

ROUTLEDGE RESEARCH IN GENDER AND SOCIETY

Queer Women in Urban China

An Ethnography

Elisabeth L. Engebretsen



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Queer Women in Urban China

Lala (lesbian) and gay communities in mainland China have emerged rapidly in the 21st century. Alongside new freedoms and modernizing reforms, and with mainstream media and society increasingly tolerant, lalas still experience immense family and social pressures to a degree that this book argues is deeply gendered. The first anthropological study to examine everyday lala lives, intimacies, and communities in China, the chapters explore changing articulations of sexual subjectivity, gendered T-P (tomboy-wife) roles, family and kinship, same-sex weddings, lala-gay contract marriages, and community activism. Engebretsen analyzes lala strategies of complicit transgressions to balance surface respectability and undeclared same-sex desires, why “being normal” emerges a deep aspiration and sign of respectability, and why openly lived homosexuality and public activism often are not.

Queer Women in Urban China develops a critical ethnographic analysis through the conceptual lens of “different normativities,” tracing the paradoxes and intricacies of the desire for normal life alongside aspirations for recognition, equality, and freedom, and argues that dominant paradigms fixed on categories, identities, and the absolute value of public visibility are ill-equipped to fully understand these complexities. This book complements existing perspectives on sexual and gender diversity, contemporary China, and the politics and theories of justice, recognition, and similitude in global times.

Elisabeth L. Engebretsen is a Research Fellow (Asian Cities Cluster) at the International Institute for Asian Studies, Leiden, the Netherlands.

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An Ethnography
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For the L alas



Figure i.1 *Jinian* (Commemorate) by Shitou and Mingming, 2006. Artwork reprinted with kind permission from the artists.

Note on Terminology and Language

Throughout the book I have included Chinese words and phrases that I believe to be of particular interest, with the English translation in brackets. A selected Chinese glossary with Chinese characters appears at the end of the book. All participants spoke some version of China's national language *Putonghua*, or Mandarin. Chinese words and phrases are Romanized and standardized according to the *pinyin* transcription system and marked by italics. Notable exceptions are personal names of authors from other Chinese societies such as Hong Kong or Taiwan, where spelling may be different, and I have retained the standard spellings of these names. I italicize the 'lala' term only at first use. I also use English plural markers on some of the most commonly used terms, including *lalas*, *Ts*, and *Ps*, for increased readability, although this is not grammatically correct. All Chinese personal names are pseudonyms or nicknames. All conversations and interviews were conducted in the Chinese language, and all translations in this book are my own unless noted otherwise.

The use of terminology to do with sexual and gender diversity in China is discussed in some detail in Chapter 2. At the outset I ask the reader to appreciate that the use of such categories, including 'lala', 'T', and 'P,' for example, is meant to point to systems of collective markers rather than a straightforward description of homogeneous groups of people or fixed sexual identity. They function as umbrella categories, or categories of knowing (D. Valentine 2007: 232), which point to ways to imagine and live social realities and communities. These categories, moreover, are crosscut by a range of factors, including sexuality and gender, but they are not necessarily or predominantly fixed by them.

My preference for using the terms *lala* and *queer* (rather than, say, LGBTQ, lesbian, or gay) in this book requires some explanation. Throughout the book I use the colloquial term 'lala' to denote women-loving women and their communities and allies. The word *lala*, often translated as 'lesbian', was introduced to mainland China via Taiwan and Hong Kong media and community exchanges in the late 1990s and is the only expressively female-gendered same-sex sexual identity term to date. I use 'lesbian' when noting a general unspecific or international context. The term *tongzhi*,

meaning 'comrade' and used to denote 'gays and lesbians', is technically gender neutral but oftentimes implies 'gay' (male homosexual) identity or subjectivity. *Tongzhi* is also an 'older' term compared with the postmillennial emergence of lala, gay, queer, and so on, and I have therefore kept its use at a minimum.

In using 'queer' in the book's title, in the analytical and theoretical discussion, and as the preferred translation from the Chinese *tongzhi* (comrade), I draw on existing publications in the Chinese context that have increasingly approximated a translation of *tongzhi* to the English 'queer', especially in activist and academic contexts (e.g. H. Huang 2011, Bao 2012). In turn, I use 'queer' as conceptual shorthand for extensive diversities of homoerotic, bi, trans, and other nonnormative sexualities and genders, identities and cultures, drawing on, for example, Ara Wilson (2006), David Valentine (2007), Tom Boellstorff (2007), and the conference program for the *Sexualities, Genders, and Rights in Asia: 1st International Conference on Asian Queer Studies* (July 7–9, 2005). I have refrained from appropriating the 'alphabet soup' terminology 'LGBTQI' (denoting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, queer, intersex) or similar, for reasons to do with clarity and readability. It is true that using categories that aim to depict subjective and collective identity in any context, especially that of interlinked transnational circuits of exchange, risks overgeneralization, erasure, and reproduction of problematic and violent power inequalities. This is especially the case in the context of studying stigmatized and poorly understood populations and lifeways, including nonnormative sexualities and genders. It is my hope that the discussion in the following pages will make clear why certain terms and concepts have been chosen over others, their contextual meanings, and that the ethnographic analysis achieves at least some justice for this ambitious agenda.

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This book exists thanks to the immense generosity and support from a vast number of people in Beijing and China, participants in the lala and gay communities there, their allies and related NGOs (local and multinational), from whom I have learned so much. I cannot mention everyone by name here, for confidentiality reasons mainly, but also due to space constraints. I must, however, acknowledge Anke, Xian (Xu Bin), Toni, Xiaobao, Sofi, Shitou, and Mingming, for their support and friendship over the years. It is my hope that this little book goes some way toward showing my profound gratitude to everyone and that it does some justice to the trust and support I have been granted.

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In writing this book I have endeavored to develop an accessible and inclusive writing style that keeps specialist academic jargon at a minimum, as a way to speak to a broader readership beyond academia and those for whom English is not their native language. I still have not perfected the difficult task of getting the balance right, but I thank those who have helped me work on it, many of whom are listed earlier. They also include my 'lay expert' readers, Gro Holme and Siri Lindstad, whom I thank warmly for their immensely helpful feedback on various draft chapters, and the many people in China, Taiwan, North America, and Europe who have invited me to talk about my research to a mainstream, nonacademic audience, in different languages, and in the media over the years. It has been an extremely helpful albeit challenging practice for developing my writing and thinking about the politics of research dissemination. I must also thank the many students I have had the pleasure of teaching, especially those I encountered at McGill, for many inspiring conversations and insights gained. My

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* * *

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Parts of Chapter 6 appeared in a modified version in the journal article “Queer Ethnography in Theory and Practice: Reflections on Studying Sexual Globalization and Women’s Queer Activism in Beijing,” *Graduate Journal of Social Sciences* 5, no. 2(2008): 88–116.

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1 Queer Women in Urban China

An Introduction

It is a warm late-summer Saturday night in August 2005, and the women-only Xixiangfang (West Wing) Bar in west-central Beijing is bustling with women, chatter, and heartfelt, if not entirely on key, karaoke singing. Due to the pleasant weather, the walled outside space of the bar, which constitutes the west wing or side house of a historic *siheyuan* (courtyard building), has been transformed into an outdoor karaoke bar. A big screen and projector are set up next to the entrance and are showing karaoke videos to the large audience seated at tables in the courtyard. Microphones are hooked up to the sound system, and the sound of popular Chinese pop songs, often melancholic ballads of lost love, is so loud that conversation is almost impossible. A deck has been placed under the roof by the main entrance, hosting a huge mix table expertly directed by Da Ge, a chain-smoking T (tomboy, masculine or butch lesbian). Meimei, Da Ge's girlfriend, sits on a chair next to her, casually smoking cigarettes, taking karaoke requests, and assisting Da Ge whenever necessary. Flanking the turntable and DJ are two large loudspeakers blasting out tunes. Throughout the evening women line up to sing, the courtyard tables are packed, and even inside the bar many patrons are enjoying the party, drinking, smoking, talking, playing truth-or-dare card games, dancing, and flirting.

I chat with Shuchun, a T media professional in her early thirties, and ask her how it's going with her 'boyfriend'. Shuchun has a gay boyfriend whom she met on an online dating site for contract marriages. Like so many other *tongzhi* (comrade, meaning 'gays and lesbians') in China, they are planning a *xinghun* (marriage of convenience, also known as cooperative or contract marriage) to fit in, to please their parents and coworkers, and relieve the incessant pressure to marry. However, they have recently had several arguments about their very different views on life and their future, and now Shuchun is not so sure any more about the convenience of the planned marriage arrangement. Another woman seeks me out, someone I have not met before but who has heard about "the foreign lala (lesbian) researcher," and wants to talk to me about the *quanzi* (circle, meaning 'the lala community'). She is a T in her early thirties and says she is active in many of the Internet lala discussion groups. She confides that she finds the community