton 2010: 1).

So, if Harbin was alienated by foreign cultures, what would it be alienated *from*? If the foreign influence caused the loss of self, where was this “originary plenitude,” the true essence of Harbin? Historically, Harbin was not a city before the arrival of foreign forces: just a fishing village and ruins of a 12th-century city built by the Jin Dynasty several miles away. Harbin’s existence as a Russian concession on the Chinese territory from the very beginning was foreign.

The idea of alienation rests on the basic assumption of some kind of innate essence, character, of being something that you lose by being subjected to the foreign, external influence; perhaps what could have been if this had not happened. Seen this way, the true essence of Harbin exists then only in fantasy, nationalistic imaginaries of a past deprived of any foreign interference, or in attempts to find origins of Harbin outside of the colonial settlements and the concession: for example, in a 12th-century Jin settlement or in a fishing village at the banks of Songhua River (Koga 2016). However, by the time I arrived in Harbin in 2018, I had not found any traces of this sentiment: the date 1898 was memorialized on plaques, monuments and even in restaurants and bars’ names.⁵¹

⁵¹ Wolff (1999: 27) offers a fascinating speculation on “Harbin’s birthday” as he lists all possible dates of importance for founding of Harbin.

Foreignization, however, opens another field of inquiry in a city that liberally takes from the Russian heritage to transform itself into a tourist attraction, a city with a “foreign flavor.” *Vefremdung* is a transition to a state of foreign. The foreignness, to paraphrase Kristeva (1991: 95), “can only be defined in negative fashion,” in relation to something, but foreignization is not as much a loss as an addition. “[E]strangement is directed against that very alienation which has doubled in strength as people have grown accustomed to it,” writes Ernst Bloch on Bertold Brecht’s use of *Verfremdung* (1970: 124). The foreign is disruptive, leading to defamiliarization, such as Shklovsky’s *ostranenie*, a process of “making the habitual strange in order to reexperience it (Berlina 2017: 24).” Yet, the result of this estrangement is a renewed, stronger emotional connection that “give[s] back sensation to life (Berlina 2017: 80).” As Svetlana Boym points out in her essay “Estrangement as a Lifestyle,” *ostranenie* “is also dislocation, *depaysement* (1996: 515),” a feeling of disorientation in a new, foreign place.

Just as in the title of Cheng’s essay, these two concepts come into play in Harbin. Both alienation and foreignization presuppose the existence of something primary, something to distance or deviate from. But although both terms can be covered by the word *yihua*, they express two different, local notions of differentiation. In one reading, it is the body of the Chinese nation that Harbin is alienated from by foreign influence and history. It is also this past that many current city residents feel alienated from, to the dismay of some of them and to the indifference of others. But it is exactly this idealized cosmopolitan past of

foreign diaspora in Harbin that also allows for the commercialization of the foreign, reducing the historical heritage to a performance.

As I had hoped, I had left the conference knowing more people; some were historical figures, but others were very much alive and in Harbin. But was this Harbin beloved, permeated by the Russian spirit, or maybe alienated? Throughout my fieldwork, I tried to probe this connection. Svetlana, the woman who believed that the Soviet Union could have followed the same path as China, expressed a somewhat contradictory sentiment: when people started to come to China to trade as so-called *chelnoki* (shuttle traders, often transporting goods in suitcases and travel bags), it stood in contrast to the old, diasporic order, where *Kharbintsy* (the old residents) lived a different life. On the one hand, it might have been a class-based distinction (small-scale trade versus established livelihood in China); on the other hand, it was a certain chronological disruption that relegated the old diasporic life to the past.

But oftentimes, the “Russianness” seemed more of an external spectacle than a lived experience of my interlocutors. Viktoriya, a young woman from Blagoveshchensk, rejected the idea of Russian Harbin.

“It is not a Russian city,” she said, unknowingly echoing Yang’s voice. “There are Russian buildings, but Russians only move here for money now.”

The Russian Harbin was a thing of the past for her: distant and largely meaningless, although admittedly sometimes nice to look at. The old, tree-lined, and cobblestone

Central Street with early 20th-century architecture and multiple restaurants and stores, remained a popular destination for residents and tourists alike. However, she told me, the currently produced reiterations of the past are just for the tourists; other people simply don't care about the tourist attractions or decorations. It is interesting that she also disqualified the "Russian character" by invoking the material motivations of the newcomers – it was a coincidence that some Russian people ended up in a city that used to have a big Russian diaspora. As I will discuss in the next chapter, she herself moved to Harbin to be far away from Russia; yet her presence depended on the link to Russia.

Chapter 3: Home for a While: Russian Women Migrating to Northern China

Falling in Love with China

“When I first came to Heihe, I fell in love with China (*ia vliubilas’ v Kitai*),” Viktoriya told me over a meal of sautéed eggplant in garlic and other Northeastern dishes. She was usually very busy, so I was grateful that she agreed to meet with me over lunch in the local mall. Throughout my fieldwork, I would spend a significant amount of time in the many malls in China. In a climate where one could expect freezing temperatures by early November, an enclosed, climate-controlled area was a saving grace. With various stores and restaurants, my interlocutors and I could always find a comfortable place to sit and chat or new stores to browse. There was also the Kentucky Fried Chicken chain that offered good coffee that according to my interlocutors was the best price-to-quality ratio, and occasional chicken wraps for those who, as they put it, “did not like Chinese food.” On this day, however, out of different establishments serving various Asian cuisines, from Korean barbecue to hot pot, Viktoriya picked a restaurant serving the local cuisine. She spoke fluent Chinese and knew most of the dishes, exuding an aura of someone unfazed, someone very comfortable with her surroundings.

Yet, this declaration of love came as a surprise to me. It was not the passion for living in China that was baffling, of course (after all, I was there myself, although I had already learned that not every foreigner was as enthusiastic). It was rather the place where Viktoriya fell in love, and the fact that it became a synecdochic representation of China. Of course, Heihe is in China: more specifically, it is a town on the Amur/Heilong River, in the very north of the eponymous Heilongjiang province. It is also located just across from the Russian city of Blagoveshchensk, where Viktoriya spent much of her life. My surprise came rather from the contrast with other stories of going to Heihe that I had heard so far, with people treating the town as a transfer point to get elsewhere (usually Harbin, Blagoveshchensk and beyond). While Manzhouli, the other prominent border town, often figured as a city of legendary “*obman*” (scam, cheating) in the stories of my Russian interlocutors (also see Peshkov 2018), Heihe was often portrayed in terms of a non-place (Augé 2008).

Yet, there is a lot that can be said about the city. Heihe and Blagoveshchensk each have a little over 200 thousand residents. But in an asymmetrical manner, as mentioned in the Introduction, this number means different things on each side of the border. The former is a relatively small town by Chinese standards; not even the third biggest city in the province. The latter - a relatively sizeable one for the neighboring Russian Far East and an administrative seat of the Amur Oblast, population 800 thousand and declining, as my interlocutors liked to point out. In his work on mimetic rivalry, Franck Billé calls

Heihe the double of Blagoveshchensk, showing what could be: bright lights and new high-rises across the river. Heihe's rapid economic development in the last decades has become magnified compared with the relative stagnancy of Blagoveshchensk (Billé 2017). Again, the border between two states becomes a boundary between two different scales.



Figure 4: On the Southern bank of the Amur/Heilong River.
2017. Photo by the author.



Figure 5: Summer night in Heihe. 2017. Photo by the author.

As already mentioned, Heihe is also the location of one of the few border crossings between China and Russia. In fact, one just had to take a ferry through the Amur River, which is exactly what Viktoriya did on her first trip. It would be tempting to call it a love at first sight if it was not for the fact that Heihe and Blagoveshchensk were actually easily visible to each other, as both cities occupy places just across the river from each.⁵² At night, Heihe's skyline is indeed brightly lit. If one did not know they were two different countries, one could maybe even think they are just two districts of the same city; perhaps one of them just livelier. Only the missing bridge was a clue that it was quite the opposite. On the Sino-Russian border, bridges have been "notably absent (Humphrey and Billé 2021: 26)." Viktoriya mentioned traveling through the temporary pontoon bridge that was installed every winter when the Amur froze. The construction of the first and presumably only cross-border road bridge started in 2016, although no one I talked to knew when it would be ready. Some interlocutors speculated that it would be left unfinished in the middle of the river, never reaching the Russian side.⁵³

But it was not only the riverbanks that made Heihe and Blagoveshchensk look as one, or at least somewhat interconnected. According to a tourist pamphlet I found in Heihe, the city was a "capital of Sino-Russian style (中俄风情之都 *Zhong E fengqing zhidu*)."

⁵² 750 meters apart at the narrowest point (according to a pamphlet on tourism in Heihe.)

⁵³ At the time of submitting this dissertation, the bridge exists and is indeed open to traffic.

Initially, the bridge was to be ready by 2020 but the opening was reportedly delayed by the Covid-19 pandemic. The next announced opening date was November 2021. The bridge was open for freight transport in June 2022 (Shi dian jiedu 2022, Reuters 2022).

Walking around the city center of Heihe, one could notice that Russia was nearby: the street signs were in Russian, stores with Russian names sold Russian bread and a variety of souvenirs, medical clinics advertised dental services and other procedures in Russian, beauty salons offered weight loss treatments with catchy slogans (sometimes not entirely correctly) translated to Russian. Russian-speaking shoppers walked between stores and stalls, some carrying large, seemingly heavy checkered plastic bags.

Finally, the city was decorated with symbols loosely borrowed from the iconic portrayals of Russian culture, such as *matryoshkas* (nesting dolls, or 套娃 *taowa* in Chinese). There was a book store named Pushkin (普希金书店 *Puxijin shudian*), proudly displaying the writer's bust in the window. There were also omnipresent references to Moscow but less so to the neighboring Blagoveshchensk. It was a town in China that capitalized on the proximity to Russia, but in a way that did not remind Viktoriya of Russia.

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Figure 6: Matryoshka depicting a panda and a brown bear holding hands.

The text reads 中俄双子城 黑河-布市 or “Sino-Russian Twin Cities: Heihe and Blagoveshchensk.” The full name of Blagoveshchensk in Chinese is 布拉戈维申斯克 (*Bulageweishensike*); here it is shortened to Bushi.



Figure 7: "Moscow," a store with imported goods. Heihe, 2017. All photos by the author.



Figure 8: "Moscow," a store selling furs.

For most of Viktoriya's life, Heihe was remote to her, if not simply non-existent. Before the Russian-Chinese border reopened in the 1980s, all border towns were remote as measured by both the topographical and relative distance from each country's center of power: Beijing and Moscow (Ardener 2012, Harms et al. 2014). The riverbank of Blagoveshchensk was where Russia ended but – for a while - nothing else began: you were not even supposed to look at it. Similarly, the riverbank of Heihe was where China ended, but nothing else began. From other people from Blagoveshchensk, I learned that if one went on a leisure cruise on the Amur, the captain was very careful not to cross the invisible demarcation line in the middle of the river. One could see and hear what was happening on the other side (for example, on the weekend I was in Heihe there was some festival or city party in Blagoveshchensk as evidenced by loud music carrying over the river), but, as it turned out, residents of both cities could just learn to ignore the background noise, just like one can get used to constant traffic noise. Now, after the opening up of both the respective countries' economies and borders, cities such as Manzhouli and Heihe are at the center of their own transnational socio-cultural formations. They are also included in other formations whose centers are still not the metropolitan centers of the respective countries (Woodworth and Joniak-Lüthi 2020).

Yet, it was as if this neighboring came as a surprise.⁵⁴ Viktoriya lived in

⁵⁴ For an in-depth discussion, see the edited volume by Martin Saxer and Juan Zhang, "Art of Neighboring: Making Relations across China's Borders (2017)."

Blagoveshchensk for many years without ever crossing the river to Heihe.

“My mom didn’t let me go,” she explained. Later on, she told me that her mom grew up in Blagoveshchensk in times when relations between the neighbors were antagonistic after the Sino-Soviet Split. As a result of this parental supervision, by the time she took the ferry to China for the first time, the twenty-something-year-old Viktoriya had already traveled abroad to places significantly more distant than Heihe. There was another spatial hierarchy in place, and for many years, China was not ranked high: perhaps precisely because it was there.

Yet, this trip to Heihe turned out to be a life-changing experience. Not that anything seemingly extraordinary happened – Viktoriya and her friends just walked around, tried new foods, and went shopping in the many stores that offer almost everything. But it was a discovery, a jarring experience of discovering something new and unexpected that was hidden in the background. One just had to take a ferry across the river, and something so remote turned out to be so close and so captivating.

A couple of years after the first trip, Viktoriya got married and had a baby. Her daughter was still a toddler when she divorced her husband, who quickly lost his interest in parenthood. Soon she was a single mother, living with her own mother in Blagoveshchensk. Although she had graduated from a university, she was not able to find a full-time employment and resigned herself to part-time jobs that were not enough to support her and her daughter, Tanya.

One day, upon hearing about job opportunities in China, Viktoriya crossed the border to Heihe and went to a local school, asking if they were looking to hire. A university graduate with foreign language skills and some experience abroad, she got hired on the spot to teach Russian. This did not happen anymore as of 2018, at least not as easily. Work visa requirements are becoming stricter every year, with local authorities sporadically imposing new rules and bans. Before the immigration system overhaul of 2013, securing a work permit was significantly easier. “I started my visa process the same day,” she recounted. Having divorced her husband and without any stable long-term employment, she moved a couple of miles away, feeling that she was leaving for good. As she was packing into seven suitcases, she told me that she already knew that this would be a life-changing step, even when the destination was just steps away.

“But didn’t you just go back for a day?” I had to ask. With the regular ferry connections, she could go – as many do – between the cities every day, as long as she’d make the last ferry that arrived on the other river bank before the end of the border guard shift. I quickly calculated possible travel routes in my head.

“No,” she said, “I only went back for major holidays.”

With the help of her mother’s Chinese acquaintance (knowing someone from China was indeed one of the effects of living on the border), she signed up her daughter for a Chinese kindergarten – the best one in the town, as she would emphasize - and did not look back. Heihe might be a small town by Chinese standards but local students wanted to

learn Russian, so Viktoriya was able to secure a full-time employment with a satisfactory pay. After a couple of years, she heard about open spots for language teachers at a university in Harbin, and so she applied, by then she had fulfilled all the requirements of the new visa system, including years of related work experience. Viktoriya explained that Harbin was a more prestigious workplace, both in the terms of institutional rankings and geographic location. While working in China was generally prestigious, living and working on the border was not. And so, she moved south to the provincial capital of Heilongjiang, Harbin, where we met at a party.

Tanya spent most of her life in China and never attended any Russian educational institution; there were none in Harbin, just a few private schools with English as the instruction language. Throughout 2018-19 I kept hearing that there would be a Russian school opening soon, although it was not entirely clear who would be responsible for the institution. Perhaps because there was no consulate, there were no official or accredited weekend classes. In Tanya's public primary school, Mandarin was the language of instruction, and her classmates were all Chinese. Her friends were also Chinese. While taught Russian at home, Tanya wrote in Chinese better than she did in Russian, but she spoke both fluently.

In Search of a Good Life

Just like Viktoriya, Elena was a lecturer and a single mother. She was, however, over a decade older and had worked on contracts in China before getting married and pregnant. Her ex-husband, who lived in Russia, did not contribute financially on a regular basis. He did not support them in any other way either and only showed up to visit whenever he wanted to. On the upside, his negligence also translated to indifference, and so he never objected to the fact that his child lived abroad, which saved Elena from long and convoluted legal procedures. As long as one parent had not explicitly forbidden the minor child from leaving the country by applying to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the other parent was free to make the decisions by themselves, and so, years in China went by. However, encouraged by her other female friends, Elena was sometimes thinking about suing him for child support in Russia. The issue was that most of the time he was not officially employed, so what could the court even demand of him?

“What can I say? Thanks for the good genes” Elena would quip wryly. After all, her daughter Anna was a smart and lively child. “That is all I got from him.”

Elena was in her forties and had been living in China on and off for around ten years. She had first worked on university-sponsored contracts in different cities in China, but she always considered it a temporary stay. Interestingly enough, these year-long university-exchange assignments were temporary by legal designation anyway; but what made them

particularly temporary was Elena's intentions to return to Russia and her ongoing affiliation with her home university. As of now, Elena's current contract in Harbin was to be renewed annually as well, so the issue of temporality was rather a question of intent: both hers and the employer's. When we talked in late spring, she had just signed up a contract for another academic year and was about to renew her work permit, which was a slight relief. After all, it was up to the university to extend the contract as they saw fit. The only thing that really changed was the lack of official ties to a "home" institution back in Russia and, most importantly, her attitude since she knew she would try to stay longer.

Regardless of her intentions, all of Elena's nominally short-term stays amassed to a relatively constant presence in China. In fact, her daughter Anna had little ties to Russia as a geographical place. She was born in a Harbin hospital and only attended a local kindergarten in Harbin. The only bedroom she had was in her mother's rental two-room apartment in Harbin. Russia was a more of a vacation destination than a home: it was where her mother took her to show her where she was from. Yet, Russian remained the language spoken at home.

Elena's decision to live in China was met with the misunderstanding and disapproval of her family. She told me that her relatives criticized her for her seemingly pointless behavior, asking questions such as: "What is the point of living abroad? (*Kakoi smysl zhit' za granitsei?*) What do you even get out of living there?" To them, she was somewhat irresponsible and careless. "They only value money and material profits," she explained to

me. Her job in China did not lead to building material wealth, but was it really because she was abroad? Elena would not amass wealth living in Russia, either. She did not have any property in Russia to begin with and did not see any potential to be granted a mortgage. She was not even trying, which her family in return saw as carelessness and a failure to think of the future (see Halawa 2015). Her siblings all managed to secure houses, cars and *dacha*, vacation cottages in the countryside. Elena called this “standard Russian life,” a middle-class aspiration. She claimed that average Russians she knew are spatially immobile, basically stuck to the apartments they or their families own. High costs of living, expensive rentals and apartments for sale, and lack of starter capital was a significant barrier to entry into the job market in other cities, especially given the income disparity between Moscow and St. Petersburg and the rest of the country. Hence the emphasis on amassing enough economic capital for the family and the future generations. Elena illustrated this low spatial mobility with the saying “*Russkie zhivut tam, gde est’ kvartira, a inostrantsy tam – gde robota.*” (Russians live where there is an apartment, foreigners live where there is work.)⁵⁵

To Elena, this lack of starting capital would, however, work in her favor, as she saw relocating to China as a means toward a healthy work-life balance. As she put it in Russian: she wanted to *zhit’ a ne vyzhivat’*, which could be roughly translated to “to live, not to fight

⁵⁵ Russian: Русские живут там, где есть квартира, а иностранцы там – где работа.

for living.”⁵⁶ The imperfective aspect marks an unfinished activity, so that *vizhivat*’ can be more adequately translated as “to keep fighting for living.” Elena saw her life in Russia as a constant struggle, a constant process of securing her existence that takes most of her time but can never be finished because the security simply could not be achieved, just as everyday life existence could not be paid for with a single full-time job as an academic.

Not without a certain irony, her move to China did not guarantee “being settled for life” either, as it was measured by the yearly or perhaps bi-annually contract renewals. Yet, it gave her a feeling of security. China was the place to reach the possibility of *zhit*’ - to be able to live without the perpetual quest for survival. Interestingly, this jump to satisfying life omitted the celebrated apartment purchase.⁵⁷ Elena’s workplace subsidized her small apartment on the campus, and she was satisfied with that. Regardless of whether Vladivostok or Khabarovsk, she could never afford to live in proximity to the university, even working two jobs. Where there might be jobs, there was no affordable apartment in the city.

Elena was originally from what she referred to as a *poselok* (посёлок), an industrial town in Primorsky Krai that has shrunk from forty thousand residents to perhaps fifteen thousand since the fall of Soviet Union. With the closures of state enterprises, many people

⁵⁶ Russian: жить, а не выживать

⁵⁷ While it is not impossible (from the legal standpoint) for foreigners living in China to buy houses, it is relatively rare.

left, often for bigger cities. However, some newcomers have arrived since then: the town had now some Chinese-owned businesses, including one restaurant. “Typically for the region,” Elena explained to me, the long-defunct mines in the area have been leased by Chinese companies, but as these tended to hire Chinese nationals, the Russian residents did not profit from these developments and had to look for jobs elsewhere. These two transborder regions exchanged parts of their populations after the 1990s: while the Chinese-owned companies brought workers from China, and other entrepreneurs and traders followed, some Russians left to work in China. In almost mirror-like coordination, neither of the migrant groups was able to secure long-term ties to the new place: just as Elena’s life in Harbin was measured by the length of the work contracts and residence permits, many of the Chinese migrants were seasonal workers on short-term contracts with no plans or possibilities to settle down in the new place. Similarly, Blagoveshchensk attracted a number of Chinese traders, who regularly crossed the border but did not settle down there.

Back in the 70s and 80s, the *poselok* was just a regular industrial town where residents held conservative values, which, as Elena explained, simply meant “atheist” by Soviet standards. According to Elena, her family’s lack of engagement with religion or philosophy was not an effect of actively internalizing Soviet ideologies or having any strong convictions, but rather simply an attempt at conforming to the standards of the town. Being passive or slightly apathetic was a virtue. “What will the neighbors say?” was the

family's unspoken mantra. Her parents did not invest in her personal development or education. She was taught not to stand out and not to take chances, but she could tell that young people in Russia are way more courageous nowadays. To her, it was moving to China that allowed her to stand up for herself and "live life to the fullest." Now that Elena was a mother of a six-year-old girl, she hoped to raise her differently.

Her daughter's childhood was different, no matter what she intended, just by the fact that they lived in China, in a big city and not in a small town. There was no point teaching her not to stand out if she was the only visibly Other, non-Chinese child in the whole kindergarten; the question was rather how to deal with other people's attention. Anna was born in China and has only attended Chinese institutions ever since. Just like Viktoriya, Elena took the task of additional homeschooling upon herself. Additionally, taking the initiative upon themselves, some mothers organized Saturday meetups for their children so that they could socialize with Russian-speaking peers and learn proper Russian and Russian culture. Although raised atheist, Elena found her way into Christianity, so now her and Anna would sometimes go to the service at the only functioning Russian Orthodox church in Harbin that has attracted a number of fellow migrants.

Paradoxically, Elena told me, living in China was better for not only for her work-life balance, but for her personal development and artistic and cultural endeavors as well, even if it was mostly in Russian and within the Russian-speaking diaspora due to the language barrier. She could teach her students in advanced Russian classes "to respect and love

Russian culture (*uvazhat' i liubit' Rossiю i rossiiskuiu kul'turu*),⁵⁸ especially since she was removed from any social pressures back home.

Female Labor Migration to China

Admittedly, I did not enter the doctoral program with the goal of studying the migrant single mothers in China: I simply did not know that this would be a somewhat common occurrence. Yet, in the summer of 2017, I became acquaintances with Nadia, an energetic café owner/manager in Dalian. It was quite an unexpected encounter: I was walking past the café and Nadia was just going outside; she called me and invited me inside. As we chatted over the next few days, I learned that she lived in the area near Vladivostok until she got divorced and became increasingly disillusioned with her life. Her kid's school was lacking in so many aspects that she decided it was better to move to China. Now it's been several years and her son was fluent in Chinese. The cafe was doing well too, and Nadia made a lot of friends from around the world. As I was leaving the café on my last day in Dalian, she gifted me a homemade muesli bread.

Before this meeting, I had known of many ways in which migrants make their livelihood in China: corporate expats, English and other language teachers, so-called *chelnoki*, petty traders that cross the border regularly, people who do seasonal and

⁵⁸ Russian: уважать и любить Россию российскую культуру.

unofficial (or illegal) gigs. Yet, apart from the wealthy (usually American, West European, from the Commonwealth or Japanese, Korean or Singaporean) expatriates or diplomats who received free or subsidized international schools tuitions and a bunch of other benefits, I was not aware of any foreigners who brought their family to China. In other words, I did not know anyone who tried to make a living for themselves. While I was familiar with international couples, the Chinese spouse's rootedness within the society and state structures usually meant following more or less established routes.

As I was getting to know more people in Northern China, it struck me how many women migrating from Russia I had encountered. Some of them remained single, some of them married Chinese men, and some came with Russian partners. In contrast, I had met significantly fewer Russian men in relationships with Chinese women. While international marriages constitute another fascinating field of research,⁵⁹ I want to focus on single women specifically. I argue that lives of female migrants and their children offer an extraordinary insight into theoretical fields of inquiry at the convergence of post-socialism and gender.

The figure of a single Russian mother is already somewhat present in the social sciences. As the sociologist Jennifer Utrata claims in her book "Women without Men," "in Russia single motherhood is normalized rather than problematized as it is typically in

⁵⁹ See Barabantseva (2019) and Barabantseva and Grillot (2019).

other countries (2015: 1).” Utrata links this phenomenon to the omnipresent struggle inherent in the life there: “For most Russians, the preoccupation with navigating multiple crises in their daily lives leaves little room to worry about the idea of mothers raising children on their own (2015:2).” I am skeptical whether this normalization is taking place simply because there are other things to worry about. While the assumption that it is “psychologically hard” to be a single mother has been universally shared among my interlocutors, regardless of whether single or married, parents or childless; there has not been any talk of “deficits” or “dangers” of such family configuration. In other words, it was seen as hard on the mother, who had to be “a mother and a father in one” but without a moral panic about the lack of a father figure in the child’s life.

I do not want, however, to pose questions about the morality and moral judgments of single-parent households, single mothers, or, finally, absent fathers, whose stories I do not know. The question I am primarily interested in is how Russian single mothers make it in China; or how it is possible that Harbin becomes a place where they thrive. As I already mentioned, there are Chinese-Russian married couples (usually Chinese men marrying Russian women) in cities, towns and villages throughout the country, but more common in the Northeast. There are whole Russian families or married couples moving abroad too. There are finally single Russians of any gender living in China. Yet single mothers from Russian Far East becoming international actors is perhaps the most intriguing aspect of labor migration to China. It is also a topic that has been relatively ignored, which leads to

a significant lack in the existing body of research, and, as I argue, severe misconceptions about the nature of international migration to China, as well as about the nature of female labor migration.

Of course, single working mothers can rarely take care of younger children without any external support network. As many scholars such as Utrata have shown, the responsibility of raising children falls on the mother and, additionally, very often her own mother, so that families become matriarchal in a significantly patriarchal society. Viktoriya's mother moved to China with her; she has retired already, so she could devote her time to household tasks and taking care of Tanya. "Everyone here lives like that," informed me Viktoriya. Most importantly, Tanya was too young to take a bus on her own, so someone had to accompany her on her morning and afternoon commute. Grandma could not speak Chinese, so homework help fell entirely on Viktoriya anyway. On rare occasions when her mother was away, Viktoriya found that navigating full-time work and child-rearing responsibilities was extremely hard for a single person.

Some single working mothers in China are largely removed from their old support network, which forces them to find alternate arrangements. Elena's mother passed away many years ago, and with her sisters being busy, she had no relatives to turn to. Even before the divorce, her husband was unreliable and not much help. Her only option was to find a babysitter for her daughter. Not speaking much Chinese, Elena was more comfortable with a Russian woman, Ludmila, who would additionally help teach her

daughter her native language. Outside of this domestic sphere, Anna would be predominantly immersed in a Chinese-speaking environment. Ludmila was married to a Chinese man and having lived in Harbin for longer than Elena, she knew a lot and was able to help Elena with school and extracurricular activities. When Elena had to travel, Anna would sleep at Ludmila's. As complicated as it could get at times, leaving children behind in Russia was not an option; it seemed unthinkable to my interlocutors. After all, mothers spoke of their desire to ensure a better life for their children as one of the major push factors for living in China; going to a Chinese school was just the start.

New Immigrant China

I argue that this example has major implications for understanding migration to China in a broad sense. As delineated in the Introduction, most of the relatively underdeveloped research on international migration to China tends to focus on either members of a privileged class that re-create or enhance their privilege upon arrival, so-called “expats” (Farrer 2019), or generally less-privileged migrants from the Global South (Castillo 2016; S. Lan 2015; 2017b; 2017a; Lin, Yang, and Mathews 2017; Mathews 2015; 2017). It is not my intention to downplay the importance of this body of scholarship. On the contrary, this research has been crucial in shaping the debate on migration in China. Yet the omission of other migration flows presents an incomplete and somewhat static, simplified image of China as a global destination.

In her book “Transnational Lives in China,” Angela Lehmann addresses this lack by researching “those who fit neither in the upper echelons of the transnational elite moving between highly paid jobs in major international centres, nor in the unskilled or forced migrant group that represents the underprivileged and often disempowered face of globalization (2014: 1).” Her prognosis is that China in particular will constitute a destination for these “relatively” well-off group of “middle class.”⁶⁰ Yet, the designation of “middle class” is quite problematic in a global scale: does a global middle class exist, and if so, how uniform it is? Lehmann’s research focuses on “the West,” yet as increasingly more people come on self-initiated trips as opposed to corporate-sponsored assignments, she proposes the term “meddling migrant.” Nevertheless, as a representative of “the West” the new migrant is still connected to “the past as an expatriate in post-colonial Asia (7)” even though the privilege of being “white” and “Western” might be waning in contemporary China (S. Lan 2022).

With international migration to China being so multi-faceted in terms of who is migrating, but also where and how, I suggest that a regional approach is needed. Farrer (2019) addresses this by focusing his research on Shanghai, a metropolis where one-

⁶⁰ Interestingly, both Farrer and Lehmann indicate the global 2008 financial crisis as a turning point in the history of “Western” migration to China: China’s economy did well, anyway. This can perhaps validate my question about the validity of “global” middle class: after all, did Russia not go through multiple financial crises? In other words, for my interlocutors it might be the on-going economic decline that influences their migration, not the American crisis in 2008. Nevertheless, what matters is that China’s economy has been stable, if not booming.

quarter of all foreigners in China live. Lehmann researches migrants in Xiamen, a coastal city in the South, which she considers an example of “emerging cities” as opposed to the established financial hubs of Shanghai or Hong Kong. But with the regional differences (such as, indeed, bordering with another country; or the designation as “emerging”), there are a lot of migrant experiences that have gone unnoticed.

This chapter deals with the uncovered (yet another) middle ground of the former Second World migration into the second-tier Chinese cities and beyond. In other, so-called first-tier, cities, foreigners – usually called expats – tend to live in exclusive compounds and urban villages, isolated from mainstream Chinese society. Even without corporate benefits, a migrant can use a variety of services offered in English (until – in some cases – they learn Chinese). But no spatial segregation of this sort exists in Harbin: foreigners need to use resources initially dedicated to the citizens. There are a few (relatively costly) international schools in Harbin, yet everyone I met sent their children to regular public schools that have a permission to enroll foreign nationals. Private schools are said to mostly attract wealthy Chinese families. (Needless to say, there is a generation of Russian children fluent in Mandarin Chinese, whose future I am very curious about.) With a limited number of groceries carrying imported items, people had to visit local supermarkets or rely on other migrants who engaged in small-scale trade. There is no international English-speaking clinic, but there is one dedicated to Russian-speaking patients, usually coming to Harbin for the treatment only. In fact, a number of women

made their living by freelancing as interpreters and helping Russian-speaking migrants at local Chinese hospitals.

I argue that while not touted as ground-breaking, pioneering, or celebrated otherwise, the narratives of single Russian mothers in Harbin are actually indicative of what the future development of Chinese society – a multi-national society - might be. Much of this is a product of specific circumstances: economic, geographical and linguistic, which are not necessarily replicable in other parts of China. However, in his book on “New Shanghailanders,” James Farrer writes:

A frustration with integrating into Chinese society often motivates long-term expatriates to educate their children multilingually in Chinese, English and other languages. However, these strategies of Sinocentric cosmopolitanism also meet many obstacles. Overall, the field perspective shows the many strategies but also the many obstacles faced by foreigners, even these privileged expatriates, in achieving a place in Shanghai society (2019: 15).

My research, however, would suggest that this is exactly the privilege that hinders integration into the local society. As Farrer notes, there is no option for foreigners to participate in the civic society in China (2019: 92); he maintains that the main way to integrate into the Chinese “ethnonationalist” society is through intermarriage. While in Chapter 1 I portray the generally little developed field of interactions between Chinese and Russians in Harbin, in this chapter I show how the necessity to take advantage of the

public institutions and other public spaces, such as schools, doctors or even supermarkets, becomes the force that incorporates foreigners into the local society.

However, it is the notion of privilege where I find the biggest tension between the Western-centric approaches to international migration to China and my contribution: If, as one of Farrer's interlocutors claims, "there is no longer a bonus for being a foreigner" and "foreigners are seen as cheap labor (2019: 33)," then perhaps that is the issue. In my experience, the migrants from Russia never counted on bonuses for being foreign or any privileges related to their national or racial origins, other than the right to teach their native language. While they are employed in roles that are directed to foreigners, as designated by the strict Chinese labor law, their salaries oscillate in the upper-middle range for their cities – yet higher than what it would be back in Russia.

Paradoxically, the ability to teach a (desirable) foreign language is somewhat of a bonus for being a foreigner. In a quest for a new life abroad, a university-educated professional (preferably with a degree in Russian, *rusaskaia filologiia*) could bank on their cultural capital. There is a certain irony in the fact that to facilitate their move away from Russia; my interlocutors could use their native language, or rather "linguistic capital" (Bourdieu 2000 [1982]). In her work on English teachers in Taiwan, the sociologist Pei-Chia Lan's, uses the term "flexible cultural capital conversion" to describe how "Western migrants, given their linguistic habitus and privileged locations in the global geography of power, are able to convert their English-language capital into economic and social capital

and status privilege (2011: 1672).” While I discuss the ambiguous position of English teachers in Northern China in more detail in Chapter 5, I want to emphasize that to be legally allowed to teach *any* language in China, one has to hold a university degree (specific requirements vary by province) and to be a native speaker of said language.

English teaching jobs in China are sometimes considered low-status and dead-end, especially in the Anglophone “expat” circles. Yet I have never met with a similar evaluation of other languages. Due to the history of Russia in the Far East and the Sino-Soviet friendship, the Russian language occupies yet another position on this spectrum of respectable foreignness. Just like Elena, other Russian lecturers spoke of their ambitions to teach their students about Russian literature, culture, and history. The relative prestige of teaching a language other than English is most likely linked to the mass emergence of often unlicensed English teaching schools and the long history of hiring less-than-qualified native speakers. The teaching jobs available for foreigners in China have undergone a transformation from the invited “Soviet experts” as well as other foreign lecturers and trainers, through a period of poorly regulated gigs seemingly available to “anyone” (but in fact also directed by many external aspects), to a strictly managed concession allowed by the Chinese visa reforms.

Moving Forward



Figure 9: View of Blagoveshchensk across the Amur River from Heihe. Heihe 2017. Photo by the author.

Although walking in Heihe one can see – and sometimes even hear – the Russian side of the border, Viktoriya did not see it anymore, as if the river dividing them was an ocean. Yet, the real oceans were not as much of an obstacle when it came to planning for the future. Viktoriya was not planning on ever moving back to Russia, although given the geopolitical situation of 2018/2019, it was not clear where she would go yet. America did not seem possible anymore, but perhaps some other English-speaking country. For example, Canada has introduced a “rapid entry” visa for highly skilled individuals. To Elena, what many might perceive as precarity, was a sign of independence: “If it gets bad,

I can always move somewhere else,” she told me.

There was always somewhere else. Compared with other big cities in China, first, second- or third-tier, Harbin with its harsh continental climate was not the most welcoming place to live. In the winter, the temperature would regularly dip below -20C and the summers were warm but short. One had to start wearing a down jacket by October. Air pollution and smog have been largely combatted, so there was nothing to complain about on that front, but there was still the dusty wind mixed with car exhausts that covered everything along the busy roads (see Zee 2021). Heilongjiang Province was famous for its forests, but in the city, the vegetation seemed a little constrained at times: sparse grass revealed the dry soil, and the plants looked dry and dusty as if forced to grow there. Most of my interlocutors came from places with similar climates, but claimed that the freezing temperatures in Harbin feel worse. Many of them preferred northern coastal cities, such as Qingdao or even Dalian, or believed that the South of China with Guangzhou and Shenzhen was all in all a more promising place to live. Besides the climate, the major reason was the economic prospects: The Pearl River Delta is a major economic hub, and so, the place to try real business. Elena did not have much interest in trade or corporate careers the South was said to offer, but she had no major attachment to Harbin either. It was rather that many schools and universities in this region still offered Russian classes.

Most migrants in Harbin knew that they could not stay in China forever. The major

limitation was the nature of work contracts and corresponding visas: valid for one year only, they offered no security of employment. When things were going well, the women could predict that their contracts would be renewed. Establishing good relations with coworkers and supervisors was an important task but could not guarantee anything. Additionally, foreign employees are subject to ever-changing immigration policies, so that little can be predicted. While long-term residence permits, so-called “green cards” are technically available, only one of my interlocutors, who had a long experience working in state-run enterprises, mentioned the possibility of applying for one; to my knowledge, she never managed to do so.

With their presence contingent on work, the migrants had to use their time in China the best they could. Originally, it was the idea of a “better life” or “work-life balance” that seemed to influence the women’s decisions. Obviously, these are directly related to the financial status: an otherwise “good life” might be overshadowed by constant money problems. However, as we see in Elena’s story, interpretations of financial gains can differ significantly. Even though her relatives saw her relocation to China as the barrier to achieving success, this is, reaching the glorified middle class by wealth status, Elena herself perceived it as an upgrade to finally being able to live: *жить, а не выживать*. For Viktoriya, it was also the constant learning potential: striving to speak fluent Mandarin, learning something every day, and learning *from* China.

While single Russian men, or fathers with families, also lived in Harbin, they were a

rare occurrence. Given the lack of reliable demographic data or the limited access to it, ethnographic observation provides here a different insight. My female interlocutors spoke largely about other Russian women they knew. However, in most of these stories the arrival in China happens after a severed relationship with a man (through divorce or death), it is an attempt at re-orienting oneself and re-establishing a new self in a foreign environment. For example, Nina came to Harbin after her divorce; her children were adults and on their own, so she did not have to worry about them. She had previously also worked at a university teaching Russian to foreign students as well as English as a foreign language. Although she spent most of her childhood in a town on the border, where she could see China, her narrative of moving abroad differed significantly from Viktoriya's: she considered China "familiar" due to the distance and, in fact, visibility. Nevertheless, life in China now was exciting. While Harbin was one short flight away from her family, it was also easy to go to Southeast Asia for vacation.

China was a chance at self-advancement. The new life would not last forever, and there were few chances to attain the same status in Russia. In other words, while some migrants use the newly amassed financial or cultural capital to launch their careers upon their return home, my interlocutors did not see this as a viable option: there were no dreams of businesses starting or companies opening. Contrary to what their drive to self-advancement and careful investments into children's development might suggest, none of the migrants I interviewed seemed to believe that "hard work" or any neoliberal idea of

self-development or entrepreneurship would help them achieve a similar lifestyle in Russia.

Learning from China, was, as I was slowly discovering, one of the biggest divides within the Russian diaspora. The process of learning did include speaking Mandarin, of course, but also learning about the culture (Elena, for example, took on calligraphy), trying to make Chinese friends and maintain good relations with neighbors and the local police; in other words, trying to understand how China worked. Once at a birthday party, I witnessed a Russian guest giving a red envelope (*hongbao*) to the (also Russian) host: although there was no money inside, I found it telling of how Chinese cultural patterns were incorporated into everyday life. Contrasted with that were migrants who did not learn. It was not necessarily their inability to speak Mandarin that disqualified them from understanding China, but rather their disinterested attitude.⁶¹

There is another subset of labor migrants, both male and female, who come on business visas, stay for weeks or months at a time and go back across the border to reset the clock or renew the visa. The closer to the border, the easier it is to go on a so-called visa run. Working without a work permit is a law violation, so migrants face the risk of random police controls, financial penalties, jail time and deportation. As the archetypical

⁶¹ While the former group looked down on the latter, the latter remained somewhat indifferent, if not hostile. Recall the quote that opens up this dissertation: “They come here from Khabarovsk, Vladivostok, and small villages; for them, this is already abroad.”

place for a foreign worker, English language schools and kindergartens are frequently controlled, but so are bars and restaurants that hire foreign bartenders, waiting staff and dancers (more on this in Chapter 5). Holding a proper work visa is a step away from precarity.

While I have never met a mother who would leave underage children at home, a practice popular among many domestic and low-paid workers worldwide (Parreñas 2015), I have encountered women who either supported their adult children back in the Russian Far East or decided to work abroad as their retirement money was not sufficient and they did not want to burden their relatives. They did not see their work in China as a way to independency or self-actualization: on the contrary, they considered it a burden. Similarly, as the previously mentioned interlocutors, they blamed structural injustices in Russia for pushing them out of the country. To them, having to turn to China to make a living was a just a sign of how bad things in Russia were; the unknown culture was more of a source of stress than a challenge. Interestingly, sometimes migrants who wanted to return to Russia would not necessarily want to go back where they were from, but rather try and move to the Western part of the country, where costs of living were prohibitive otherwise. Alina, another Russian lecturer I met at a Maslenitsa (a Slavic folk holiday), was trying to calculate how much she'd have to save to buy an apartment in St. Petersburg or Moscow – which was still more likely on a Harbin salary, as opposed to what she made in Khabarovsk. She did not enjoy living in China, but at least when she handed her passport

to the immigration officer on the border, he always nodded with approval, seeing her profession (language teacher) printed on the visa.

It is not surprising then that the appeal of Harbin lies rather in the distance to the (previous?) hometowns and relatives in Russia: trains and buses to Heihe or Suifenhe, where one could cross over, direct flights to Khabarovsk and Vladivostok, than the historical allure. Note Viktoriya's conceptualization of both Heihe and Harbin as Chinese in spite of both the semiotic symbols linking the cities to Russia and Harbin's colonial history. Although one could certainly argue that this is the preserved good spirit of the town that makes it so comfortable for the Russian migrants, it was also the developed infrastructure that made Harbin so convenient.

Yet, for these women who taught Russian, their livelihood did, in fact, depend on the allure of Russia. There is a certain paradox in the migration pattern of the Russian lecturers. As they seek the new and the foreign, they profit from both their cultural capital acquired back in their home country (especially as a language fluency remains a vague concept), and also from the historical and socioeconomic conditions that made Russian language classes popular in Harbin. My interlocutors were building the future for their children – a future that they did not think was possible in Russia, but still a life that was only possible in China because of Russia.

Chapter 4: “Moscow of the East:” Mimicry and Deterritorialization

During my fieldwork, I moved through different spaces following my interlocutors. It was the physical and social spaces I was allowed or invited into; and the spaces of their stories: back in Heihe, Suifenhe, Blagoveshchensk, a small town in Amurskaya Oblast, and elsewhere. Some of these places I had visited previously; many I haven't. Without a valid Russian visa, I never crossed the land border between China and Russia, which put a certain twist on international mobility. As an EU passport holder, I could go to many places, but when it came to the places in the proximity of Harbin, most destinations other people could easily go to were out of question for me.

I also found myself switching – or drifting, to better express the side effect of trailing behind my interlocutors – between temporal planes. As an anthropologist, I was interested in what was happening *now*, in people's everyday life experiences; no trip to a grocery store or a KFC too insignificant. But just as my time for fieldwork was limited by both the visa duration and the graduate school requirements, my interlocutors' time in China was always conditional. For migrants who had to work to secure their right to reside in China (*work* as both being legally employed and making effort), there was the question of the future looming on the horizon; a future that was deeply precarious, contingent on what

would happen between the Chinese politics, market fluctuations, global geopolitics and many other factors. Although most of my interlocutors were optimistic about the future of China, they were not sure that there would be a future in China for them. What future was there for Russia, was not as much of a question, because most did not plan to be there to witness it. These, who wanted to go back, they often spoke about moving to the Western part of the country, to Moscow. Others claimed they had no interest in Moscow just as Moscow had no interest in them. Asia seemed more exciting than Europe.

Whether the past – especially the past that went beyond one’s lifetime - mattered, depended on whom you ask. Was the colonial, international, pre-socialist past of Harbin, known through memoirs, books and other means of collective memories, an inspiration for the future, like many claimed? Or was Harbin where the postsocialist past of living in Russian Far East could be pushed aside in order to create a new life, as many of my interlocutors wished to? I do not mean “forgetting” or “erasing” the past; as I showed in the previous chapter, it was the dissatisfaction with the past life that fueled the decision to move abroad.

And what happened to the Soviet past that spanned between these two eras? The socialist period has been barely referenced here; but given that the age of most of my interlocutors rarely exceeded 45 years old, only a few of my interlocutors lived their adult lives or even came of age in the Soviet Union. These who were in their late 20s and early 30 had little if any personal experience of socialism; but the “post” was palpable in societal

changes, sometimes in closures and bankruptcies of their parents' workplaces. As for China with its non-transition (Saxonberg 2013) on the one hand, and the opening-up on the other hand, the post- did not seem as dramatic. Elsewhere (in Chapter 1) I mentioned how my interlocutors saw the Chinese state as stable and secure, often constructing this image in the opposition to the perceived corruption and omnipresent crime in Russia.

In the past, a political slogan in China proclaimed: "The Soviet today is our tomorrow." But for some migrants who came from the Soviet Union decades ago, the new reality exceeded the expectations and even the Chinese today was already much better than the Soviet today. "I came from the Soviet Union into the better Soviet Union," told me Svetlana, a long-time resident of Harbin with an appreciation toward the cultured life and social harmony in the Soviet Union. Back then, in the late 1980s, China was a Soviet Union that *worked*, and today's China was what the Soviet Union *could* have become. Now that the fates of the two empires were radically uncoupled, they no longer followed any similar trajectories. As for contemporary Russia, perhaps against the grain of the theories of transition to capitalism and narratives of progress, the post-Soviet tomorrow was not on the path of becoming the Chinese today. If Russia – or the Soviet Union still – had followed the Chinese way, Svetlana speculated, the country would be far more prosperous than it is today, but it was all in the conditional tense: unreal. It became one of "futures past" to borrow from Koselleck (1985). "But the Soviet Union was not bad either," she told me.

Can it then be surprising that I found the landscape of Harbin and the lands stretching

to the Russian border also drifting between planes, both temporal and spatial? It was a palimpsest of historical periods, powers expanding over its territory and newer, capitalist developments; in other words “sediments or layers of time (Koselleck 2018: 3).” Both these concepts, palimpsest and sediments of time, indicate some kind of visibility: the most recent layers that we can see, the older ones we can only somehow decipher. This palimpsest has been also shaped by the languages spoken: every translation, every attempt at transliteration marking another layer that mediates the experience of being there. Whereas in the past a special pidgin, a language of contact zones, developed in Harbin and along the border,⁶² nowadays there was a couple of words left in common usage.⁶³ Similarly, certain Chinese words made its way to the Russian lexicon.⁶⁴ Otherwise, the two languages, a Slavic and a Sinitic one, remain illegible to each other.⁶⁵

In this chapter, I look at what I call material Russian presence. It includes the afterlives of Russian colonial presence in Harbin; more specifically, the very material aspect of the Russian colonial heritage (殖民遗产 *zhimin yichan*). As I examine what is left

⁶² In fact, there are three recognized variants of Chinese Pidgin Russian, all of which were influenced by other languages as well), originating from: Kyakhta/Maimaicheng, the Russian Far East, and Harbin. See for example articles by Bakich (2011) or Stern (2020).

⁶³ Examples range from 列巴 *lieba* (bread, from Russian *khleb*), to *policiya* (while it means police in Russian, it denotes specifically Russian police. Perhaps less commonly used now, I learned this word from a taxi driver, who told me his parents used to threaten him with Russian police when he was little). See an overview by Tan (2007).

⁶⁴ *Chifanit'* (to eat, from Chinese 吃饭 *chi fan*) is perhaps the most notable example, although I observed my interlocutors incorporate other Chinese words into their speech in Russian.

⁶⁵ For studies on contemporary language use at the border, see articles by Fedorova (2011) or Namsaraeva (2014).

from the colonial built environment (Zatsepine and Victoir 2013) and the ways it is being used, re-used and represented, I point out a tension between the “historical” heritage, or the actually remaining objects left behind by foreigners, and the contemporary tourist industry that is taking liberally from the history of the region.

While I am interested in which forms the Russian heritage and symbolics is present in the spatial and symbolic landscape of Harbin and the broader Northeast, this chapter is not a study of an urban revitalization process or attempts at historic preservation. Since these actions required financial means and political power, they were largely out of hands of my interlocutors – or were at least perceived as unattainable. Instead, I am interested in the so far largely ignored processes of creation, reproduction and replacement of the “foreign presence” that are now made possible by the booming Chinese economy. In other words, my question is very simple: why are there so many reminders of Russia in a proximity to the Russian border, where one could just go to Russia instead? How is it that “Russianness” can be an integral part of placemaking in a country that otherwise attempts to control every facet of “foreign influence” over its territory and culture?

Cosmopolitan Ruins

But before I move onto the discussion of the new constructions, I will switch the temporal focus once again – to the disappearing traces of the past, or, in other words, ruins. Although the word “ruin” might denote various phenomena (for example, see Anna L.

Tsing's "capitalist ruins" (2015) and Ann Stoler's reflections in "Imperial Debris" (2013)), here it stands for buildings in a state of disrepair, to put it roughly; usually not inhabitable and usable anymore. Harbin does have a significant number of these, which might come as a surprise because the city's existence (in its current form) does not even span two hundred years. And yet, despite not being that old – especially judging by the millennia-long history of other Chinese regions – many traces of Harbin's early 20th-century history were fading away. Whether they were reminding of the disputed colonial beginnings, or the capitalist bourgeois art shunned by the Cultural Revolution brigades, or whether they were just unneeded and unfunctional, many landmarks were already gone. Some were bulldozed to make space for new infrastructure. Others, strewn across the city, were falling into oblivion; their disappearance being merely a question of time. A few looked like shells of their old selves; although made of brick, they could be probably destroyed by a strong wind (see Figures 12-14 on p.196).

There are two main kinds of ruins: the "historical" ones and the industrial ones. In choosing the term "historical" I am influenced by the work of anthropologist Mun Young Cho, who in her book "The Specter of 'the People:' Urban Poverty in Northeast China" describes the workers' neighborhoods she conducted her research in as "excluded from the topographical history of Harbin when government officials, journalists, and even scholars evoke the city's earlier life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (2013: 23)." This is not to endorse a particular version of history, but rather to recognize

that this is the History that fuels much of the current narratives of the city. That means that the ruins are either left by the early settlers, or by the pioneers of industrialization, when they themselves were left out by the modernization process in China. The latter kind doesn't attract anyone's attention, besides a rare urban explorer or a researcher; at least for now. Beginning in the early 2000s, artists and businessmen took interest in abandoned socialist factories, most notable example of which is the 798 district in Beijing (J. Li 2020: 195) initially a compound of art galleries. So far, this has not happened in Harbin, and to my knowledge none of the industrial spaces got the re-valuation and revitalization treatment the sites of old factories in Beijing or Shanghai got. This categorization of ruins is important as it points to a division of historical eras: the "historical" ruins are the pre-socialist ones. Cho comments:

They [*the aforementioned scholars etc.* – KK] rewrite the city's colonial history in terms of cultural diversity and cosmopolitan openness... The first three decades of the twentieth century - before the Japanese occupied Harbin in 1932 - dominate the official "history" of Harbin, generating a wide array of attention to the "polyethnic" and "multicultural" city (Wolff 1999). In fact, the area covered by this "history" of Harbin in the late 1920s constitutes less than 30 percent of today's Harbin, and only about 1.4 percent if one adds to the city proper seven counties and country-level cities in suburban Harbin. Foreigners lived in only two districts, Daoli and Nangang. Yet the modern story of this limited area is now widely presented as the "history" of Harbin owing to its contribution to the city reputation as a "cosmopolitan" hub, a reputation prized in most post-Mao cities (2013: 23).

While it is true that in the popular accounts, the cosmopolitan history is presented as the most important history of Harbin, and the workers' history is absent, I want to focus on the role of the colonial heritage. Cho argues that the surviving buildings "represent the living present for those who desire Harbin's rebirth as a hub of international investment and development (2013: 23)." The architecture does hint at the pre-socialist, cosmopolitan past: but what is the contemporary vision of cosmopolitanism? Taking the multiplicity of "Russian" representations into consideration, I argue that the new, cosmopolitan history of Harbin is deterritorialized in a way; it does not encompass the geographical locations Russia or the West either, but rather a simulacrum of the foreign. This chapter is a journey through the spaces.

Walking through Harbin(s)

Early in the fall of 2018, I stumbled upon an online ad announcing a walking tour of the old Harbin. By online, I mean the social app Weixin, and a group chat in particular.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ You might recall my interest in joining WeChat groups from the earlier chapters. This is a testament to how useful they have been. When I introduced myself to new people at the conference, we exchanged WeChat contacts. By the force of habit, the phrase "exchange numbers" comes to mind, but there was not much use for actual phone numbers, since you could also call via the app if necessary. Additionally, for these who moved in and out of China, WeChat accounts could be linked to new phone numbers easily. During fieldwork, I had only saved a handful of phone numbers but dozens of WeChat contacts. Within a couple of days, my new acquaintances added me to various group chats. As a new user enters the group chat, a notification shows up including the information on *how* the person joined: for example, via a QR code or naming the user who invited the new participant. In a way, that was the digital gatekeeping (Zani 2020).

However, the term “group chat” might be somewhat misleading in this case. The group chats I was interested in were not private conversations between a couple of friends or classmates, but rather large semi-public forums with up to 500 users, where announcements and news were regularly shared. The group that was so helpful now was a predominantly English-language forum for so called expats, bringing in foreigners and foreigner-adjacent residents of the city, that is, anyone who could speak English and had any interest in socializing with foreigners. This included recruiters for English language schools, bar proprietors, etc. The linked website featured a brief schedule overview and some information on what to expect from this kind of enterprise, albeit this time in Mandarin Chinese. As I came to learn, he must have been an institution of his own. Mr. Bo organized his tours semi-regularly, every other month or so, sometimes with the help of the local university student organizations.

Mr. Bo was indeed a very knowledgeable history expert and a Harbin guide. He belonged to a community of Chinese men who were not only interested in the history, material and cultural heritage of the old Russian colony, but also broadly conceived social studies focusing on the Chinese Northeast. As it might have become visible throughout the chapters of this dissertation, the interest in the history of the Russian expansion onto the Northeast tended to be a masculine or male-dominated hobby. Of course, the local history was not an exclusively Chinese hobby, as there also existed a number of Russian residents who were very passionate about exploring and commemorating the local history (albeit

sometimes from very different perspectives), not to mention the international scholarly community around the world. The Russian community organized trips to take care of the old cemetery. I could not help but notice: I have not met a woman of any nationality who was so publicly passionate about the history of Harbin. The key word here is “publicly,” of course. When it comes to the public activities, talks and tours, they seemed largely dominated by men; both by those telling the stories and those featured in them: engineers, traders, military officials and so on. Yet, in contemporary Harbin, the community might seem to be “maintained” and organized by women, not least because of the child-rearing responsibilities.

The tour started early on a Saturday morning, just after 8 am. The cold October sun was shining bright, but it was cold already; at night, the temperature might have fallen below zero. Although the address was indicated on the website, I was nervous I wouldn’t be able to find the meeting point, a big government building on a street I had never been to. Not taking any chances with the buses that run regularly, but without a timetable (“every 15 minutes”), I tried to catch a cab well in advance. Yet, when I arrived at the right address, a monumental socialist building whose dusty façade did not reveal any visibly recognizable main entrance, I was still lost. This building spread over a block; nowhere on the invitation did it say what a tour like this would look like. Would there be a guide in a neon shirt or vest or a neon umbrella, perhaps with a megaphone, as usual on organized Chinese tours? In the photo online, Mr. Bo, a man in his 30s or 40s maybe, was wearing a

historical costume of sorts, which would surely stand out in the crowd; here there were just few passersby. The broad avenue with few stores and dusty wind mixed with exhausts blowing from the speeding cars did not attract many pedestrians. After a couple minutes, I saw a group forming. I walked over to them, only to find out that Mr. Bo was wearing a camo t-shirt.

The group consisted of many young people, mostly students and a few tourists from other parts of China. (The second time I attended, there were even fewer tourists and more students.) It turned out that the guide did have a megaphone, only that it was not working: it was merely a prop, maybe even a toy one. Yet, perhaps in an ironic manner, we passed the plastic megaphone in a circle; whoever held it, had to introduce themselves. I was the only foreigner. The group welcomed me quite warmly as for a mix of people who also did not know each other.

“Can I take notes?” I asked the group directly.

Mr. Bo liked the idea and repeated after me, “Can [she] take notes? Of course, [she] can!” He put some emphasis on the word “can” (*keyi*). Was it to indicate his support, or show that he supported my research? Or was he happy that someone would put so much effort into remembering this tour? Either way, I was happy that I have so seamlessly established my presence as an anthropologist. After I explained my research in a few simple phrases, a young woman told me I should go check out Manzhouli; her sister got married there and everything was so Russian there.

The tour started. Mr. Bo led us through four- and six-lane avenues, streets, and alleyways, gesturing at attention worthy objects. These included preserved historical buildings, reconstructed historical buildings, buildings that must have changed their function and appearance many times within these 100 years, so that we could only attempt to trace some palimpsest layers; then, there were ruins that still resembled something, then new buildings that stood at non-existent constructions' sites, and finally squares or pieces of land that were not anything right now, but used to be something. The ratio of the currently nonexistent objects, to the readable and recognizable – at least to an unexperienced and untrained eye – objects was quite high. In other words, participating at this tour required some imagination. Only an archeological excavation could reveal the traces that one was supposed to imagine now. If I had not gotten used to these permutations of the urbanscape, I would have difficulties following the rapidly changing spatial and temporal planes, but here, I mostly had troubles following Mr. Bo's fast-paced Dong Bei (Northeast) accented Chinese.

This was an issue, of course, because some of the points of interest simply did not speak for themselves. Unlike well-preserved imperial palaces or famous pagodas in other parts of China, here many of the buildings did not have meanings or recognizable histories ascribed onto them; not for casual viewers, at least. The old St. Stanislav Catholic church still looked like a church, except now on the first floor there was a noodle fast food chain; this I could have guessed even without listening to the guide. But the more progressed the

process of ruination and adaptation was, the less one could guess; maybe an artfully carved wooden banister or a half-eroded stucco was still there, marking the early 20th-century origins of the building. Finally, when it came to land plots whose significance was entirely in the past, the tourist was fully dependent on the guide. There, one could only wonder what happened to the land under their feet, because the surface was already a park or a sidewalk. Beneath, it could have been a cemetery.

Mr. Bo led us into small alleyways and cul-de-sacs to show us dilapidated houses that were once built by European settlers, as well as remains of so-called Chinese Baroque, Chinese-style buildings adorned with “Western art,” a unique Harbin style developed in the early 20th century. Sometimes we walked into internal collection roads between apartment buildings. Amid newer and older high-rises were nestled small homesteads, two-story houses that looked as if severed from whole built quarters, and multi-layered constructions based on what once must have been a singular residential building. There is a Polish word “przybudówka,” meaning an annex, an extension, but specifically a smaller building added to another building. An “annex,” also a word used in Poland, sounds fancy, international. “Przybudówka” is rather vernacular, more than likely to be visually grating, conflicting with the environment. It is a result of a delayed, small-scale construction process, sometimes without the official construction permit. It is what you do when you need to expand your living space, one room at a time. And here, these buildings consisted of what seemed like a multiplied annex, layers of different construction materials marking

different ideas, attempts to transform or modernize the house, or perhaps necessary rescue solutions of the owners. They looked like sediment layers, documenting the evolution of the building's purpose and the needs of the residents.

Some of the buildings were nearly falling apart and must have been deemed inhabitable by the authorities, yet people lived in them. It was an old administration building that was now in an extreme state of neglect, whose baroque facades were now covered by layers of dust and chipping off paint. The staircase was almost black, perhaps from the coal dust. Where the paint revealed a previous layer of cast, it was covered by a thin film of another substance, maybe mold, maybe dust; I could not tell. Mr. Bo knew what purpose this building served before (a Czech consulate, in this case) and could even trace the remains of old decorations in the staircase and outside. Yet, the building was not empty; we came to watch a decrepit residential building divided into apartments. Someone lived there, at least some of the apartments must have been inhabited; yet the few residents I had seen seemed accepting, if not resigned, about our walking tour; I think they already knew Mr. Bo from previous excursions.

Some participants ventured into the building's hallway; I stayed on the street with the others, who were now looking around the street, up and down into the sky and the sidewalk. The participants came alone or in small groups and mostly remained in the initial constellations. We came to look at buildings whose significance lied in the past, but they still were someone's home. It was a foray into a different historical era, perhaps. There

is urban poverty in Harbin, where, decades ago, many workers found employment in the now defunct heavy industry (see Cho 2013). Now the city and its residents were the pressing issue of inhabitable conditions that working poor, whether old-time city dwellers or recent migrants from the countryside, are left with. I was hesitant to go inside, and so were many of the other participants; we all looked at the walls and took photos. I go back to this scene a lot, trying to make sense of this silent, maybe even invasive encounter of looking at someone's home, even if it is just the staircase.

Somewhere else in the city, there was a dark alleyway between an old cinema and a residential building, where a family run a barbecue stand – they had no running water, they said, but they lived there in this apartment whose windows were dark with the smoke coming from the grills. I had actually met them before. The first time I had walked through this area with a friend, long before I took this trip, we struck a conversation with the residents; this time, with the group, I was not sure if a chat was a good idea. The opposite building was covered in a film of sticky ash so that it was effectively black. It used to be a cinema, Teacher Bo said and gestured at closed-shut exterior shutters. Some of the tourists, including me, rushed to the windows, trying to sneak a glance into the mysterious cinema, but we couldn't make out any shapes in the dark interiors.

A couple of blocks away, the reconstructed Old Quarter began. With uniform, reconstructed Chinese Baroque house fronts, carefully laid sidewalks and garlands of traditional red lanterns, it was quite picturesque. We did not go there on any of the tours.

There was nothing to see there: and not even because we were supposed to look at the hidden Harbin on this day; the reconstructed “Old Town” just never attracted many tourists or residents. You were more likely to stumble upon a tourist with a high-tech camera in the old streets. While a few of the renovated streets had operating businesses, others were virtually empty; the storefronts all vacant. In the old streets, where buildings were still usable, life was thriving: from hardware stores to eateries with dumplings. In one street where most buildings were closed and marked for demolition, I saw chickens running out of courtyard.

We did not enter the central district with the mail walking promenade, Zhongyang Dajie, or what even now some Russian residents called *Arbat* or *Tsentrāl'naia Ulitsa* (Central Street). Incidentally or not, this walk did not intersect with the itineraries of most walks organized by tourist agencies that would rarely miss Zhongyang Dajie and St. Sophie's Cathedral, turned into an architecture museum. After all, the website promised that through vivid stories, we would learn of a different Harbin, one that has been hidden from us.

Not without certain irony, I thought that there was always something hidden from me anyway; with my imperfect Mandarin skills, I had to look up unknown characters. (My Russian was also sometimes lacking, but at least I could always read everything.) For speakers of other languages, knowledge of Mandarin is an entry barrier into independent life in China. Of course, it rings true for migrants in any country where another language

is spoken, but a different writing system poses a whole new set of challenges, especially when it comes to spatial orientation. Some foreigners without any Chinese skills managed to get by with Google Maps, but the more useful local equivalent, Baidu Ditu, was impossible to navigate without knowing Chinese characters. Teachers at universities and private schools were sometimes given business cards with the addresses of their new home and the workplace by their employers, so that they could show it to cab drivers or potential guests.

But another barrier was the way people referred to places in different languages. It was one thing to learn the city topography, as in to discern and remember where specific points of interest are physically located. To learn how to and navigate and communicate it was another challenge. On the old colonial maps, street names were often indicated in both Chinese and Russian; and for places that only had Chinese names, a Russian transliteration was provided. This was still the convention in the historical downtown, probably to retain “the atmosphere of the foreign city (Koga 2008),” although instead of the colonial – and colloquially used – names, Zhongyang Dajie was rendered in Cyrillic as *Chzhun’yandats’ze*, marking a break from the foreign, colonial topography: after all, who has the right to name the streets? Otherwise, as elsewhere in Chinese cities, most streets and road signs listed the names in Pinyin underneath the Chinese characters.

Within the Russian language sphere, it was also common to give directions using orientation points, such as “the Wanda mall,” a certain centrally located KFC, or a

particular school of Chinese as a foreign language. On multiple occasions, I had almost missed meeting my interlocutors because the coordinates somehow did not align. “Meet me at the bus stop where we got off the last time when we went to the vegetable market,” ended up being one of the most stressful endeavors. The issue could sometimes be solved by sending a live location on WeChat, so that everyone could see their position relative to the others. It was not an issue of the street grid being confusing; it was an issue of naming and legibility. It took me a while to learn of the landmarks that served as orientation points; especially the ones, whose names were relayed to me in a Cyrillized Chinese (any pinyin syllable can stand for multiple characters, and I was initially unfamiliar with the Russian standards for transliteration) or ones under colloquial Russian names that did not indicate an immediately discernible connection to the Chinese name (as opposed to direct translations such as *Ostrov Solntsa* for *Taiyang Dao*, Sun Island). Nevertheless, these places served as an intimate geography of Harbin.

There was a certain paradox in the fact that knowledge of Russian was needed (obviously, since it was mental maps created by and for Russians speakers) to learn of this geography, but barely any places that had Russian names officially ascribed to them belonged there. In fact, if a store had a Russian sign, with mistakes or not, such as “*Magazin Andreevicha*” or “*dobro pozhalovat’ v rossiiskikh tovarov*,”⁶⁷ I could be sure

⁶⁷ Literally: “welcome to Russian goods” or “wares.”

that none of my Russian interlocutors would go there because it sold souvenirs and overpriced imported snacks. Instead, they recommended Carrefour, other stores or simply bringing some food from Russia yourself. The Cyrillic-advertised restaurants were more controversial to my interlocutors: some offered proper Russian food, some were bad, and others went unnoticed. While in many places around the world, businesses catering at migrants use – sometimes exclusively – the language they are familiar with; to see the use of Russian writing as a sign of such marketing strategy would be very misleading. It seems rather that Russian writing was not necessarily there to be read as a text informing the reader of particular content or suggesting familiarity, but rather to be noticed as a symbol, alarming the passer-by that this is “foreign,” or a decoration. In other words, Russian script was not for people who speak Russian, but rather for tourists who came to see the Russian “feeling” the Northeast was so famous for, 俄罗斯风情 (*E’luosi fengqing*).

But what was the Russian “feeling”?

Atmosphere of a Foreign Country

The circular hotel hallway was dark, only partially lit by colorful matryoshka doll-shaped lamps. Instead of simple plaques, the room numbers were displayed on bright neon lights that also looked like Russian nesting dolls. The doors to each room were embedded in relief sculptures of a matryoshka doll, so that walking into a room, the guest was entering a supersize doll. Inside of the room, as one could expect from a nesting doll,

more matryoshkas followed. But they were outside, too; through the window one could see a park filled with matryoshka statues of various sizes, some of them as tall as a person, some fitting an entire souvenir store within. Back in the room, a mirror was hanging on the wall, in a frame modeled after the doll. If you looked in the mirror, you would see yourself inside of a matryoshka. Surrounded by other matryoshka-themed decorations, on the counter next to matryoshka shaped teapot, mugs, and plastic water bottles, was placed a (regularly shaped, this time) guest information booklet that proudly proclaimed (see Figure 10), “Go to Russia, travel thousands of miles, just see a part; come to Kouan,⁶⁸ in “Matryoshka” appears the whole country.”⁶⁹

The “Matryoshka” in question was the Matryoshka Hotel, a some 60-meter-tall doll-shaped construction that is now somewhat infamous by being featured in the online contest for the ugliest building in the country (Archcy.com, n.d.).” This nomination could be read as an affront to the whole country of Russia, were one to believe the motto. But this hotel in a shape of a nesting Russian doll was surely to be treated as a metaphor, a synecdoche: a part representing the whole. Even if it is a whole that most Russians do not associate with nesting dolls at all; this is an important point to which I return in the further part of this chapter.

⁶⁸ Kouan (口岸) - another name of the place, literally meaning a “port” as in “port of entry.”

⁶⁹ The English translation is quoted as it appears in the book. In Mandarin Chinese, the text reads: 去俄罗斯，行千里，/ 只见一隅，来口岸，/ 到套娃，可览全貌。

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Figure 10: "In
'Matryoshka' appears
the whole country.
Manzhouli, 2018.
Photo by the author

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Figure 11: 'Matryoshka' seen
from outside.
Manzhouli, 2018. Photo by
the author.

What might seem more surprising, though, is that “the whole” was just a few miles away. If you already were in Manzhouli, a town in the Northeastern corner of Inner Mongolia, you did not have to travel thousand miles to be in Russia. In fact, the border with Russia was just a few miles away from the hotel, a short car ride away. Why this emphasis on the distance then? Initially, I assumed that it was because the Russia of interest was not the Russia that was around the corner, just as the stores in Heihe were named after Moscow and not Blagoveshchensk. In other words, even crossing the border and seeing Zabaikalsky Krai was not enough when one wanted to see Moscow. Yet, the Matryoshka hotel is a part of a bigger tourist complex that also includes a majestic border gate with a looking platform, from which one can gaze both at Russia and back into the Chinese mainland. Although the neighboring Russian land was largely rural and without any big cities, the gaze into a foreign land must have been a draw enough. An acquaintance told me that the organized tour in Manzhouli she was a part of in the late 2000s was even allowed to cross the border and walk around in Russia for several minutes; but that seemed to be a thing of the past. Now, a Russian bakery on the Chinese side was promising to deliver “the real taste without crossing the border.”

“Sino-Russian Border Tourist Area of Manzhouli” is a 5-star scenic spot. While there is a simple rationale why such an investment was located in this place, namely the need for revenue (Peshkov 2018), there is also more the tourism industry in China. Initially, leisure travel was only common among gentry who followed itineraries established by

scholars, literati and cultural figures: a canon of scenic spots (Nyíri 2006). It was only after the opening-up reform that traveling and tourism became popular practices. In the 1990s, domestic tourism became a mass phenomenon in People's Republic of China (Nyíri 2006) and the country underwent so called "theme park fever" (Oakes 1993). The Chinese theme parks are supposed to teach visitors about country's past, the present and the desired vision of the future; and to furthermore help the citizens imagine themselves as a part of the nation and the world (Anagnost 1997). The topics reflected in the newly opened theme parks include Chinese history, miniaturized touristic landmarks of the country, ethnic minorities' cultures and depictions of foreign countries. By now, multiple tourist attractions throughout the country are officially designated as "scenic spots" (景点 *jingdian*). The development of large-scale Chinese domestic tourism has some similarities with the didactic function of Soviet tourism, where, as Svetlana also reminded me, the goal was to learn about the country and all the ethnicities that made up the Soviet Union (Hirsch 2003). In a multi-ethnic country such as the PRC, trips to regions inhabited by minorities were also encouraged and facilitated by strategically placed infrastructure. But let's not lose focus on the economy: In 1999, the government had even extended the holidays in order to stimulate economic growth (Nyíri 2006: 5).

Manzhouli Scenic Spot was also built with a mission. According to the official website, Wang Zejun, the chairman of Port Travel, was a fresh university graduate (who majored in Russian language) when he saw the potential of Manzhouli in the early 1990s. That was

the beginning of his vastly successful business, which now combined the National Gate scenic spot and an “European-style Wedding Palace.” Today, it is China’s only tourist resort with the theme of “traditional Russian handicrafts, nesting dolls.”⁷⁰ Furthermore, as the website explains, “It is a large-scale Russian style park integrating food, housing, transportation, tourism, shopping and entertainment with the concept of history, culture, architecture and folklore, combining Chinese and Russian customs (Manzhouli Port Tourism Group 2017).”⁷¹ In fact, the resort includes a museum of Russia that presents a somewhat superficial version of the history of the relations between these two nations. Controversial or painful events have not been rare, yet they are never mentioned. Instead, one can see a photo of the presidents holding hands or an exhibition on “Sino-Soviet friendship” without a mention of the Sino-Soviet Split. The common socialist heritage is reduced to a mention of the Soviet support for the development of heavy industry in China.

The museum of Russia is clearly directed at the Chinese visitor - since all the texts are in Chinese only, with titles in multiple languages, Russians that do not speak Chinese cannot easily learn what is written about them. (Since it is a museum of Russia, there is no exhibition explaining China to the Russian visitor, either.) But there are photos: One exhibition proclaims that the Russian Federation is a very diverse country. This claim is

⁷⁰ Chinese: 俄罗斯传统工艺品——套娃。All translations by the author.

⁷¹ Chinese: 是以中俄风情相结合的历史、文化、建筑、民俗为理念，集吃、住、行、游、购、娱为一体的大型俄罗斯特色风情园。

illustrated by photos of various ethnic groups, such as Tatars and Buryats, usually in their traditional garbs. Yet this diversity does not find much relevance outside of the one exhibition; in other pictures the Russian people are still the ones with Caucasian features; most likely with blonde hair. Wang Zejun's biography also mentions that the resort filled the a gap by creating a "platform for cultural and artistic exchange and mutual learning between China, Russia and Mongolia (Manzhouli Port Tourism Group 2017)."⁷² The insistence on including Mongolia in this set up is worth noting. There was not much that indicated the significance of Mongolian culture to this place otherwise. In the town, the fact of belonging to Inner Mongolia was marked by traditional Mongolian script on the fast-food KFC's neon sign and occasional "Mongolian" souvenirs such as dolls in traditional folk outfits or little yurt figures. It felt perfunctory compared to the omnipresent if superficial fascination with Russia.⁷³

Besides the spectacular hotel one can already see from the plane, the streets in the city center were decorated with matryoshka statues and images; even some trash cans are shaped like Russian dolls. During my visits in 2013, 2017 and 2018, I could observe the development of "Russian atmosphere" that coincided with the decline of physical cross-border trade. On the one hand, multiple stores sold matryoshka-themed souvenirs and products imported from Russia. Street and store signs were all in Russian; many venues

⁷² Chinese: 中俄蒙三国文化艺术交流互鉴的平台。

⁷³ The history of Inner Mongolia is beyond the scope of this dissertation. See Bulag (2004).

blasted Russian music or Russian-language commercials (*dorogiye druzia iz Rossii*, “dear friends from Russia,” it said often, a recorded voice played on repeat). Small theaters and restaurants hosted shows of variously arranged Russian music and ballet shows, performed by artists from the former Soviet Union. Yet, obviously, Manzhouli is not in Russia; it is located in the Inner Mongolian steppes, and the picturesque landscape combined with the extraordinary “cultural” offerings makes it a fast-growing tourist destination that attracts a steady flow of visitors.

On the other hand, Chinese tourists were not the only inflow into Manzhouli looking to experience “another culture.” Admittedly, it’s becoming less and less popular due to online shopping and wholesale services operating with international intermediaries, but Russians from the border areas used to frequently travel to Manzhouli from Siberia for shopping, business or for entertainment. Liza, a young woman I met in Irkutsk, showed me her photos from a weekend getaway with her friends: traditional Peking Duck dinner, Chinese tea, shopping. She never ventured further into mainland China and did not feel like Manzhouli might be any different from the rest of the country, or that it would matter: it was China, after all. You might notice a certain similarity with Viktoriya’s story: the Russian-style decorations dominating the city and the omnipresent usage of the Russian language did not prevent Liza from enjoying what she considered vacations in China. While the appeal of in-person shopping might wane, especially given Manzhouli’s reputation as a dangerous city, the weekend excursions seem to remain popular. Although

neither Chinese nor Russian visitors constitute a homogenous group, they generally seem to recognize the border environment as “foreign” or as representing the other group.

From a technical standpoint, the “Russia experience” takes up a small part of the city; just as the historical architecture covers few percent of Harbin’s area. The whole Hulun Buir region is governed as a prefecture-level city, so technically, by the power of administrative creativity, Manzhouli is just one of the many urban districts of the prefecture. Since the high-speed rail network did not reach the Northern ends of the country, the rail connection to Harbin was slow: it took 12 to 14 hours. I wanted to avoid sleeping on the train, and luckily, I found a cheap flight back from Haila’er, another city in the prefecture. Nevertheless, the train ride to from Manzhouli to Haila’er took 3 hours and went through two *Banners* (administrative divisions of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, similar to counties). The vast grasslands with occasional villages did not resemble much of a urban landscape.

But when I got to the town, Haila’er had nothing from the frenetic energy of Manzhouli: just the blue sky, cold October sun, grey high rises. The main square bore the name of Chinggis Khan. People around me largely spoke Mongolian. As I was sitting in a cab driving down the expressway decorated with massive sculptures of horses and ancient warriors, I could clearly see that Russia was not in the picture anymore. Until I went further away from the border, down to Harbin, that is.

Surely, the architecture in Harbin is more subdued; after all, it was hundred years old.

Much has been written about cities' treatment of ruins, revitalization processes and preservation. Sometimes their presence is a little surprising; they look as if copy pasted into the landscape from another picture.

Figure 12: A theater building in 2017...



Figure 13: ...and two years later.



Figure 14: Former site of the Italian consulate before renovation. 2017.

The Song Lei Shopping Mall in the background.

All photos by the author, 2017-2019.

In Berlin, there is the so called Memorial Church, destroyed during the bombings that has never been reconstructed; its destruction is left as a reminder of war. Yet, the church's destruction has been secured through "counterpreservation" (Sandler 2011), presenting the damages for the world to see. I do not think that this is the case here, in Harbin: it is rather indecision or stalling. Eventually buildings get renovated or destroyed. Harbin's authorities are also selective when it comes to the choice between bulldozing and preservation; but what is more interesting is the process of reconstruction and replicating. Perhaps the most famous destruction process was the one of St. Nicholas Orthodox Church. Taken apart during the Cultural Revolution, it disappeared from the city center until it was reconstructed in the suburban Volga Manor resort (or a cultural park). It never became a ruin, though; the rubble was cleaned up. The building had just disappeared and re-emerged in a different place, several decades later.

Surprisingly for many (foreign or not) visitors, who do not expect this kind of transparency, the photos from the Cultural Revolution demolition hang inside the church-like building. When you are inside you can see photos of the church being taken apart, demonstrations with Mao portraits, and pieces of the rooftop strewn on the ground. Yet, the building stands anew.

"So, it's fake?" was my first reaction after my Chinese friend, Yang, told me about it. "It is not fake," he reprimanded me. "It is reconstructed." After all, did it matter if the building was half- or fully destroyed if it was rebuilt back into the original shape? The new

church was not an imitation, because what it was modeled after did not exist anymore; the new object filled the void after the old one. One might say that this is precisely what makes it an imitation: the lack of the original. But perhaps this is an ultimate example of Baudrillard's simulacra (1994): copies where the original point of reference becomes irrelevant.



Figure 15: The reconstructed St. Nicholas Church at the Volga Manor. Harbin, 2017. Photo by the author.

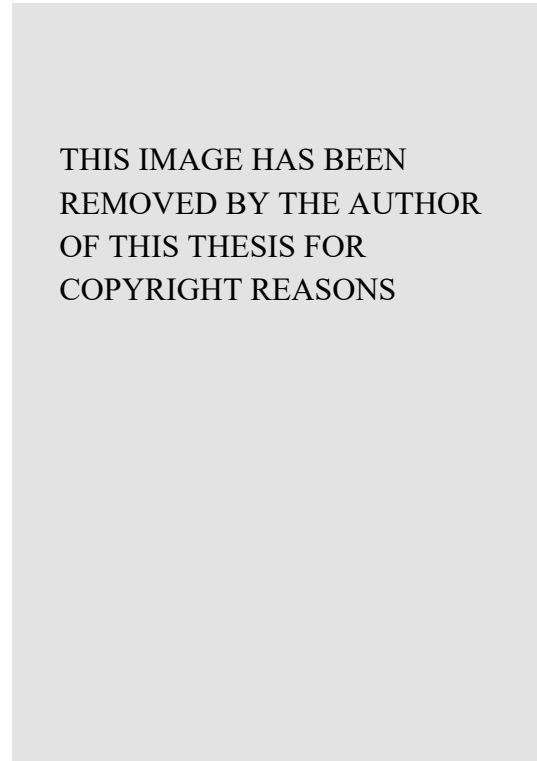


Figure 16: The original St. Nicholas Church (colorized). Source: Wikipedia.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Раскрашенная_открытка_Никольского_собора_в_Харбине.jpg)

[File:Раскрашенная_открытка_Никольского_собора_в_Харбине.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Раскрашенная_открытка_Никольского_собора_в_Харбине.jpg)

In the end, can someone tell the difference? While many people who witnessed the demolition in 1966 are still there, most of these who originally visited the church are not. Could it function as a church again? One cannot enter the resort without paying a fee of 100RMB (\$15 USD), which seems antithetical to an idea of a church. Yet, inside, there are icons, there is an altar of sorts – does it not make a church?⁷⁵

On the one hand, the reasons for the relocation are very pragmatic. Over the decades of the temple's non-existence, its old site has been repurposed, the empty spot has been filled. There is one functioning Orthodox Church in the city, serving a relatively small religious community. Yet, the relocation from the city center, in midst of so-called urban tissue, to a walled and manicured tourist resort, shows that it is merely a decoration, a marketing tool. Despite the contested simulacrum, Volga Manor lacks the hyperreal character of Matryoshka. Calling itself "Moscow of the East," it was built on empty land outside of the city, located between forests and with a pond in its midst, it is indicative of a Russian pastoral fantasy. Especially if one looks in the direction of the new-old church or wooden houses that now serve as hotel apartments. The Volga Manor park also includes a castle and a golf course; it can serve as a wedding venue or a conference center. In fact, several Russian-Chinese conferences or fairs took place there; including one on methodology of teaching Russian as a foreign language, funded by the "Russkii Mir

⁷⁵ I need to leave the discussion of what constitutes an altar and a place of worship to experts of religion.

(Russian World) funds (publicdiplomacy.club 2017).

On the Sun Island on the Songhua River, there is the Russian Village. As previously mentioned, it was founded at the actual site of old Russian-style houses, using them as exhibitions, *skansen* style. *Rusaskaia Derevnia*, Russian Village was founded in 2005 at the old summer resort where wealthy Harbinets' had their *dachi*, summer houses. (Gribin 2015: 49). The museum consists of several old houses, some of them used as venues for exhibitions, some of them preserved to showcase the lives of previous residents.

As if to emphasize the fact that these stand for foreign countries, tickets to both venues in Harbin resemble passport booklets. Whereas for example, in Epcot in Florida one receives an Epcot passport where each page can be stamped by a representative of a different country as if recreating a world with the selected countries deemed worthy visiting (Russia is not included there, but China is), here each passport stands for the venue itself. On the cover, the header says the PRC, but the main text is the name of the resort. While the Manzhouli border gate (although accessible only to the citizens of the People's Republic of China) offers an experience of a passage, and actually shows what a border looks like (conceptualized as a physical crossing through a gate), the Harbin parks offer a recreation of another aspect of this rite of passage: holding a passport.

A “Russian” Experience

Russia is far from the only country that is being represented in such a manner – in China or abroad. In “The Beautiful Country: Tourism and the State of Destination Italy,” Stephanie Hom (2015) points out that more people experience Italy in its deterritorialized, simulacra form, for example in Las Vegas, than by visiting the actual country. Themed spaces also invade Chinese cities: Multiple communities are built as replicas of European towns and North American suburbs (Bosker 2013).

However, I argue that this “Russian” space theming phenomenon is distinct from the aforementioned ones (see Koziol 2020). Firstly, it is geographically limited to the Northeast of China, where the vast majority of the shared border, measuring around 2500 miles, is located. Unlike the reproductions of Italy in let’s say Las Vegas or Macao, this tourist mimicry takes place within a very short geographical distance from the original point of reference; a distance that (at times) could be possibly traversed even within an hour.

Secondly, it is based on a colonial legacy; that is, it originates from material heritage left in the wake of the Russian Empire’s involvement in the region, which itself is an interesting phenomenon. But in spite of the geographical proximity and the historical background, it “outgrows” the existing material heritage, and it is very selective in its portrayal of “Russia.” For example, there are also so called Russian ethnic minority villages – also including a tourist resort – in Hulunbeir Prefecture in Inner Mongolia and other

places. As I have already mentioned, due to the administrative divisions of Inner Mongolia, Hulunbeir is administered as a prefecture-level city taking up a vast area, so technically some villages are in the same city as Manzhouli (nestling dolls seem to be a predominant motif here). Yet, these places are rarely discussed together; the former are a part of “ethnic tourism” while the latter represent something akin to “Russian tourism.”

Thirdly, perhaps as a direct consequence of this liberal attitude, it is not necessarily recognized as “Russian” by Russian migrants residing in the area. I had already mentioned that being a part of another migration wave, my interlocutors largely had no personal ties to the people that used to live or own the historical European spaces; neither did they have much involvement in the contemporary use of the buildings. Unsurprisingly, especially gigantic nesting dolls did not evoke any familiar feelings, because – and I am stating the obvious here – free-standing, human-sized Matryoshkas are simply not a part of the Russian urban landscape; and probably not the type of objects one would usually develop intimate attachment to. Neither were the more traditionally sized ones that were still more associated with souvenirs for foreign tourists. Note the intimate geography of Harbin, where Russian script was more of a deterrent than a draw.

What were these venues seen as then? Svetlana took these resorts and sculptures as a sign of Chinese commercial genius and entrepreneurship, wishing that the Russian side of the border could also develop a tourist base. I found this sentiment very indicative of figuratively assigning the “Russian” objects into the symbolic realm of Chinese culture: in

other words, it was a Chinese project that did not have any ties to the Russia that exists nearby; but instead, was based on a highly commodified, iconic representation of “Russian culture” that mostly caters to these outsides of Russia. As such it circumvented Russia – the country Russian migrants knew; instead, it spoke to the global image of Russia, a fixed imaginary entity (or a floating signifier?). It was not a mimicry of Russia per se, but rather a mimicry of global trends.

The disconnect between what my interlocutors saw as Russian, and the visibility of things technically Russian hints at a certain multi semantic shift of what “Russian” actually means. I follow this thread in the next chapter, as I turn to experiences of these who work there.

Chapter 5: “Working as a Russian”

“Are you Soviet (*Sulianren*)?”

An elderly man looked at me with curiosity as I was passing him by in the dark hallway of the building I just moved into. The year was 2018, but he was probably just curious as to why I showed up in his apartment complex. Based on my observations during these first weeks in the high-rise I was now calling home, I had the impression I was the only visibly “Other” resident there, although the 30 floors with multiple apartments surely allowed for some anonymity. Maybe my neighbor wanted to be more inclusive: after all Soviet Union encompassed many republics; not every Soviet person was Russian. Perhaps he was just used to the Soviet Union.

“*Bu shi, bu shi*” (I am not), I chuckled at the thought of time travel from the Soviet Union and introduced myself. “I am Polish” I explained: still from Eastern Europe, just another country. Throughout the year I lived in this building, I sometimes stopped to chat with him and pet his two small dogs if he was sitting on the couch in the lobby or in front of the entrance, sometimes with his wife and other retired neighbors. The building lobby served as a sort of communal living room with two couches, where older residents gathered to play chess or chat and smoke cigarettes, especially as it was quickly getting too cold and dark outside.

The first weeks in Harbin were not easy. I was lonely, and the encounters I had were not always that pleasant. Very shortly after I moved in, another person I met on the elevator asked if I was Russian. I said I was not, but he did not believe me. Suddenly he switched to very proficient Russian and accused me of pretending, adding “I know you all” (*ia vas vsekh znaiu*). It was late evening on Saturday, he might have been drunk; he was definitely angry I was there. He continued that he used to go to Russia, therefore he knows “us all.” “*Ia vas znaiu*,” he kept repeating furiously. I could not tell if he was angry that I did not admit to it, or whether his anger finally found an outlet. Did the “*vas*” refer to me as an honorific plural, or to all the people he knew, I did not know either, although the latter seemed more plausible. I was relieved to leave the elevator, and for a second I was scared he would follow me to continue his rant, but he stayed in. I never saw him again.

“Next time someone says you’re Russian, just deny it,” told me a Chinese friend, when I told her about the incident. Some people don’t like Russians, she explained. No one knows too much about Poland so it’s a safe answer: it’s not like America, either. Admittedly, although Russian is spoken in many countries, speaking Russian while claiming not to be one could have been seen as a little suspicious.

“Better just don’t react,” the friend followed up with more advice. If I had not known any Russian, I would have not even known of this interpellation, I would not have understood it. But a Russian(-speaking) person could have also pretended not to understand, so silence was not a solution. Short of showing my passport, there was no

plausible way to prove my nationality, which in turn revealed the absurdity of trying to prove being or not being Russian. And maybe even that would not work. This categorization was beyond me: it was an identity ascribed to me and to many others.

The advice not to react was coming from a place of concern to ensure that I am not subjected to someone's rants again, but seemed at odds with my ethos as an anthropologist in making: shouldn't I *want to* talk to people? Talking to strangers could be awkward, or simply unpleasant or even bizarre (like with the man who was asking if I was looking for a husband); but it could also be informative, enlightening, and enjoyable; multiple things can be true at the same time. Since I barely knew anyone, the alternative was only relying on the conversations I started, or simply not talking to anyone. This recommendation seemed counterproductive to me: After all, did I not learn foreign languages precisely so I could speak to more people? If my neighbors did not like Russians, would I not want to know?

I kept thinking about my friend's advice throughout my time in China: she was trying to protect me from potentially unpleasant encounters with any strangers. Interestingly, my Russian interlocutors never complained about open hostility toward them. The advice could speak more about my friend's vision of the world. There could be anti-Russian sentiments, or, conversely, incidents that my Russian interlocutors preferred not to discuss.

But nowhere else in the country did people so frequently ask if I was Russian.

“Russians” seemed to be an established category - perhaps the primary category of foreigners in Harbin, in contrast to the common placement of Americans as “prototypical foreigners (Y. Liu 2021: 1).” Surely, most of foreigners in Harbin were actually from the Russian Far East: after all, this was the nearest big city for many; it was just a statistical probability that a Caucasian-looking passer-by was Russian, either on a work visa, just visiting or staying on a short-term business visa. For people from other countries, Harbin would not be the first destination to consider; it was not a major international port of entry, such as Beijing, Shanghai or Guangzhou. More questions were coming to mind: If Russia was such an unwelcome presence, why all the tourism? While the Russian-themed tourist attractions were not built in order to attract Russian tourists, there must have been something of interest there: why did tourists go to the Russian Village? Why did they take photos with Russian performers?

Of course, one did not have to be Russian to be perceived as Russian: I was just one example of that. But to profit of being Russian, one had to be perceived as a specific kind of Russian. Most of the Russian-themed spaces hired foreigners. An exploration of this has been the initial goal of my study. Yet, as I arrived in Harbin I learned of a parallel phenomenon: where, in order to earn money one had to be specifically not perceived as Russian.

Being from There: Working as a Russian

Rabotat' russkim (работать русским), *working as a Russian*, is perhaps the most apt description of the kind of work that Eastern Europeans undertake at tourist attraction sites. I have never witnessed anyone using the phrase to refer to themselves, although I doubt that it never happened. Yet, it was always others who *worked as Russians*. My interlocutors preferred using terms such as “to work in the village” (*robotat' w derevni*) or “to work in the park” (*robotat' w parke*). The work included tasks such as posing for photos with visitors or – rarely – presenting some skills. Yet people who participated in dance and/or music performances were designated as artists or dancers (the latter having some other negative connotations), and these who painted or decorated were also working as artists. Employees (or, perhaps, contractors, to use more precise terms) who were parts of dancing troupes were usually called “*artisty*.” To be a “dancer (*tantsor*)” had another connotations: often working in bars and clubs, these women – it was usually women – were not “artists.” People who worked in little workshops, teaching visitors to paint matryoshkas or sold their paintings, were considered “*khudozhniki*,” artists, and referred to themselves as such.

I do not recall how I first learned of this phrase: it was not common, since the profession itself was rare and the actual content of the work and its moral evaluation – ambiguous. Going back to my previous discussion on foreignization and domestication in

translation: If the English rendition of this phrase sounds awkward, then it surely retains some qualities of the original term. The meaning of the English phrase is in fact very unclear: To work as a Russian does not mean to hold a job that is available to Russian citizens only; to my knowledge, there are no such jobs (with Russian being a language spoken in multiple countries, the category of “native speaker” includes many nationalities). Neither does it mean that it is the only job is available for Russians citizens; and it surely does not indicate anything intrinsic to the experiences of Russians working in China. In fact, this job does not have much to do with the citizenship; *russkii* indicates nationality within the *Rossiianin* category. I am not aware of a Chinese equivalent of this phrase. However, the usual way to refer to Russian people was *E’luosiren*, which did not indicate the difference inherent in *Rossiianin* and *russki*, even when it usually meant the Russian nationality. *E’luosizu* with the suffix *zu* (of *minzu*, nationality) meant Russians as ethnic group, which could include both the Russian ethnic minority in China and the Russian (*russki*) nationality of Russia, as opposed to, for example, Buryat or Sakha people, representatives of which also lived in Harbin.

What does it mean to work as a nationality (representative)? To work as a bearer of one’s (national) identity? The work includes mostly being, as in being present at the physical site, and as in being Russian; in other words, being a right person in a right place. The physical site is of crucial significance here, because only some places needed Russians and were willing to recognize this presence as labor. These were the venues I discussed in

the previous chapter, as well as smaller restaurants and places such as “streets of Russian culture,” short commercial strips with multiple Russian-themed stores and services.

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Figure 17: Everyone can be (in) a matryoshka. “Russian Street” in Dalian. Photo by the author, 2017.

The work of “a Russian” was therefore rather a question of presence, of *being there*. Perhaps it could be grasped more in terms of being “an ambassador.” It might have included some custodian duties, such as reminding visitors not to touch exhibited objects, but the emphasis was on being seen. A dancer I briefly met bitterly described being surrounded by spectators “like an animal in zoo.” In other words, it was a “double duty as

ethnographic specimen and museum docent (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998: 44).” Placing “right people at a right place” is hardly a new phenomenon; it is not specific to China either. The Epcot in Orlando, FL, a theme park with several country pavilions, hires international employees as a part of their “Cultural Representative Program.” Many contemporary museums around the world hire docents, who sometimes dress up in historical costumes.

Yet, in this case, the phenotype is of great significance, and it is openly discussed: while the very idea of “Slavic appearance” is never elaborated on, the candidates have to look the part. Within the Russian context, it was *russkii* as ethnicity, not *rossiiskii* as nationality. Many job listings circulating on social media would state “Slavic appearance required,” “candidates with Slavic appearances,” “Looking for Slavic girls” etc. The phrase “Slavic appearance” (*slavianskaia vneshnost’*) was the key. Job offers circulating online were calling for waitresses, dancers, sales assistants: all with a “Slavic look,” never just “Slavic.”⁷⁶

On my quest to define the elusive Slavic look, I was given various explanations. The usual answers were that being Slavic was something about the face, the facial features and the eyes, but not only in terms of eye color or shape, but also the expression (the phrase used was *vzgliad*). In fact, some of my interlocutors believed that I could have a job like

⁷⁶ The listings were always written in Russian, although the potential employers were most likely Chinese. I cannot tell whether it was usually the Chinese employer’s preference, or rather the Russian-speaking broker’s contribution.

that too, since I looked the part. When I asked one of the performers at the Gardens⁷⁷ about the preferred look, he did not give me a definition but instead told me my blonde hair were a major give away that I was Slavic. I did not tell him that they were dyed, but I doubt that the authenticity was of importance here. Nevertheless, Slavic people did not have to be blonde. In this case, the category of Slavic appearance extended beyond the Russian nationality and ethnicity.

On the one hand, the Slavic appearance was an instrument of racial and ethnic exclusion, although some people of *russkii* ethnicity did not look Slavic either. On the other hand, looking Slavic did not equal just being white - as perceived in the terms of “European whiteness” or US racial categories (Krivonos 2020; Sadowski-Smith 2018). Many white people, including these coming from Western Europe, did not look Slavic; Slavic appearance was then separate from corporeal whiteness. But what was it? My investigations were sometimes met with a slight irritation: Everyone knew what the *slavianskaia vneshnost'* was. I was asking for something that was so obvious to others that they could not exactly pinpoint it. In other contexts in Russian-speaking countries, similar phrases are used as means of exclusion and discrimination- for example, against migrants from Central Asia in the competitive housing market in Moscow (Reeves 2017). On the Russian-language internet platforms for those living in China, “Slavic appearance”

⁷⁷ Gardens is a fictional name I keep in order to honor my interlocutors' wishes.

appeared in nearly every job listing I saw, clearly marking the authors' need for distinction.

Just as I was leaving China in the summer of 2019, the idea of Slavic appearance became even more complicated. The Chinese internet suddenly had a new star: Dong Desheng, a man streaming his everyday life in the rural Northern Heilongjiang. An ethnically Russian (*elusi minzu*) farmer in his 40s, Dong had a "Slavic appearance." I spent some time watching his videos on the *kuaishou* app, only to go on WeChat and see acquaintances and news outlets post about him. Desheng's popularity trickled into the Russian-speaking population as well. His foreignness was astounding: Neither Dong nor his ethnically Russian mother who sometimes showed up in his videos, knew a word of Russian. Desheng's great grandmother came to China with her two sons in 1926, and adopted the last name of her new husband, Dong. Speaking *Dongbei Hua*, the local dialect, Desheng talked about farming on his 15-hectare plot, trips to the nearby town, occasional roles in historical movies, and the family he made with his ethnically Han wife.

His "unusual" appearance and fun, cheerful disposition helped him gain millions of followers. But it has also opened a debate on national belonging in China: who can be Chinese? In the movie "Petrov's Spring Festival (彼得洛夫的春節)" (Li, Li and Zheng 2013), Desheng talked about discrimination his family faced in the past. When he was traveling, police would check his documents, not understanding why the nationality (ethnic group) listed in his national ID was Han Chinese. Then, Desheng learned that he can change his official nationality to Russian minority. In other videos, Desheng explained that he had

not been anywhere farther from home except Harbin until he got a role as an extra in a historical movie in 2009. “Then I felt that my foreign face could be useful.” Nevertheless, he is not interested in moving to Russia: “although we have Russian faces, we all share Chinese culture and customs” he stated, emphasizing his connection to his home village. “We are also Chinese.” Then, Desheng confessed that he married a Chinese woman to gradually change his lineage, his children’s ethnic belonging. “Then, my son marries a Chinese and his descendants eventually become Chinese by blood. Anyway, even when you don’t want to change, you have to, because there are fewer and fewer people like us left.”

While Dong Desheng was famous – at least partially due to the juxtaposition of his “Russian face” and heavy Northern accent; one conceptualized as foreign and the other as provincial, – there were more ethnic Russians in the Northeast. Yet, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, the representatives of *eluosi minzu* who worked in tourist industry were concentrated around so-called ethnic tourism that was based on the depictions of rural life and on the actual history of these communities. Foreigners – those who were not Chinese citizens – were delegated to the more urban, Russian-themed venues.

Irina worked in the one of the Russian-themed tourist attractions, a park with small pavilions and exhibitions. The job did not have an official title that I knew of, and Irina usually simply said that she works at the Gardens. In practice, it meant that every day she wore a peasant-style dress and sat in a wooden house stylized to look like from the early 20th century. With oil paint already chipping off window frames and doors and an eclectic

collection of decorations, it did feel like a rural settlement somewhere between Eastern Europe and Siberia. In the summer, the smell of dust and wood mixed with the humid air. In the winter, it felt somewhat cozy, if still cold. As she was usually the only “Russian lady” (*e’luosi dama*) there, the pavilion was almost like her home, at least on weekdays from 9 am to 5 pm, or whenever her shifts would fall.

Irina was not working as a tour guide per se. She did not speak much Chinese. Besides, it was just being there that she was paid for, speaking was not required: so much was clear from the very moment an acquaintance told her about this job. Generally, there were different tasks employees could be assigned to. For example, some worked at a little store, selling souvenirs and snacks from Russia. Other employees were paid extra for posing for photos. This part of the job was perhaps most controversial: some employees preferred not to be in any photos, hoped to remain unrecognizable and had concerns about ethical nature of being paid for posing, but it also brought extra money. Others treated with indifference, and some others enjoyed the feeling of popularity.

For Irina, being a Russian woman in a Russian museum was a job, where she sometimes had to put up with “uncultured” behaviors of Chinese tourists and sometimes enjoyed a short conversation with them. “Uncultured” (*nekul’turnyi*) behavior was when the tourists touched exhibits although a sign in Chinese said it was forbidden or tried to stealthily take photos. The worst instance, she told me, was when someone tried to touch her. Pleasant interactions were ones where the tourists smiled and talked with her.

After work, Irina she changed into her regular clothes and went back home, to a rented apartment in the city. Although her workplace was supposed to resemble a “traditional Russian house” and her presence was to add authenticity to this staging, she obviously was not at home when she was working, and she took on a different persona, a mask. To paraphrase Marx: she felt at home when she was not working, and when she was working, she did not feel at home. But what if your work is to pretend that you are being yourself at home?

My study of Russian theme parks does have one significant disadvantage, namely that I did not get access to people running it, and therefore I do not know much about the idea of the Gardens other than the need for “Slavic appearance.” It was partially due to the limitations of my position as a foreign researcher in Harbin, and partially due to a conscious decision to protect my interlocutors. In fact, it was initially that I did not know how, and then that I was asked not to. Details of this enterprise remain unclear to me: it was one of the many “themed” tourist attractions in Harbin area, and according to Irina, there were multiple Russian museum-villages like that across China. From other sources I learned that since foreigners cannot own companies in PRC unless they find a local partner, this business belonged to a Chinese person and was managed by another Chinese person.

All in all, these places are financially profitable enterprises. Vera, another employee, remarked: “maybe it is weird that all of these places belong to Chinese.” Yet, of course, she

worked for a Chinese manager. Vera was unfamiliar with the law of PRC, which in fact does not allow a foreign citizen to run a company on their own; a Chinese “silent partner” is needed. It was however an example of alienation, the “Rusianness” not belonging to Russia.

Although every employee wore special clothes (a peasant dress, a 19th century stylized ball gown, or an elaborated folk costume), whenever I showed up at (or near) any of the sites wearing everyday clothes, for example to pick up Irina and go somewhere else, I received receive multiple requests to be photographed, nevertheless. “I don’t work here,” I said every time. But what work was that? What work was it that I did not do?

It would perhaps seem that a logical choice for me would be to seize the opportunity and go with the flow, so to say: if I attracted attention, why not use it for ethnographic purposes? While working at the Gardens – had I been hired - might have proven beneficial for my study, the brief answer is that I was not allowed to work on my visa. While foreign nationals are theoretically eligible to intern at companies, these internships are highly regulated, and frankly, quite unattainable in my situation. Moreover, being employed at any of these places would surely lead to ethical considerations and changed dynamics of my relationship with my interlocutors. I was then left to study this phenomenon through them – by listening outside of and after work.

Being from Somewhere Else

If there is an opposite, a double of working as a Russian, it would be teaching English as a Canadian. These were the two jobs that required *embracing* a nationality, taking on an easily readable identity. For the teachers of Russian language coming from Russia, no extra performance was needed: they *were* Russian.

Only citizens of designated countries can teach English; for other languages, the rule of “native speakers” seem to apply. English falls into the trap of being a global, colonial language that is not contained by national borders – while no language is, the popularity of English and global migration trends make coupling “English as a native tongue” with citizenship a risky undertaking. At the same time, no language is as popular in China: French or Spanish, also colonial languages, do not captivate the country’s pursuits of education with English being the marker of education in progress, and the language tested at *gaokao*, the high school exit test. With almost 3 thousand universities, some of them specializing in foreign languages in particular, teachers come from all around the world to teach Slovenian, Finnish or Somali. Korean and Japanese attract a number of students too, especially given the countries’ economic development. Yet no learning process of any else language became as commonly, anxiously revered as the elusive project of achieving English fluency.

Teaching English is a better paid position. I was told that universities or language

schools that teach multiple languages, English native speakers are often the top-earners, Russian teachers making less money. Where did the teachers of other languages land, I cannot tell for sure – it seems to be an interplay of supply and demand.

Paradoxically, there is also more opportunities to get a job teaching English; as much as it might be harder for Chinese employers to find and hire a “real” native speaker. If you walk through any Chinese city, you will encounter private English schools, learning centers, and kindergartens offering some English instruction.⁷⁸ In bigger cities, you will also find international (for foreign nationals only⁷⁹), and so called “internationalized (Poole 2019: 62)” schools that include elements of the Chinese national curriculum. Harbin had at least two international(-ized) schools, a number of language schools, and probably even more learning centers for children. Even during my fieldwork, a new Chinese language center opened in my apartment complex. I was also offered English teaching jobs multiple times, which included unprompted messages on WeChat.⁸⁰ No one inquired where I was from. Once, as I was eating at a restaurant with an American acquaintance, we were approached by another guest. A middle-aged woman who was sitting at a table nearby, overheard us

⁷⁸ For a comprehensive study on “Westerners” teaching English in China and foreign language schools, see Stanley (2016).

⁷⁹ Interestingly, it seems that the only exception to the “foreign nationals only” rule is Chinese passport holders who possess foreign permanent residency permits and can produce a proof of having lived in the foreign country for at least one year. In other words, it has to be people that have already been exposed to foreignness somewhere else.

⁸⁰ I assumed that the (always unknown) senders could have seen my account in big group chats, but sometimes I was not able to determine our connection. Nevertheless, I never followed up as I did not want to create a false impression of being interested in the job; since I was already warned that WeChat accounts connected to some private schools are monitored.

speak English and came to our table to ask whether we want to teach English.

“We can’t,” I said, “we are students.”

“Students can’t teach English?” the woman was very surprised. She kept insisting our student status will not be an issue.⁸¹

There are speculations on why China introduced this rule of native speakers only. Was it to protect students from unqualified teachers? Was it to protect the job market and young Chinese graduates who are also qualified to teach English? But does a good teacher have to be a native speaker? Many non-native English teachers with professional background spoke to me about advantages of a non-native speaker, who can reconstruct the process of learning, who understand how it is to successfully understand a foreign language. While the current law requires native speaker teachers to have graduated from a college and hold an ESL (English as a Second Language) teaching certificate, many teachers with longer experience recall the times when “everyone could get a job,” or when being “white” or a “native speaker” was enough, even if someone was not qualified to teach in their own country or China. On the other side, a “native speaker” in a retirement age, who attempted to establish herself as an English teacher in China despite lacking the ESL certificate, spoke to me about the “natural connection” that is needed to teach someone a language; a connection she could easily find, she claimed. This is not a debate intrinsic to

⁸¹ Legally, it most definitely would be an issue, as I explained before.

the English language education environment in China; probably everyone who has learned or taught a language has an opinion on the native/studied speak divide.

When I was studying in Beijing in 2012-13, English-teaching jobs were easy to find. My classmates who were native speakers of English or had “good accents” were offered tutoring jobs. For a while, it almost seemed that foreigners from English-speaking countries will never run out of opportunities to make money, whether full time or on the side, especially if they were considered white (S. Lan 2022). In Beijing, bars were full of English teachers from all countries. While many of them were professionals, the “English teacher in China” soon became the subject of jokes within the “expat community.” The disdain toward English teachers seemed to be class-based phenomenon, where the more entrepreneurial transnational professionals alleged that this was the easiest job to find; the job you take where you don’t have anything going on for you back home. The visa reform from 2013, however, had a major impact on non-native speaker teachers in China, who feel disadvantaged, especially when positioned against native speakers with less formal education. A common solution for hiring teachers from the “unapproved” countries was to officially assign them to managerial or HR duties.

Most non-Eastern European foreigners I encountered in Harbin were English teachers; some were visiting university lecturers or professors. With few jobs in other industries, it was very rare to meet an engineer or a business executive. Once, I started chatting with an American woman in her 20s at a bar that was popular among foreigners

and university students alike.

“So, what do you do? Are you a teacher?” I asked. Amanda’s reaction was full of surprise.

“Wait, you are not?!” she exclaimed, seemingly surprised at the question. “I think this is the first time I am at a table where no one is an English teacher!”

Amanda had Russian colleagues at her English school, but they were not allowed to talk about it loudly in case students’ parents would be around to overhear it. This meant that they had to be careful in all public spaces. Russia could not be mentioned. The Russian teachers were honest with her, because she could tell that they did not have a “Texas accent” - and because it did not matter to her. When I asked Amanda if she could introduce me to her colleagues, she was hesitant because they didn’t like to talk about it and she could offend them by further exploring and probing their identity. Pretending was awkward for everyone involved.

Other teachers were more open about their performative nationalities. I had previously met a “Kiwi” teacher, whose New Zealand connection was entirely made up. He had not been to New Zealand, but given that the country’s population was 5 million, maybe there was a chance the parents would never meet anyone else from New Zealand. Settler colonial countries such as the United States, Canada, New Zealand and Australia were especially popular because of the population diversity: perhaps it was easier to imagine belonging there. If the parents found out inconsistencies in teachers’ stories, or for

example accidentally overheard the teachers speak Russian, there were ways to explain this inconsistency. I had heard of people constructing elaborate life stories of being born abroad to Russian parents, or coincidentally having spent a part of their life in Russia (because their non-Russian parents were working there, for example) - so that's how they became bilingual and speak Russian to their friends. Some teachers kept up the charade on their social media profiles, inserting flags of various British Commonwealth member states into their usernames and bios. "A Brit teaching in China" with a smiley emoji. Interestingly, the question of Slavic appearance did not seem to play a crucial role here - in contrast to the broadly defined service sector jobs. In her article on young Russian-speaking migrants' social advancement strategies in Helsinki, the sociologist Daria Krivonos discusses their "efforts to approximate the norm of white Western body (2020: 389)," which included working on their accents, modifying their dressing styles and even changing last names "in attempting to be seen as not Russian (2020: 389)." To my knowledge, English teachers did not employ similar strategies (except improving their English accents, which is, however, not uncommon among speakers of English as a second language in general), which suggests that the "foreign" persona was a performance more than an attempt at creating a new identity.

Yet, I could sense why Amanda's colleagues would not want to talk to me. Many of my interlocutors saw it as very shameful that their compatriots were denying being from Russia – or that people of any other nationality were denying their respective country of

origin. If someone insisted on claiming they are from New Zealand, it was as if they are denying a connection to the national community, as if they were saying that there is something to be ashamed of. For others, it was a business decision, motivated by economic gains: it was the game rules, but external to them, a role they assumed. But there was a sense of discomfort that one was not allowed to be truly themselves, that one had to pretend. Again, although “everyone” Amanda knew was a teacher, this social world could not be easily approached: snowballing method did not work.

However, I received some interesting news. Dennis, a young man I had met previously in Russia, was coming to China. When we first met in Russia, he was still a student, and brainstorming ideas what to do in the future. Now that he graduated and worked somewhere else for a while, he found a job teaching English. He liked teaching, and his English was fluent due to the time he spent abroad. Yet, teaching English was never his dream job, but rather a mean to the end, a stage in his plan to save up enough money to start his own business. Being a smart and entrepreneurial person, Dennis gathered information, evaluated pros and cons, and made plans.

When I asked him why he moved to China, he had his answer ready, as a scholar defending his findings: “To me, there are three types of rich people in Russia. The first kind gets rich on resources, like wood. It is usually connected to corruption schemes: for example, tenders with the government,” he explained.

The second type of rich people were in the IT field. “The IT field is not heavily taxed, it’s a

new phenomenon. In IT you work for a global customer base.” The non-localized nature of IT field and possibility of remote work meant the possibility of entering better-paying markets. Finally, the third way to make money was to do business with China.

“What about people who have jobs?” I asked, clearly lacking the entrepreneurial spirit. But Dennis estimated that it was unlikely even for doctors and lawyers or any corporate workers to get rich. In fact, it was hard to even become middle class in Siberia – middle class for him being when you can buy food “without thinking about money” and drive a middle-class car. Since he did not see himself working with the government, he was left with IT or China. While he saw some possibilities in the IT field, he also realized he won’t save up enough money just by working in Russia. Coming to China had the added benefit of learning the language, which would then help him in his future business. Initially, he planned to come for a year, but after he spend his first four salaries on settling down, buying appliances for his apartment and running into unexpected expenses, he realized that he needed to stay for two years; the saving plan hasn’t worked out yet.

“Why China?” I asked.

“Because Russia is still a poor country,” Dennis explained. “China produces cheaper products which can be sold in Russia.” Economically, it just made sense to come to China. In many Siberian and Far Eastern cities, such as Irkutsk, Chita or Khabarovsk, many people did some kind of business with China. So, while a regular job won’t lead to wealth, and in the future Dennis would like to avoid working a 9-5 job, this was the best option

available. Some people he talked to back home mentioned working in Korea or Japan, but migration paths to these countries were less established. He did not know how to get a visa, what kind of job to get and how difficult it is. Going to America or Canada was harder; especially America was out of question with both diplomatic tension between the Russian and the US governments and the highly competitive US visa system. The path to China seemed easier: he knew Russians working in China, and then he just went online on a website with job offers for foreigners.

Now he was sitting in a mall restaurant with me.

I sometimes started the interviews with my standard question: “How do Chinese treat Russian people?” I learned that it was a good ice breaker. It came with its own set of assumptions: it did presuppose clear boundaries between nations and it did position my Russian interlocutors as opposed to Chinese people. But it always provoked a wide range of answers: border crossing experience, culture shock, Sino-Russian relations etc.

Dennis had a different answer for me:

“Well, no one knows I am Russian. At work, I pretend that I am Canadian, which is the worst part. It is against my principles.”

At the school, where almost every teacher was from Eastern Europe, everyone pretended. Serbian or Ukrainian, everyone was Canadian or Australian. Yet Dennis had the impression most of them don’t care and say whatever they need to say, treating it as a required part of the job, although it was lying to Chinese customers. To him, this was hard

to accept, both in terms of morality and freedom: freedom of expressions specifically, because he could not be who he wanted to be. He would rather be honest with his students. This would have been a more productive approach: he would communicate with them openly, and then using his own experience of learning English to support his teaching, he could show them how a foreigner can learn English. He would rather connect with his students through the fact that none of them was a native speaker; so that the learning experience would be something they had in common. While Denis did not intend on being a teacher his whole life, he definitely took the task seriously.

I asked how does he let the students know that he is Canadian, in other words, how does he establish his “Canadian-ness” in the classroom. It was probably way more important to the parents, who were promised that their children would be taught by “native speakers,” than to schoolchildren.

“I try not to,” he said, “because I am uncomfortable. I just introduced myself in the beginning.” In a way, he was lucky that his name has this international sound, Denis – Dennis, so he could at least go by his real name, instead of making up a whole new name like “Jack” or “Andrew.”

“Where are you from?” I asked, making quotations marks in the air.

“From Vancouver, because I have been there, so I could answer some questions.”

Luckily, the kids did not ask many questions; they were at the age when they did not even necessarily know all the countries.

This phenomenon is not limited to Russian, of course; as already mentioned, English teachers come from any part of the world as long as their native language is not marketable enough. But given the proximity of Russia, it often was Russians. Before the visa reform in 2013, it very common to find foreigners from all around the world teaching English. In case of Russian migrants, the supply of teachers is still higher than the demand for Russian language classes, although these are relatively popular in Russia. Yet the figure of the Russian pretending to be a Canadian teacher has been appearing in popular culture and became somewhat codified in the “foreigners in China” subculture niche.

A popular Youtube channel *Mamahuhu* published a comedy video “The Russian English Teacher from Canada (Mamahuhu 2017).” In the short movie, a young man comes into the classroom and speaks with a heavy accent, making common mistakes: often skipping articles such as “the” or “a” that do not exist in Russian and other Slavic languages. He is seemingly unqualified, lacking any pedagogical training. He does not answer his students’ questions, repeatedly asking them what their favorite food is instead. One of his students catches up on his mistakes, ridiculing his pronunciation and inquiring which part of Canada he is from. He ignores the questions, going on with his performance.

After the class, he runs into a fellow teacher who also speaks with a heavy accent. “Later, we have to watch the game together, bro,” says the friend.

“For sure! We will watch American game. Just like my days at Harvard,” the Russian English teacher from Canada responds.

“Harvard! Harvard was the time of my lifetime!” exclaims the friend.

As they part ways, the Russian teacher whispers: “*Ya master maskirovki* (I am a master of disguise).” A comedic element, since the viewer had already recognized that the man is not a native speaker of English.

In a similar vein, a Polish journalist, who worked as “Roxy from Boston” or, alternatively, as a Londoner in Beijing, explained the geospatial and racial hierarchy of English teachers in China in a succinct overview:

If you are a real American, Canadian or Brit, you will work with kids of businesspeople, celebrities, members of the Communist Party in east Beijing in very expensive schools or kindergartens or visit their apartments to prepare them for college in the US, UK or Australia. If you are Italian, Greek, Slovak or Polish with a good accent, you will have private classes in expensive English language centers in west Beijing, in the university district Haidian, with kids from families that came here from all over China to study and work for their future.

If you are a native speaker from a former British colony in Africa or Russian or Ukrainian, you will play with kindergartens in northern Beijing. Or with kids in shopping malls (Leszczyńska 2017).

In her – perhaps somewhat exaggerated - account, the journalist is officially hired as product manager since as a Polish citizen, she is not – and cannot be - a native speaker of English. When she refuses to work overtime, the school withholds a part of her salary. Leszczyńska threatens that she will admit faking an American identity to her students; in other words, she will reveal that she is Polish. Since the school’s most valuable product is classes with native speakers – and since only these are allowed to teach anyway – this is a

risky move for both parties. Over the course of her career, however, students' parents recognized that Leszczyńska is not American, but continued working with her.

More striking in Leszczyńska's account is the inherent differentiation between non-native speakers. While every country's education system is different, there is no intrinsic difference between a Greek, a Slovak or a Ukrainian person's English: each of them speaks English as a second language, and in fact many come from Slavic languages background. Presumably, having a European Union passport opens up more foreign job markets, and less people are motivated to teach English in China.

At the time, Denis was also paying for a Mandarin class for his girlfriend back home, so that she could be better prepared to join him in China, which they planned to do soon. She did not want to teach English; she was an artistically talented person who could pursue a career in a creative sector, but it was unclear what possibilities she would have in China. "I don't want to be negative about it," Dennis said, "but in the end, I think, she will end up teaching English."

The Chinese class in his city had not started yet. There have not been enough participants to fill a group – much to his surprise. Maybe the classes were too expensive, but maybe people did not want to learn Mandarin. The language school that taught multiple foreign languages, including English of course, hired one or two Chinese teachers so that the classes will be taught by native speakers. Otherwise, there were no native speakers of other languages, Dennis told me.

I remembered the language school from my time in his city. With their significant online presence and advertisement everywhere, they were quite a consistent presence. I saw their flyers and posters in coffee shops and bars that were popular among young people. Not unlike in China and other countries, learning English was crucial for ambitious youth, many of whom wanted to leave Siberia – for Moscow or somewhere else.

“I was pretty sure there were some Americans teaching there” I said. I was confused: did not he tell me about them? I vaguely recalled stories featuring young American teachers, who would come to Siberia for a year or two. Who was Katie then? Didn’t she come from Minnesota?

“Oh, you think so because they had English names?” He smiled, a little amused by my naivety.

“They all do, for the job. No foreigner would come and work for this money.”

Conclusion

There was a certain paradox in the Russian presence in the Northeast. Many migrants coming from the Russian Far East arrived in a world where there was seemingly no place for who they were and where they were from (the main exception from that predicament were teachers of Russian, who did capitalize on their “native” cultural capital). From Blagoveshchensk they made it across the river into Heihe, where one could think the nearest neighbor was Moscow. In Manzhouli, “Russia” was recreated as a collection of nesting dolls that proclaimed that there is no need to cross the border.

On the one hand, “Russians” were necessary for the tourist attractions to work: after all, who else could convince the visitor that this is a piece of Russia, a “Moscow of the East”? On the other hand, any qualified migrants were much needed for English schools to function in the competitive market. Yet they had to convince the customers – the students and their parents – that they had nothing to do with Eastern Europe, steering clear of any references. In both cases, the factual national heritage and belonging did not matter as much as the performance. The performativity of “nationality” made the category like a floating signifier that could be imbued with any meaning.

So, what to make of Russian presence in the borderlands, then? At the first glance, while perhaps visually confusing, it is a relatively simple situation - when it comes to theoretical assumptions, at least: there is colonial heritage, and there is a mimicry process.

Mimicry has been long associated with postcolonial theory: the colonized subject would imitate the colonizer, whether by their own desire, or by the colonial policies (Bhabha 1984). And yet, the components are here, but somehow this framework is not fully adequate in this situation, where the colonial power cannot be exactly located. I argue that the case of Nikolaevski Sobor is very emblematic of this: just as re-building a church destroyed during the cultural revolution as a museum elsewhere defies the simple logic of heritage restoration, after all, Harbin's unique history defies the simple binary of the colonizer and the colonized (Koga 2016, Wolff 1999).

While Harbin and the railway territory were ruled as a concession, it was only the Northern part of China that experienced the colonial Russian presence - a colonial force, nonetheless. Then, the PRC underwent a brief period of fascination with the Russian/Soviet at the height of the Sino-Soviet Friendship, when the Soviet Union was "the older brother," a benevolent guide to socialism (Li 2018). After the Sino-Soviet Split, the reformed empires engaged in a new form of Sino-Russian Friendship, yet any mention of "the older brother" seems very misplaced here: In the recent years, scholars have pointed out a new "Asia on the rise" paradigm, a "new global order that no longer privileges a white, First World masculinity (Hoang 2015)." Similarly, the figure of the older brother might not carry the same significance anymore.

While we can safely assume that the PRC's rapid economic development belongs to the trend noted by Hoang, I have to point out that evoking the category of "First World"

highlights the same kind of omission that has been fueling my inquiries here. Nevertheless, this sentiment of “Asia on the rise” rings particularly true in the Sino-Russian borderlands that are currently witnessing a migration wave from Russia, especially from the more economically depressed regions of Siberia and the Russian Far East. At the time of my fieldwork, it was a common statement that China offers better living conditions and career chances. The power dynamics between the two empires are subject to rapid change, going through periods of “passing dominance (Wolff 1999: 2).”

The existing scholarship does not account for the complex situation here, and in many other places where the imperial and colonial afterlives intersect. A new framework is needed - but within a field of inquiry that is so fragmentized if not fractalized, is there space or justification for any new unifying “grand theory”? In fact, it is the grand theories that anthropologists constantly revisit as we attend to social and political formations marked by legacies of imperialism, socialism and colonialism. I argue that a new approach should emerge from the vantage points of the borderlands - not only literally from the borderlands like in the case I present here, but from the spaces slipping away from the existing categories. However, this is also where our discipline’s ability to attune to smaller scale developments proves especially useful by acknowledging the dynamic, transformative nature of these intersecting, overlapping and sometimes contradictory legacies that are inscribed into the uneven palimpsest of the local landscape.

And so, I came to see this borderland mimicry as a phenomenon that reflects the split

nature of imperial presence. We can distinguish an attempt to keep the Russian colonial legacy safely contained at the margins of the city/society: in a theme park, between the restored buildings that do not belong anywhere else, or within a historical district that cannot spill outside of the set boundaries. Perhaps it is a sign indicating that the colonial presence has been neutralized and as such induced into the realm of generally accepted local history; even adding some legitimacy to the global/cosmopolitan claims of the Northeastern cities by marking aspirational international connections. Perhaps it is even a sign of a certain historical triumphalism that allows for such generous treatment: Is there any danger in it? Is it the sign that the “postcolonial” ended and is now safely contained in an enclosed space?

Or is it the opposite - meaning that the colonial legacy must be closely monitored and carefully managed to diminish its haunting afterlife? Or can it be both, depending on the current state of international affairs?

During the trip with Mr. Bo, the girl whose sister got married in Manzhouli, caught up with me: “Do you think it was European colonization like the guide said? About the imperial aggression?”

“Yes,” I said, caught by a surprise. Was she expecting me to defend the European expansion? I had no investment in that, of course. But I was the only foreigner in the group, and maybe that was enough.

After the trip, I went home and browsed the Internet, reading articles about Harbin's past. One of them mentioned an old folktale, according to which the area that is now one of Harbin's neighborhoods was resembling a dragon. When a European church was built there it had a negative influence on Harbin's *feng shui*. Therefore, a Buddhist temple was built in the area to restore the balance (CCTV 2003). In fact, as students in Harbin protested against Russian and European authorities ruling the city in the early 1920s, a Buddhist monk maintained that a (perhaps unsurprisingly) Buddhist temple is needed to maintain the Chinese character of the place (Carter 2002: 7). According to Carter:

Prior to 1924, the city had no Chinese Buddhist temples, no traditionally designed schools, no Confucian temples. Yet, the appearance of these structures, once completed, gave the impression that they could have existed on those sites for generations, implying that Harbin had been a Chinese place for some indefinite period (Carter 2002: 161)."

In 2019, it seemed that the Buddhist Temple's mission has been somewhat successful. At least the Catholic church housed a fast-food noodle restaurant now. St. Nicholas Church was long destroyed and re-built in the Volga Manor, with an altar but without a religious function. Indeed, our trip ended at a Buddhist temple that doubled as an ethnographic museum, as if to return into the range of the protective *feng shui*.

The question of *feng shui* aside, urban landscapes are sites where memory, national narratives and identities, and various actors' interests intersect and clash. Yet, the Northeast was dotted with reminders of the foreign. Two years after I left China, in 2021,

a Japanese-themed investment, a pedestrian street with commercial and housing complexes, named “Little Kyoto Commercial Street” opened in Dalian, a city that went through both Russian administration and Japanese occupation. According to the developers, the project was to showcase the convergences between Kyoto and the Chinese Tang Dynasty, whose period architecture, especially the ancient town of Luoyang, was to influence the development of the Japanese city. In other words, the Kyoto Street was supposed to evoke the Tang Dynasty style by the way of Japan, presenting the familiar though a little unfamiliar detour – this pattern might already seem familiar too. However, the Little Kyoto was not welcomed warmly. In fact, it closed after one week (X. Lu and Du 2021)

Some complaints stated that the Japanese components overweighed the Tang Dynasty-specific elements, making the architectural style historically inaccurate. Someone started spreading news that only Japanese merchants were authorized to work, and only Japanese products were allowed to be sold there – a rumor that was quickly disproved by the developer. Finally, placing a Japanese street was considered a tasteless, if not offensive move, given the history of Japanese violence in the region (see Koga 2016), although researchers emphasized the importance of “cultural, economic and commercial exchanges” between China in Japan and the need for learning from foreign cultures (Wan and Deng 2021).

To my knowledge, this had never happened in Harbin. Of course, it is true that the

nature of the Russian presence was different than the Japanese occupation and the Manchukuo state, especially as many Europeans came as refugees or exiles, seeking protection in a new place. Russian migrants and settlers in Manchuria did partially display hostile attitude toward local, Chinese residents, and the city has its share of interethnic conflicts. While I don't want to run into a risk of simplifying the region's complex history, I need to point out that numerous violent incidents took place during the time of Soviet military occupation in the Northeast, and the residents' grudge toward Russia/Soviet Union was well-documented (Li 2018). As such, it could be expected that the emergence of "Russian spaces" in Harbin and the neighboring area could evoke similar sentiments. After all, some of them did hire many foreign nationals and sold imported products. Yet, shops and bars with Russian names mushroomed around me during my year-long stay.

There are more similar examples in the history. In 1926, the Chinese Eastern Railway (by then a Sino-Soviet enterprise) directors decided that Orthodox icons have to be removed from railway buildings. The Chinese residents protested. It was not that many Chinese converted to Orthodox Christianity and demanded a public acknowledgment of their new religion. Instead, the saint became a sort of a vernacular presence, a "folk idol (Carter 2002: 158)." Other explanation was the power dynamics: Supported by the Soviets, the ban on icons was an affront to the White Russians, who had little political power at the moment. The Chinese authorities chose to keep the icons, which Carter (2002: 159) sees primarily as a sign of them "defying the most powerful Russian interests in Harbin and

again asserting Chinese control over the city.”

Carter presents this story primarily as an example of fragmented national identities of Russian migrants, which it undoubtedly is; but there is more to this account. Firstly, I want to emphasize Carter’s suggestion that the Chinese authorities’ decision to keep the icon on display pointed to “the insignificance of the White Russian threat to Chinese power in Harbin (2002: 159).” With the official doctrine of Sino-Soviet friendship, there is no official threats, of course; mimicry turns into cultural appropriation or appreciation. Secondly, I want to point the changing interpretation of the St. Nicholas’ icon and its presence in Harbin.

As the foreign is always a negation of something, the foreignness in the Sino-Russian borderlands is obviously a negation of the Chinese, but it also a negation of the Russian. To paraphrase Kapitolina Fedorova, one of the first scholars to write about Manzhouli: for Chinese tourists, it was an illusion of being in Russia, but for Russian tourists, it was an illusion of being in China (Fedorova 2014: 126). The most poignant illustration of it is the very border-centric Matryoshka park: a piece of Russia still in China for Chinese tourists, a variation of a national symbol for Russian visitors. Whereas one side produces symbols, the other side views it through the lens of the new authorship. The portrayed symbols are nominally Russian, but they stand alienated from the Russia that is nearby.

It is hard not to see this “hyperreal constellation of attractions (Hom 2015: 11)” as a manifestation of yet another imperial durability - by no means excluding the precious

interpretations; most likely compatible with both. As the tourism simulacra expands beyond the local semiotics, the local history becomes a commodified, sanitized experience, oriented toward yet a new imperial order: one of global capitalism occupying once socialist (or still nominally socialist) spaces, adding yet another layer to this ambiguous palimpsest.

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