Materiality and (Non-)transnationality: Russian-speaking Migrants in Japan Along their Life Course

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“I couldn’t do it all at once, but I went to Russia, sorted out all the belongings and ultimately arranged to sell our apartment.” This utterance by one of the informants in this study illustrates the transforming transnational relationships that Russian-speaking migrants in Japan have with materiality along the life course. The goal of this paper is precisely that: to investigate the material component of migrant experiences in a transnational context. Many previous studies have researched migration through the lens of materiality to show how transnational connections are maintained or created anew. This study, however, takes as its point of departure an inquiry into the ability of material objects and practices to highlight the opposite: the absence, the fading, and the disappearance of transnational ties. As such, this paper examines the following questions: Is every migrant necessarily enmeshed in transnational material flows? How dense are these flows at every stage of a migrant’s life? Is there a time in the life of a migrant at which no more transnational connections are tangibly sustained through material objects and practices?

In the scholarly literature of the last decade, migration and materiality have been examined from multiple perspectives, highlighting the interrelationships of people and objects. These accounts have included discussions of what is carried along in one’s luggage as one migrates, how the new home in the destination country is organized and decorated, and by means of which objects the atmosphere of one’s homeland is recreated in a migrant home. The studies prioritizing a transnational standpoint have paid particular attention to the movement of possessions, including food, across borders. Homes that migrants build for their families left behind have also been the focus of scholarly attention, once again exposing the transnational logic of such endeavors. These earlier works have vitally brought to the surface the material worlds of migrants, especially regarding their engagement in cross-border practices. The question remains, however, as to whether migrants’ lives are always predetermined by a transnational logic and how the study of materiality can be applied to unpack this inquiry.

This paper draws on the findings of ethnographic research into the material culture of Russian-speaking migrants in Japan, whom I interviewed in their homes. By means of both the life history approach and the life course approach, this research explores the trajectory of material objects and practices in the life of a migrant as time passes in the destination country. Paying attention to the transformation of the contents of both incoming and outstanding suitcases and parcels – if they surface at all – helps unveil the changing relationship migrants have with their home country and any relatives left behind, as well as their changing self-perceptions. This paper further investigates when and under which circumstances memorable items, such as one’s old security toys or favorite paintings, are relocated from one’s country of origin to Japan to reside within migrants’ homes. It also considers the role objects play in enacting the affective dimension of attaining “closure” so that the disruptive nature of migration is finally pacified. The death of next of kin in the home country and trips associated with taking care of the deceased’s belongings are another case discussed to highlight the fading of dense transnational ties. Finally, there are those in this study’s sample for whom migrating has been akin to running away from the moment of their initial relocation to Japan. In their case, the migration-prompted opportunity to cut all connections with the home country was met with gratitude.

Migrant materiality, when assessed not only from the point of view of the range of objects and practices and their cross-border travels, but also with careful attention to its “currents” – that is, the timing and frequency at which objects move transnationally, if they do so at all, as well as the processes by which they disintegrate and disappear – has the potential to provide insight into the life course dynamics of the migrant experience. As such, this study suggests that material objects and practices should be perceived in terms of both their capability to reveal materially articulated transnational connections and their non-existence and sparsity.

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