

The London School of Economics and Political Science

*Love in a big city: Sexuality, kinship, and citizenship
amongst lala ('lesbian') women in Beijing*

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Declaration

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Abstracts

This thesis is a critical analysis of individual and collective aspects of same-sex sexuality between women in post-millennial Beijing. I argue that sexual subjectivity ('lala'), rather than being a stable core constituent of self, is continually being produced by, and produces, social aspects of personhood, including bonds of kinship and national belonging. In particular, the fundamental interrelationship between gender and sexual difference in producing subjectivity is probed. I argue that transformations in gender norms in the domain of family, marriage, and alongside national socio-economic development, have enabled lala subjectivity to emerge. I demonstrate the Chinese-specific anchoring of lala, and thereby I critique globalization, sexuality, and China scholarship that predict inevitable Westernization and progress-oriented modernity, including Western-like queer life.

My thesis is based on twenty months' anthropological fieldwork, mainly utilizing the methods of participant observation, semi-structured and informal conversations. The core group of informants numbers ninety-five.

Chapters 1 and 2 develop an ethnographically informed theoretical framework for the study of sexuality and gender in China. Chapters 3 and 4 present social geographies and narratives to demonstrate the interrelationship between gendered sexual subjectivity and social factors that together constitute selfhood, including age/generation, socio-economic background, marital status, motherhood, and residency. Chapters 5 and 6 discuss the enduring importance of kinship and marriage, and present ethnographies of marital strategies including same-sex, lala-gay contract marriages, 'conventional' marriages, and resistance. Chapter 7 discusses lala community and social activism. It compares post-millennial initiatives with those in the 1990s, and with regional and global activism.

The extensive ethnographic material and critical analysis of kinship, marriage, relationships, and community demonstrate that non-normative sexuality is not inherently transgressive. Conforming is a strongly felt personal desire, not simply an imposed duty. Strategies which ensure the appearance of hetero-feminine and marital conformity and normative national belonging ('Chineseness') are being creatively and continually combined with growing possibilities for lala ways of life in Beijing.

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Finally, I dedicate my thesis and my work herein to the memories of my mother, Mary Elisabeth Engebretsen (b. Lund), 1932-2001, and brother, Haavard, 1963-1992.

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Key abbreviations and terms

P	<i>Po</i> , “wife”; femme/feminine lesbian
T	Tomboy/tom; butch/masculine lesbian
bufen	Lit. “not differentiate”; here: ‘versatile’, it combines aspects of T and P
Lala 拉拉	‘la’ literally means ‘to pull’ (v). Lala is a recent phonetic appropriation in the PRC of ‘lesbian’ and ‘les’, which in turn are long-standing versions of ‘lesbian’ or ‘female homosexual’ in South-East Asian places such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Bangkok.
MSM	Men who have sex with men
OCP	One Child Policy
The PRC	The People’s Republic of China, Mainland China
RMB	<i>renminbi</i> , i.e. the Chinese currency; also called <i>yuan</i>
Tongzhi	Lit. “same thought”, here: ‘comrade.’ Originally a form of address for members of the Chinese Communist Party, tongzhi took on a subversive meaning of (a gender neutral) ‘queer’ or ‘gay’ in 1990s Hong Kong and Taiwan, and was appropriated in the PRC at that time, too.

Note on use of key terms and language

Throughout, I use key terms such as *lala*, *tongxinglian* (homosexual/ity), lesbian, gay, and queer interchangeably to some extent. However, I do attempt both consistency and order: I use *lala* mainly when discussing local contexts in which women's same-sex identity and collectivity emerged during my fieldwork, in order to mark its alternative to dominant discourse: *tongxinglian/zhe* ("homosexual/ity"). I use *tongxinglian/zhe* specifically when discussing state-sponsored dominant discourses on same-sex sexuality in the PRC. The term *tongzhi/comrade* is used mainly when discussing lesbian and gay community and networking in the 1990s, when the *tongzhi* term was the preferred term of self-reference. Due to its frequent use in the text, I italicize *lala*, *tongzhi*, and *tongxinglian* only at first mention. I apply queer, and lesbian and gay principally when discussing Euro-American scholarship, discourse, and activist politics. Wherever appropriate, I have endeavoured to clarify any variation of this general usage in the text.

I appropriate the Pinyin transcription system when referencing Chinese terminology and phrases.

All Chinese—English translations are my own unless stated otherwise. All fieldwork communication was conducted in Mandarin Chinese, or *putonghua*, unless stated otherwise.

Everybody says something, certainly everybody here does.

Gertrude Stein

I was ... engaged in a struggle to recognise and protect my own identity, in all its intricacy, for I knew that I had to view it as unique, complicated, open to inspection and re-examination, and binding me not just to a particular tribe, clan, or race, but to the human race ... recognising this would be a prerequisite of writing well, for the more vigorously one resists a narrow view of self, the more one sees.

Caryl Phillips

CHAPTER 1

Introduction, context, and background

The post-Mao, late-socialist period in the People's Republic of China has seen rapid transformations on every level in society, including socio-political and technological development, dramatic rise in foreign trade and exchange, and rising consumption economies. Whilst the State is slowly adjusting to a late-modern global reality, most Chinese citizens are at the same time experiencing fundamental changes to their personal lives. This includes the domains of sexual intimacy and romantic love. Chinese women and men are on an unprecedented scale exposed to a multitude of competing discourses on the nature and desire of intimate relationships and life aspirations beyond, and alternative to, those monolithic norms embedded within normative familial and moral cosmologies. A principal effect here has been a relative proliferation in opportunities for women to define their sexual and gendered subjectivity according to alternative criteria informed by 'other' ideologies and practices, that sometimes originate in foreign places. This furthermore involves changes to the possibilities for making sexuality central in configuring and thinking about one's personal and social identity. This is what my study is concerned with.

My thesis is primarily a critical ethnographic exploration of the origins, roles and meanings of intimate and social relationships between women in late-socialist urban China. Based on twenty months of full-time ethnographic fieldwork in Beijing, this thesis is an anthropology of the production of lesbian identity and sociality. It also looks at women's struggles to balance largely normative expectations, bonds and yearnings on the one hand, against non-normative practices, desires and aspirations on the other. Furthermore, my thesis offers an anthropological analysis of the relative importance of sexual subjectivity in constituting social identity and in organizing intimate life and collective belonging. Alternative life trajectories are increasingly available through growing material and lifestyle consumption in cosmopolitan China. I question simplistic predictions of 'sexual awakening', 'sexual revolution', and 'opening up' in much writing and scholarship on China. Such literature assumes that opening up, political relaxation, and globalization necessarily cause changes towards

Western-like individualistic identity and democratizing collectivity, and against a socialist or feudal collectivist past characterized by patriarchal oppression and a categorical lack of agency and power. My findings document globalizing - yet very much Chinese-identified - queer social and activist communities, which firmly reject the pervasive Western folk theory which suggests that viable forms of alternative (here: queer) life are impossible outside a Euro-American capitalist, democratic reality.

By investigating non-normative sexuality with specific reference to women, and in a cultural context characterized by large-scale socio-political and economic change in recent history, I question Western queer, lesbian and gay academic and activist truth claims to sexuality as core, stable constituting aspect of individual and collective identity. It is also an attempt to put feminist concerns of gender inequality, in practice and academia, back into the centre of critical investigation. By extension, I critique the prevailing ideological mainstay in the discipline of kinship and gender anthropology with regards to sex and sexuality by examining those normatively positioned at the margins.

Here I first outline the principal research questions and themes, before I present a detailed literature review in order to situate my own approach. I then delineate the Chinese socio-historical cultural context of homosexuality in general and female homosexuality, homosociality and gender diversity in particular. This is followed by an outline of relevant kinship and marriage literature, before a consideration of comparable current scholarship on urban China and marginal populations. Chapter two develops the epistemological and methodological framework that informs the subsequent chapters, and which builds on the scholarship discussed in this chapter.

1.1. Research questions and thematic framework

The principal theme of my study is to explore the ways in which diverse experiences of sexuality and gender among women in Beijing, co-constitute subjective and social identity in domains of intimate love, gendered subjectivity, social and familial relations, and even those of ideologies of national belonging. What does it mean to call oneself 'lesbian' in contemporary Beijing? To what extent do imaginaries of sexual

desire, romantic and erotic love structure the experiences of or desires for same-sex intimate relationships? What kinds of imaginaries are available in the first place, and what cultural symbols and ideologies do they engage with beyond the spheres of sexuality and romance? How do women make sense of sexual difference and same-sex intimacy in narrated re-collections of early life and in self-presentations of current adult lives? How do meanings of sexual identity intersect with other markers of social identity such as gender conformity, age, socio-economic background, motherhood, kinship and marital status? These predominantly ethnographic concerns engage further analytical concerns: how can one interpret the apparent contradictions in women's continually shifting narratives and self-representations of 'being lesbian' yet refusing categorical sexual identity. In this respect, I address the possibilities and constraints with regards to agency and choice, and the extent and interrelationship of private, intimate matters against collective, state-sponsored and public ideals and politics.

Chapters three and four trace the social geographies and patterns of experiences and formations of sexual subjectivity, of the women in my study. Chapter three details social backgrounds and circumstances including age, class, place of origin, educational and career attainment and aspirations, identifications with same-sex identity categories and lesbian community, familial and marital status. This demonstrates for one, patterns of community participation and attitudes to lesbian sociality. It also shows that boundaries, however permeable, between same-sex intimate relationships, sexual and social identity roles, interrelate with wider trends of belonging to class, to kin, and to the relative degree of heterogendered conformity.

In chapter four I present narratives and analysis of women's appropriations of and affiliations with emergent identity categories. First, the category *lala*, which function as an umbrella category covering collective social life and spaces in which women participated who broadly identified as 'lesbian'. The second is the fundamentally gendered TP roles. In short, TP roles refer to gendered roles among lesbians in the PRC. T means 'tomboy' and denotes the masculine role ("butch"). P means 'wife' (Chinese: *po*) and refers to the feminine role ("femme"). In between is the "versatile" role *bufen* which marks someone who is neither firmly masculine T nor feminine P. I draw on anthropological scholarship on sexuality and queer, feminist, and gender theories that argue against positivist notions of subjugated, peripheral practices - here: homosexuality - as mainly an "indexer of marginality", arguing instead *for* their fundamental analytical importance as "a central cultural site where

meanings about gender and sexuality are being worked out” (Valentine, 2007: 14; see Berlant & Warner, 1998).

A look at lesbian culture in its wider context, however, demonstrates that the process of appropriating non-normative sexual categories is fraught with tension, reluctance, and prevalent denunciation of such categories altogether. The second theme therefore concerns the interplay of lala social and subjective experience with normative everyday life, exemplified by ethnographic explorations of family and kinship ties. During fieldwork I found that marriage constituted the most important marker of socially recognized entry into normative feminine adulthood amongst Chinese women (Evans, 2008: Ch 7; Friedman, 2006). However, most women also considered the question of marital status a main concern, risk even, in that it troubled the attempt to maintain boundaries between private, largely ‘closeted’ lesbian sociality and intimacy on the one hand, and everyday social lives that included work, study and family on the other. I propose a conceptual approach of “desirable duty” to comprehend a seeming paradox in women’s practices and strategies to negotiate the intersecting emotional and relational domains of marital, familial, and nationalist duties and desires.

Hence chapters five and six discuss marriage and conjugal strategies in detail. Why was marriage, or being married, considered to some extent desirable regardless of actual sexual and romantic preference? How can one make sense of the complex meanings of desire involved here? What kinds of strategies were planned and carried out to merge seemingly oppositional desires between lesbian life and normative family? To this effect, I interrogate Beijing women’s notions and meanings of intimate love and desire to suggest that they exist in complex ways beyond subjective individualistic desire for romantic and sexual love. I argue that deep-seated desire for family life, the desire to belong, and fulfil socially recognized duties of being good daughters, wives and mothers structure the production of social identities. I suggest that many women’s misgivings about coming out, ‘being lesbian’ and about rejecting marriage *tout court* is not simply the result of a structurally dominant state power that disable alternative subjective agency. Women’s actual desires to belong and to achieve normative recognition as adult women compete with newly available alternative notions of femininity and life styles - based on ideals of romantic, sexual love - that discursively produce an individualistic, non-consequential sense of freedom and choice that in real life seldom intersect with competing normative expectations.

This opens up into the third main theme which concerns collectivity and sociality beyond the lala and family sphere; namely the emergence of lala social activism, identity politics and community networks locally, regionally, and their links to global sexual cultures. Not only are there sustained struggles about what lala, TP roles and homosexuality mean and should mean, how same-sex identity should be represented in public - if at all. But there is also a considerable attitude *against* activism and organized networks primarily known as lesbian and visible to the public. Who has the moral clout, and who can represent 'lala' to the public in media or events? Why make homosexuality an issue instead of just quietly getting on with your everyday life? If being lesbian is normal and natural, getting organized and demanding rights make it into something special and different, hence abnormal, some women argued.

In chapter seven, then, I enquire into the interrelationship between the current formations of organized lala collectivity and regional and global sexual culture and activism. I question the assertion of shared sexuality as a fundamental premise for community, and the notion and ideal of community itself as something that requires predetermined allegiance to a certain sense of sameness, here through shared sexual identity. I discuss the intersections between local and regional activism and global queer culture and politics. In particular, I look at prevailing claims to a local Chinese cultural uniqueness, expressed by not coming out by declaring sexual identity, not being openly queer in all aspects of life, and avoiding confrontational identity politics (cf. Chou, 2000). Against that, sustained networking efforts amongst lesbians, gays, HIV/AIDS and MSM activists appropriate aspects of Western-originating practices and ideologies to advance local ones. Instead of assuming a local authentic homosexuality against a Western-originating global queer *other*, and mutually incompatible with each other, I suggest that local, regional, and global queer cultures and activism constitute each other, yet in different ways. To this effect, I investigate prominent approaches to newly available possibilities for support and knowledge to establish and manage various lesbian networking initiatives.

Finally, my thesis is also about anthropology and anthropologists: the way objects of study are imagined, produced and presented. It is about truisms that traverse cultural locales and time frames, and about the ways in which practitioners of academia and activism engage theory, methods, ethics, and politics in research and writing. Chapter

two develops a framework for the following ethnography that aims to balance the domains of epistemology, methodology and ethical engagements with politics and partiality in the study of marginal sexuality as categorical concept and cultural practice. I thereby address intellectual and folk imaginaries that structure anthropological endeavours for studying and understanding others, including the process of recognizing the self in the other and vice versa.

In summary, this thesis is a critical analysis of individual and collective aspects of same-sex sexuality between women in post-millennial Beijing. It investigates the emergence of conceptual, discursive, and physical manifestations of lesbian spatiality in Beijing, and how lala subjectivity is reshaping and being reshaped by wider social and political notions and norms of sex and sexuality, femininity and female sexuality, cosmologies of 'Chineseness', and national belonging. In the next sections, I provide a comprehensive overview of relevant literature in order to situate my discussion in the following chapters.

1.2. Literature review

The review focuses on three major themes in the scholarship of China: First, normative and non-normative sexuality in China, including homo-sexualities, in the English and Chinese language. The second is women and kinship with particular reference to marriage, family, and contemporary demographic changes. The third is the anthropology of urban China, and Beijing in particular. With the discussion of bibliography and scholarly themes I endeavour to apply sexuality as an axis of differentiation to the project of "thinking *with gender and China*" (Hershatter, 2007: 109; emphasis in original), which I then explore in detail in chapter two on theory and methods.

1.2.1. Chinese sexualities

1.2.1.1. An overview of general discourses on sexuality in Chinese history

Scholarly literature on Chinese sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular, has over the last two decades been fast emerging and gaining unprecedented interest both inside mainland China and in Western scholarship. The literature surveyed in this section focuses on official discourse in novelistic, scientific, or various other official representations. The next section surveys Chinese language publications on homosexuality, including those published in Hong Kong and Taiwan. The general proliferation of research and publication corresponds with increased possibilities of undertaking research in China, and a differentiation and visibility of alternative discourses of love and sex. In many ways these changes constitute major effects of reform policies and increasing transparency and interchange with regional Asian cultures and global cultural flows.

The most common narratives of sexual modernity in China place sexuality on a developmental scale, whereby traditional (pre-1911) and Maoist China (1949-76) are characterized by a repressive discourse on sex, and feudal sex-gender systems marked by a similarly repressive patriarchy (Dikötter, 1995; Evans, 1997; Hershatter, 2007; Jeffreys, 2006; McMillan, 2006). Reform-era China (1978 onwards), in contrast, is often described in terms of “opening up”, where sexual freedom and liberation are emerging (see Farrer, 2002; Ho, 2007a; Sun, 2007).¹ “Sexual revolution” is another frequently used term, both in the media and in scholarly literature (see Pan, 2006; Sun, 2007). Furthermore, this so-called opening or revolution is considered a development that is essentially influenced by the West (Jeffreys, 2006b: 2; Sun, 2007). As Hershatter points out, this repressed versus liberal narrative of modern sexuality misses the crucial point, namely that sexual discourses are part of larger social concerns, and that their changing patterns need to be observed in their particular cultural and temporal contexts (1996: 78;² Jeffreys, 2006; McMillan, 2006).

¹ Hershatter regards the May Fourth Era (1915-27) as a period possessing a liberating sexual discourse (1996: 78).

² “Desire’s objects, expressions, control, suppression, transgression, relative importance, and the venues in which all of those are expressed, are not “natural” occurrences, but social ones.” (Hershatter, 1996: 78)

Historical accounts of sexuality in China delineate various meanings ascribed to normative and non-normative sex, including homosexuality, during different historical periods; thereby they support the Foucauldian insight that sexuality is a social construct (Brownell & Wasserstrom, 2002: esp. 32-3). In Imperial China, sex was predominantly configured in terms of “health and disease, virtue and vice” (Hershatter, 1996: 79). According to Confucian norms, morally ‘good’ sexual behaviour was fundamentally linked to similar conduct in all other aspects of social life. It was gendered into complementary, desirable forms of female and male qualities. Ultimately, sexual pleasure and relationships subscribed to the Confucian virtues of control, discipline, integrity and benevolence (Hershatter, *ibid.* 79-80; Furth, 1999).³

The anxieties of reformers in Republican and contemporary China with regards to national modernity and strength, racial quality, and development, fostered the view of sex and reproduction as realms of control and regeneration aided by scientific understanding (e.g. Dikötter, 1995; Hershatter, 1996, 2007; Ko, 2005). Women’s sexuality was increasingly being portrayed as threatening and dangerous by biologically essentialist discourses. These discourses did to some extent grow out of Confucian gender and moral hierarchies, and, increasingly an influx of European medico-scientific discourse since the Republican New Culture movement of national restoration. Women’s bodies and sexuality were tied to the healthy development of the Chinese nation, modernity and population quality, and thus became key arenas for regulation, discourse, and eugenics. Women - more specifically, their bodies, and their reproductive sexual and moral qualities - were held responsible “for the perpetuation of the family but also for the very survival of China” (Hershatter, 2007: 38; Barlow & Zito, 1994; Dikötter, 1995; Gilmartin et al., 1994).

Revolutionary national discourse on sexual morality in the Maoist period (1949-76) emphasized the physiological and moral dimensions of conjugal reproductive sex in building a healthy modern nation and improving population quality (Hershatter, 1996: 86-8; Evans, 1997). Extra-marital sex, both heterosexual *and* homosexual, was heavily sanctioned, and to some extent silenced (Evans, 1997; Sang, 2003). As McMillan notes, discourses on sex, gender, and marriage created a particular scientific, naturalized knowledge that did and, in the reform period, has

³ On homosexuality in Imperial China, see for example Hinsch, 1990; Sommer, 2000; Vitiello, 1996, 2000a/b.

continued to control and sanction what constitutes 'normal' sex in order to produce a healthy socialist social and national moral order (2006).⁴ She questions the extent of actual sexual liberalization in current China, and argues that, despite the pluralization and differentiation of ideas and practices in the domain of sex and sexuality, "authoritarianism and the control of ideas in China compel a high degree of intellectual conformity...[and] underlying structures of meaning ascribed to sexuality remain intact (McMillan, 2006: 130; see also Dikötter, 1995: 186; Evans, 1997: 218; Hershatter, 1996: 88-93; Hershatter, 2007: 36-43; Jeffreys, 2006: 4; Yang, 1997).

Scholarship on sex in China, both Chinese and Western, tends to propagate two pairs of dynamic relationships with consequences for this research project. The first is the sex/uality – gender dynamics. In much of Chinese literature and thinking, the difference between gender and sexuality is not categorically or universally stable, at least not according to Western psycho-biological theories, which argue that the sexed body determines social gender and, hence, 'normal' heterosexuality (cf. McMillan 2006: 130; and see, Barlow, 1993; Sommer, 2000). In other words, according to the dominant discourse in the modern West, biology-based sexuality - evidenced by the unambiguously sexed body (male *or* female) - predetermines social gender and sociality, including kinship (see for instance Foucault, 1991[1978]). The second and related pair is the activity – identity dynamics, or: 'doing versus being'. It posits sex and sexuality in Chinese culture and ideology as an activity rather than as an embodied, individual identity common in Western thinking. According to Sinocentric and Eurocentric discourses, then, the Chinese and Western paradigms remain fundamentally incomparable. This discursive mutual 'othering' in turn effects orientalization and exoticization of Chinese sex and sexuality which, in the Eurocentric case, upholds Western identity paradigms as desirable, modern, and advanced. The Sinocentric approach in turn essentializes a traditional past (Imperial period) or political ideology (market-socialism) (e.g. Chou, 2000). Paradoxically, both seem to rely on the premise of an ahistorical and categorical cultural difference, and they regard the contemporary 'hybrid' versions as inauthentic aberrations. I discuss the analytical and ethical consequences of these approaches in chapter two.

⁴ Rofel presents compelling data which demonstrates that the official ideology during High Socialism did not necessarily effect an unambiguous response in women with regards to 'natural' feminine gender identity and the meaning of marriage and family (1999: esp. 228-44).

1.2.1.2. *Scholarship on homo-sexualities in modern China*

The following two sub-sections consider, first, English and Chinese language scholarship largely based on official discourses on sexuality; and second, scholarship based on alternative discourses. Chinese language literature is further differentiated into, scholarship published in the PRC on the one hand, and in Taiwan and Hong Kong on the other.

1.2.1.2.1. Literature on official discourse in the English and Chinese languages

An examination of the two main official regulatory discourses on homosexuality - the legal and the medical - demonstrates that same-sex sexuality has been exclusively referred to as actions wholly separate from the social persona (e.g. Chou, 2000; Dikötter, 1995; Li, 2006; McMillan, 2006). As Evans notes, homosexuality was generally assumed not to exist in the early socialist period, being a 'vice' eradicated by the new socialist governing system (1997: 206; cf. Wan R., 1990: 168). At present, however, there is no legal provision in the Criminal Law concerning homosexuality (*tongxinglian*).⁵ However, between 1949 and 1997, sex between men was criminalized according to the Criminal Law 160's ambiguous section on "Offense of obstructing public order" on the grounds of "hooliganism behaviors" (*liumang*) (Chou, 2000: 108). This law did not, however, refer to sexual conduct explicitly, although sex in public was invariably regarded as a violation of public morality: "it therefore disturbs public order and affects the physical and mental health ... it clearly constitutes criminal behaviour" (Zhang, 1994: 633, cf. Chou, 2000: 109). Other forms of extra-marital, non-reproductive sex were also periodically considered "hooliganism", including same-sex and opposite-sex prostitution (McMillan, 2006: 93; Li, 2006; Ruan, 1991).⁶

⁵ Note that *tongxinglian* (adjective) denotes activity; the term for 'being homosexual' or 'a homosexual [person]' would be *tongxinglianzhe* (*zhe* is a suffix that denotes "a person who is *tongxinglian*"). To gender *tongxinglianzhe* one would have to prefix it with either *nan* ("male") or *nü* ("female"). Note also that *tongxinglian* is an almost verbatim translation of the English "homosexual" (*tong* = same; *xing*=sex/uality; *lian*=affection, love). See Chou, 2000: 95, for a discussion.

⁶ I have not found any documentary evidence that female homo-sexuality was ever successfully prosecuted according to this paragraph. However, a relationship between two women in Anhui was

In 2001, the authorities removed homosexuality from the Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders (CCMD-3).⁷ Still, folk theories, and the general media and public opinion alike, continue to attach stigma to and exhibit ignorance of same-sex sexuality (Li, 2006; McMillan, 2006; Wan, 2001). As Chou has pointed out, there remains “a wide gap between tolerance and acceptance” (2000: 103).

English-language scholarship on these official approaches (usually as part of a larger discourse on sex) in modern China discusses sexuality in terms of the medical, public health and psychobiological official discourses available through state-sponsored sources. This includes the mass media (Dikötter, 1995; Evans, 1997; Hershatter, 1996; Jeffreys, 2006; McMillan, 2006).⁸ This scholarship tends to chronicle sexual politics, and practice much in line with the overview in the previous section.

A number of Western publications on sex and sexuality in modern China consider the changing possibilities for articulating sexual diversity, including homosexuality. Major examples here include women’s sexuality in official discourse since 1949 (Evans, 1997); the interrelationship between sex, science and morality in modern China (Dikötter, 1995; Jeffrey 2006; McMillan, 2006; Ruan, 1991); youth (hetero)sexual culture in reform-era Shanghai (Farrer, 2002).⁹ Homosexuality is here discussed in general and rather abstract terms, as a smaller part of a wider concern with sex and sexuality. The same-sex focus is usually male-to-male oriented, and, although the topic is critically appraised, it is still described uniformly within the state-sponsored discourse of “inversion” and “filthy habits” (Dikötter, 1995), “perversion of nature” and “arrested development” (Evans, 1997).

Women’s same-sex sexuality is mentioned even less here. This is due to, for example, “the overwhelming concern with regulating male extramarital sexuality” (Dikötter, 1995: 141), or the “total reluctance to acknowledge...lesbianism” (Evans,

subjected to attempted legal separation by a disgruntled father as “an instance of hooliganism” in 1991 (Chou, 2000: 109; cf. Chou, 1996a: 140). The local Public Security Bureau ruled against this allegation, stating that: “under the present circumstances in our country where the law has no explicit regulation on what homosexuality is and what criminal responsibilities may pertain, the situation you have reported cannot, in principle, be accepted to be heard as a legal case, and it is not appropriate that this should be submitted for legal punishment as an instance of hooliganism.” (Chou, 2000: 109)

⁷ CCMD-3: *Zhongguo jingshen zhang'ai fenlei yu zhenduan biaoqun, di san ban*.

⁸ On homo/sexuality in medico-scientific literature, see for example, Dikötter, 1995: 137-45; McMillan, 2006: 92-9, for references.

⁹ For pre-modern studies, see Hinsch, 1990; van Gulik, 1974[1961]. See McLelland, 2000, pts. 64-68, for an interesting discussion on the controversy of alleged plagiarism of Samshasha, 1989, by Hinsch, 1990.

1997: 208), or, simply due to “the lack of many references to it” in literature and discourse (Evans, 1997: 208; Hinsch, 1990: 173-8; Dikötter, 1995: 141). As Evans has pointed out, the official discourse on sexual love in China emphasized conjugality and women’s roles as wives as the only healthy and desirable context, with other practices effectively deemed as “abnormal” (*bu zhengchang*) or “perverse” (*biantai*). This included subversion of the marriage norm such as singledom (or spinsterhood), adultery, and homosexuality (Evans, 1997: 189-215). Other commentaries argue that sources on lesbianism did not exist, especially pre-1949, or that lesbianism was considered totally unproblematic, hence not chronicled in official written sources (Hinsch, 1990; Ruan, 1991). Another common ‘explanation’ of lesbianism in general sources on sexual culture, both in English and Chinese language material, is that through the absence of men in imperial living quarters (Imperial China) or in times of rigidly enforced gender segregated work and living arrangements (Cultural Revolution, high socialism), women would turn to each other as a matter of ‘need’ (Sang, 2003).

Whilst the official condemning rhetoric continued in the 1990s, Chinese-language literature published since the early 1990s in the PRC provides crucial contributions to our understanding of same-sex cultures in China. However, in large part, they concern male-to-male, not female-to-female sexuality, usually with a scientific rather than a socio-cultural focus.

The first academic study on male homosexuality, based on first-hand survey research, titled *Tamende shijie/Their world*, was published in 1992 (Li & Wang).¹⁰ It was later re-published as *Tongxinglian yawenhua/Homosexual subculture* (1998), which then became a bestseller (cf. Cui, 2002; Sang, 2003: 320, fn. 20). Other titles such as the sympathetic *Tongxinggai/Same-sex love* (Zhang, 1994), and the journalistic, voyeuristic *Tongxinglian zai Zhongguo/Homosexuality in China* (Fang, 1995) followed, as did sociologist Li Yinhe’s *Zhongguo nüxing ganxingyu xing/Love and sexuality of Chinese women*, which includes significant material on same-sex erotics (1998: 207-24). The sexologist Pan Suiming published his treatises on sexual variance in modern China in 1995 and 1998. The first nationwide survey on sex,

¹⁰ *Tamen de shijie* was first published in Hong Kong as no publisher on the mainland would accept it. Later in the same year, it was re-issued by Shanxi People’s Publishing House (Sang, 2003: 320, fn. 20).

conducted among 20,000 individuals between 1989 and 1990 was first published in 1992. It was conscientiously modelled on the Kinsey Report of the 1940s (Liu, et al.¹¹). The study included homosexuality, yet its medico-scientific style, the emphasis on sexual anxieties, and the statistical research approach left social substance and context aside (see Hershatter, 1996: 90-3; Sang, 2003: 168). The overall approach in these publications remains embedded within medical normalizing discourse. It links 'healthy' sex to national modernity. Homosexuality is here effectively presented as deviance, despite being treated with far less condemning rhetoric than previous discourse.

General historical overviews of same-sex sexuality and erotics situated homosexuality across historical periods, and indeed also across cultures, as Western origins are included and debated (Liu & Yu, 2004; Zhang, 2001). Liu and Yu's volume is an example of the persistent sensationalist approach to sex in Chinese official discourse, even at the hands of so-called specialists.¹² It is an overview of same-sex literature throughout Chinese history, with only a small sub-section devoted to female-female sexuality (pp. 25-32); it contains numerous sexually explicit illustrations: most portray Western men and women, including several Tom of Finland images. A chapter discussing the origins and the possibility of curing homosexuality (ch.5) drew considerable consternation and disappointment from lesbian and gay activists during my fieldwork. Zhang's volume, far more sober and factual in content and lay-out, includes a closing chapter on female homosexuality that considers research published in the early republican period on sisterhoods and delayed marriage patterns (*bu luo jia*) in southern Chinese regions (2001: esp.749-75).

The Chinese-language publications mentioned here, whilst groundbreaking in their sympathetic approach compared with the more long-standing and condemning medical treatments of homosexuality, maintain a distanced, and effectively stigmatizing view of homosexuality, and of lesbians and gays. As Sang has commented, "most texts claiming to offer scientific knowledge of sexuality simply rehashed Western sexological theories of homosexuality as gender reversal and psychological abnormality" (Sang, 2003: 168). *Tamen de shijie/Their World*, for example, presents interview data as a fragmented narrative, interviewees are not

¹¹ English translation, 1997.

¹² Liu Dalin is professor of sexology, likened by some to a Chinese Alfred Kinsey.

given (fictional) names [but X, Y, etc.], the methodology lacks clarity, and the sample size remains uncertain. I agree with Sang who argues that, “the usefulness of the study is undermined” (Li & Wang, 1992; cf. Sang, 2003: 320, fn. 21).¹³ Similarly, Wan argues that, “during the late 1980s, homosexuality was increasingly criticized as part of a larger move towards social conservatism ... homosexuality [was] being seen as a form of degeneracy found amongst Westerners and those Chinese influenced by the West” (Wan, 2001: 51). In short, there has been no continuous, progressive development towards ‘sexual opening’ after High Socialism’s fall in 1976. Instead, conflicting discourses between new and old, and permissiveness and control, gradually enabled generative alternatives to emerge amidst controversy and condemnation.

Still, the proliferation of publications and mass media in the post-Mao era has by and large enabled an increasing diversity and multiplicity of discourse on homosexuality, and a space for alternatives beyond the official narrative. Importantly, none of the researchers and publishers identified personally with *tongxinglian*. In the current social and political climate, with its fundamental ambivalence to sexual diversity and non-conformity in general, the reality is, I suggest, that publishing such work in different ways would be impossible.

1.2.1.2.2. Alternative literature in the English and Chinese languages

The second type of Chinese scholarship on sexuality is more recent. It is academic-activist, and interdisciplinary, and approaches alternative sources to official discourse, often first-hand social research and life narratives, or examinations of alternative communication arenas such as film, fiction and, increasingly, the Internet. These writings critique the one-sided categorical approach to homosexuality outlined in the previous section. It presents partial accounts of emerging gay (usually male) spaces in line with socio-economic transformation and political change: Rofel looks at gay (male) networking in Beijing and internal struggles about community and identity in Chinese culture versus the West (1999, 2007). Ho and Wang consider gay

¹³ See Wan, 2001, for a disturbing account of his experiences of conducting research on male homosexuality in the late 1980s.

and lesbian culture and the articulation of same-sex identities as effects of ‘opening up’ policies, gay culture, and Internet’s effect on gay community (Ho, 2007a/b; Wang C., 2003). Wan discusses emerging gay activism in relation to HIV/AIDS advocacy, legal problems and state authorities in the early 1990s (2001). Chou looks at comparative examinations of Sino-centric approaches to same-sex identity and community formation in Chinese societies including the mainland, Hong Kong and Taiwan (2000, 2001). Ruud’s thesis considers the interrelationship between homosexual sex and sociality, consumption and wealth, and family concerns amongst a small group of men in a town near Shanghai (2007). Furthermore, He writes about her experiences in Beijing’s emerging lesbian community throughout the 1990s, which I will discuss in the following sub-section (2001, 2002).¹⁴

These publications share the fact that they tend to be based on first-hand participatory research. It is often executed by researchers who personally identify with the community or identity, and have thus transcended fundamental difficulties of sensitivity, risk, and access (e.g. Chou, 2000, 2001; He, 2001, 2002; Wang, C., 2003). These studies focus predominantly on gay-identified men in urban contexts, and their attachments to an already established sense of community (e.g. Ho, 2007a/b; Wang C., 2003; Rofel, 1999, 2007). Furthermore, they focus on socio-economic change and alternative cultural and temporal identificatory processes that force a consideration of sexuality in interrelationship with other identity markers like class and age. Towards the late-1990s, an emerging concern with sexuality “was the construction of an identity based on these acts” (Rofel, 2007: 87), as well as with determining sexual identity’s native or foreign origins, including the increasingly transnational or global quality of queer discourses and community (ibid.).

Affirmative and research-based studies on same-sex cultures and experiences published in the Chinese language to date have come out of Hong Kong and Taiwan.¹⁵ Samshasha’s *Zhongguo tongxinglian shi*/History of homosexuality in

¹⁴ A substantive body of literature examines novelistic, musical, and cinematic representations of same-sex cultures: Berry, 1998; Cui, 2002; Erni & Spires, 2001; Lim, 2006; Wong & Zhang, 2001; Leung, 2001; Sieber, 2001; McLelland, 2000; Tan, 2001; Wang P., 2001; Liu & Ding, 2005; Martin, 2003.

¹⁵ For literature published on queer life in Taiwan and Hong Kong, see, Chou, 2000, and Sang, 2003, for references.

China, is a comprehensive historical account of Chinese homosexuality (1997).¹⁶ *Beijing tongzhi gushi*/Stories of Beijing tongzhi (Chou, 1996a) which includes a critical overview of the official mentioned ‘specialist’ literature. *Women huozhe*/We are alive, is edited by activist Gary Wu and activist-publisher Chou Wah-shan (1996). The two latter books are based on personal narratives and life stories by men and women. Chou’s *Tongzhi: Politics of same-sex eroticism in Chinese societies* (2000) is an edited translation of *Beijing tongzhi gushi* (1996a), *Xianggang tongzhi gushi*/Stories of Hong Kong tongzhi (1996b), and *Houzhimin tongzhi*/Postcolonial tongzhi (1997). An Keqiang’s *Hong taiyang xia de hei linghun*/Black souls under the red sun: a report on male same-sex cultures on the mainland, was published in Taiwan (1995).

These publications differ from the scholarship outlined in the previous section by presenting first-person narratives and life stories, and reporting on people’s everyday lives and the wide-ranging negative effects of stigma, ignorance, and exclusion on queers themselves, their families, but also society at large. By publishing first-hand narratives of people who identify with and lead same-sex lives, they challenge the naturalizing and dominant interpretation of homosexuality as pathology, deviation, abstract phenomenon, and sensationalist topic of inquiry.

1.2.1.3. *Scholarship on intimacy between women and lesbianism*

Literature on same-sex intimate relationships between women and lesbianism covering the contemporary post-Mao period is growing, but sources about the pre-reform Maoist period remain scarce (Evans, 1997; Hershatter, 2007: 41; Sang, 2003: 163).

In the modern period (post 1911), women’s non-marital sexual activities became the focus of regulation and control in the name of civilizing and modernizing the population. It was at this time that erotic literature depicting sex between women emerged (Ruan, 1991; Ruan & Bullough, 1992; Sang, 2003). The May Fourth Era discourse appropriated the neologism “same-sex love” (*tongxingai*), translated from

¹⁶ Previously, Samshasha published *A Chinese gay’s manifesto* (1980, Hong Kong; in Chinese), the first ‘gay liberation’ book published in Chinese; and *25 questions about homosexuality* (1981, Pink Triangle Press, Hong Kong; in Chinese).

Western and (via) Japanese sexology, which “contributed to a medicalization of same-sex relations” (Hershatter, 2007: 40-1). Women’s extra-marital sexuality was characterized as abnormal and which therefore required control and containment. Intimacy between young women and girls, however, was considered harmless, and was even encouraged by some.¹⁷ Sexological and fictional sources at the time portrayed same-sex intimacy between students, male and female “as situational rather than biologically determined” (Hershatter, 2007: 41). Lesbianism was considered more threatening though, not in itself but because it was feared “that increased independence combined with attraction to other women might induce some women not to marry” (ibid.; cf. Sang, 2003).

During the reform era (post 1978), official reports on homosexuality with scattered references to women began to emerge. Still, female homosexuality was usually explained either as result of neglect and abuse by men, gender inversion, or as compensatory sex in the absence of men (Hershatter, 2007: 41; Ruan & Bullough, 1992); while the media’s approach was generally sensationalist, scandalizing, and negative (ibid.; Xu, 1996). Fictional literature by authors such as Chen Ran and Lin Bai explores lesbianism somewhat beyond the negative folk theories (cf. Sang, 2003).

In the last few years publications by self-identified lesbians have emerged (e.g. He, 2001, 2002), which describe personal experiences and emergent activism (Hershatter, 2007; cf. Sang, 2003). Media interest - domestic and abroad - has soared. A television chat show *You hua hao shuo* ‘Talk it easy’ in 2000 featured gay writer and film-maker Cui Zi’en, and Shitou, a lesbian artist and independent film-maker who came out publicly, the first to do so in the PRC (cf. Sang, 2003: 172).¹⁸

There exists additional scholarship on intimacy between women, such as marriage resistance movements and deep friendships. In her exhaustive review on women in Chinese modern history, Hershatter references studies on sisterhoods in southern China in the late 19th and early 20th century, and notes that relationships “were sometimes sexual” (2007: 13). Stockard suggests that these so-called “sworn

¹⁷ Sankar notes that in the Imperial China Confucian tracts suggested lesbianism was a desirable strategy for a gentleman to keep his wives satisfied (1986: 79; cf. van Gulik 1974[1961]).

¹⁸ In 2002, the magazine *Xiandai wenming huabao* ‘Modern Civilization Pictorial’ published a special issue on homosexuality entitled *Tongxinglian yu women tongzai*/Homosexuality is with us, featuring stories on gay and lesbian-identified Chinese. Recently, *Zhongguo xinwen zhouban*/Chinese Newsweek magazine featured a research article on lalas in Beijing (see, Zheng, 2005: 36-39).

spinsterhoods” were not primarily ‘lesbian’ but resistant strategies against heterosexuality and marriage (1989: 40-1; Evans, 1997: 208; Jaschok, 1984; Siu, 1990). Sankar describes Buddhist sisterhoods and marriage resistance in southern China, and demonstrates the fluidity of being sisters and lovers in women’s relationships through the life cycle (1985). For the contemporary period, Friedman discusses the reception and consumption of a movie depicting women’s relationships in the native mainland Chinese community where it was filmed, and among Western ‘queer’ audiences who consider it a ‘lesbian movie’ (2006a).

Friedman’s monograph *Intimate politics* is a sophisticated ethnographic analysis of women’s relationships, kinship, gendered labour patterns, and changing living conditions in village Fujian province (2006b). A major focus is on a particular form of intimacy between women termed *dui pnua*. It relates somewhat to delayed transfer marriage (*bu luo jia*), a well-documented common practice in south eastern China (e.g. Siu, 1990; Stockard, 1989; R. Watson, 1984). *Dui pnua* refers to lasting, intimate bonds between women – sometimes, but not primarily, erotic – that come to the surface especially at the time of marriage. Wives would resist moving to their husband’s family house, and rather stay with their own kin and *dui pnuas*, with only reluctant compulsory visits to their husband and his family. Women would avoid sexual intercourse with husbands since the event of child birth meant they were required to move permanently to his family house. *Dui pnuas* would care for each other through every major transitory stage in their life cycles, especially at marriage, child birth, death, and visit each other’s ancestral graves (Friedman, 2005; see also Zhang, 2001).

This work on sisterhoods, marriage resistance, delayed transfer marriage, and fluid understandings of women’s intimacy and sexuality demonstrates that these bonds were considered as threats to normative kinship and gender systems only at particular moments in a woman’s life. And conversely, as Hershatter points out, such formulaic expressions of antipathy to marriage may have had to do with “reluctance to part with peers and natal families” (2007: 14; F. Liu, 2004; McLaren, 1996, 1999). Same-sex intimacy, then, whether sexual or not, is not considered to transgress normative expectations and social status markers, except at particular moments when such intimacy comes up against marriage for instance. Hence it poses a threat, and needs to be resolved through sanctions and control, especially through the institution of marriage.

Since the turn of the millennium, there is a growing body of academic work that focuses on women's same-sex sexuality in contemporary Chinese societies. The majority of these publications are written by women who affiliate personally with these communities and cultures. Studies on lesbianism in Hong Kong and Taiwan include 'tomboy' identity and lesbian community in Hong Kong (Lai, 2007), lesbian identity and community in Taiwan (Chao, 2001), regional differences between mainland Chinese and Taiwanese lesbian identity and community in relation to sexual globalization and rights advocacy (Wang P., 2001), and a report on the first Asian lesbian film and video festival in Taipei (Perspex, 2006). These descriptive publications depict local lesbian community and identity, activism, and regional and global networking. Together with partial discussions on women and lesbianism elsewhere (e.g. Chou, 2000; Ho, 2007a), and gay networking (e.g. Rofel, 2007; Wan, 2001), these studies demonstrate the complex nature of queer lives, and contextualize the mainland situation with cultural issues in wider Chinese societies, including kinship norms and state governance.

In the PRC, the published scholarship specifically on lesbianism to date includes three bodies of work, and I begin by discussing the two book-length publications: Sang's *The emerging lesbian* (2003), and Wang's *Buy a PC, otherwise get married!* (2004). *The emerging lesbian* was the first book-length study to trace the changing patterns and expressions of women's same-sex sexuality during the pre-modern, republican, post-Mao periods in China, and in post-martial law Taiwan, mainly through readings of 'elite' or 'serious' fiction. Sang demonstrates how a distinctive change emerged in the early twentieth century, especially during the May Fourth era (1915-27), whereby intimacy and sex between women became a serious and problematic issue in public discourse. Sang thereby complements other male-focussed studies that have shown how sexuality was increasingly being problematized in modern China (Dikötter, 1995; Hinsch, 1990; Ruan, 1991). Sang specifically discusses how women's same-sex sexuality, under the influx of medico-scientific discourses, went from being "negligible and insignificant in the patriarchal familial organization of traditional China, [and] became distinctively associated with feminism...and psychobiological abnormality" (2003: 6-7). The increased discursive visibility reflected changes in women's economic, social and political status,

especially as upper class women entered waged labour, participated in public life, and experienced a degree of economic independence from the patriarchal family (ibid.: 7). This coincided with, and was significantly related to, an unprecedented urbanization and development of mass printing industry. Sang notes the surge of female homoerotic fiction in contemporary mainland China and Taiwan, and situates “elite literary representations” (ibid.: 13) in relation to burgeoning activist politics.

Sang questions the usefulness of applying homogeneous identity categories across historical periods, and demonstrates that sexual meanings shift in relation to changing socio-economic and political circumstances. She also shows that sexual subjectivity is always already embedded within wider and changing gender norms, linked to kinship, and to changed life-cycle identities, and the status markers daughter, wife and mother.

Wang’s *Buy a PC, otherwise get married!* (2004) is a comprehensive sociological study of lesbians in contemporary mainland China. Wang investigates the emergence of the contemporary same-sex identity and collective category ‘lala’ in a transitional post-Mao urban China by using the Internet. Her thesis is based on participant observation online and (to a lesser extent) offline, in the PRC including Beijing, and in the US. Wang’s two main concerns are: first, to provide a nuanced and dynamic interrogation of emerging lala (and, to some extent, gay) subculture, and its relationship to nationalist progress-oriented governmentality and global capitalism. Wang argues against simplistic predictions of democracy and freedom for non-normative sexuality. She demonstrates that access to knowledge, support, and community via the Internet, and the possibility of resisting dominant norms, do not inherently establish “lala civil society” (p. 9) because, importantly, the authorities correspondingly update regulatory measures of surveillance and control. An excellent example details the events of the police crack-down of a lesbian festival in 2000 (p. 81-108).¹⁹ Secondly, Wang interrogates various meanings of lala in context with previous forms of same-sex sexuality and identity, and alongside global queer formations. Wang argues the distinctively queer - not lesbian - sensibility of the lala phenomenon, compared with the previous *tongxinglian*/homosexuality. She analytically distinguishes sexual orientation from ‘lala’, which she considers a non-organic, largely non-sexual, sociality made possible by machines/computers (p. 4).

¹⁹ See also Wang, 2001, 2003.

Taken together, Sang and Wang's publications provide nuanced approaches to the study of women's same-sex sexuality in contemporary mainland China. However, they adapt a largely categorical approach to the sexual subject or 'lesbian' community as already constituted, with the brunt of the discussion focussing on categorical comparisons of terminologies, or on literary depictions of lesbianism (Sang). Whilst they provide genealogically situated analyses of same-sex intimacy in time and place, the object of study remains categorically unchallenged in the sense that the intersectional constitution of non-normative sexual subjectivity remains uninterrogated. Hence, and this is probably an effect of a largely textual or discursive research focus, the sociological aspects and contexts remain peripheral. This in turn disables serious attention to micro-practices, subjective narratives, and everyday lives, which is what my own ethnographic study offers.

The third body of work is He Xiaopei's writings, which are based on participatory accounts of lesbian community formation and activism in Beijing from the early 1990s onwards (2001, 2002).²⁰ She outlines the emergence of lesbian networking and provides unprecedented insights into the collaborative networking with HIV/AIDS, gay, and feminist networks, the ambivalent conditions vis-à-vis governmental policies and public tolerance, and the importance of foreign advocacy and support.

He's achievements are two-fold: on the one hand, she discerns the transformations in cultural meanings attached to homosexuality starting in the late-1980s, where pervasive, silencing shame was slowly giving way to empowerment and community building. She argues that "[b]efore the 1990s, many homosexuals, especially lesbians, did not know that there were other people with the same orientation; there was no one to share feelings with, and no place to find same-sex partners" (2002: 10). She then goes on to outline her own involvements with finding other women, setting up networks and support groups, often under the auspices of foreign NGO workers and HIV/AIDS public health focussed organizations and resources. The 1995 UN World Conference on Women in Beijing was a catalyst for further *tongzhi* ('comrade') activism: informal get-togethers gradually developed into activism such as awareness-raising and out-reach projects, including letter-writing networks, a pager hotline, and weekly bar events with discussion salons. In 1998, the

²⁰ Chinese media and activist examples: The *Les+* zine: <<http://www.lesplus.org/>>. See also Asian gay and lesbian web portal *Fridae*: <www.fridae.com>

first national Women's *Tongzhi* Conference took place in Beijing. A network, the *Beijing Jiemei*/'Beijing sisters', was established, as well as the magazine *Tiankong*/'Sky'.

The second major achievement in He's work is the ways in which she conveys the highly difficult circumstances under which these communities developed, i.e. the discursive stigma attached to 'homosexuality', but also, and more directly, the governmental censorship and control that made *tongzhi* organizing extremely difficult and fraught with high personal risk for the gays and lesbians involved. He demonstrates how, in order to avoid police attention, they invented elaborate cover stories and non-confrontational public displays (see, chapter seven). He's emphasis on personal narrative and participant observation provides an important anthropological document of what it was like to produce and develop lesbian identity, personal and collective, in Beijing during the 1990s.

In sum, my research adapts Sang's historical and Chinese regional approach (2003) and Wang's *lala* community concerns (2004), as well as the dynamics of identity formation and emerging identity-based communities and activism in other Chinese societies (e.g. Chao, 2001; Lai, 2007). My thesis specifically appropriates He's grounded, personal narratives of her experiences, life story, and everyday practices with regards to the processes of identity and community formation in this particular period and place (see also Chou, 1996a; Wu & Chou, 1996). It does so by relating sexuality issues in subjective and collective arenas to the dimensions of normative kinship and national belonging. Furthermore, compared with Chou and Wu (1996) and Chou (1996a), which both present narratives from the late-1980s and early 1990s, my study provides narratives of and attention to current socio-economic and political conditions in the PRC, which have undergone considerable transformations in this period.

In this section, I have discussed scholarship on sex and sexuality in different historical periods, in the greater China region. I showed that female homosexuality or same-sex intimacy emerges as problematic only when it counters dominant kinship norms and cultural logics, where female sexuality is naturalized into a procreative, domestic sphere. In the modern and contemporary period, following considerable socio-political changes, we have seen an increase in the discursive and social

inclusion of, and possibility for, alternative sexuality, including emerging social formations based on self-identification with same-sex sexuality as identity. In the following section, I discuss how socio-political change and economic development have also effected transformations in normative family formations, with the marriage institution being subject to governmental regulation.

1.2.2. Changing marriage and kinship norms in contemporary China

Here I discuss the changing meanings of marriage and their gendered implications for women in the contemporary period. The argument is limited in several ways, in particular because I do not examine conventional literature on traditional Chinese kinship that focuses principally on structural-functionalist analyses and those based on this paradigm, of rural village organization and patriliney. Here, gender concerns are at best considered structural components of marriage systems, as aspects (objects) of relations of property and gift exchange, reproduction and child-rearing.²¹ Rather, my concerns lie with recent (cross-disciplinary) literature that emphasizes kinship and sociality, with a gender perspective against the backdrop of the momentous changes and developments in the Maoist and reform period.²²

Whilst the institution of marriage in the modern and contemporary period has adopted an ethos linked less with patriliney and filial duty and more with personal choice and romantic desire, it is clear that marriage concerns retain 'traditional' dimensions in crucial ways (Croll, 1981; Evans, 1997, 2008; Friedman, 2006; Hershatter, 2007; Judd, 1994; Pieke, 2003). The scholarship by, for example, Evans (1997, 2008), Judd (1994), and Friedman (2006), demonstrate that, whilst new meanings and practices of kinship emerge with modernization and reform, patriarchal residues and filial obligations remain structural referents. These are

²¹ See Chun, 1996, and Santos, 2006, for comprehensive reviews of Chinese kinship anthropology; both focus predominantly on lineage paradigms, and rural and village studies.

²² The emerging gender approach in the reform-era notes changing norms regarding gender and kinship systems in the market economy and social reform period (Barlow, 1993; Barlow & Zito, 1994; Croll, 1995; Evans, 1997; Friedman, 2006; Gates, 1996; Honig & Hershatter, 1988; Judd, 1994; Rofel, 1999; Shue, 1988), and their relationship with modernization and trans-national socio-economic processes (Evans, 2000, 2008; Fong, 2002, 2004; Friedman, 2006; Rofel, 1999, 2007; Yang, 1999).

reconstituted with regards to, for example, marriage practices and their ideologies. Still, as Friedman demonstrates, the introduction of a minimum age for marriage has encouraged changes in courtship practices, given greater individual autonomy and decision-making power to the potential husband and wife, and increased possibilities for cohabitation prior to marriage (2005, 2006; Yan, 2005).

The idiom of marriage, then, brings together two dimensions: one that emphasizes conjugality and the nuclear heterosexual unity; the other that ties together affines and biogenetic kin. The analytical implication is critical, in that it allows us to reach beyond weary dichotomies still plaguing China research, such as collectivism versus individualism, structure versus agency, stasis versus change, and allows us to study, rather, how they come to constitute and influence each other (see, Pieke, 2003; Yan, 2003).

As Hershatter notes, China has often been portrayed as a society with entrenched patriarchy, patrilocality, and complex lineage kinship systems prior to 1949, especially in rural areas (2007; M. Wolf, 1972, 1985; Johnson, 1983), and with comprehensive disadvantages for women (Croll, 1973, 1985, 1995; Fong, 2002; Watson & Ebrey, 1991; Watson, 1982). This focus was then modified by mass re-organization - modernization - of social life including kinship, marriage and policies of gender equality from the 1950s onwards (Evans, 2008; Hershatter, 2007; Whyte, 1997). Marriage and its key functions of policing proper sex, producing wealth, and reproducing quality citizens, was appropriated – especially via consecutive Marriage Acts – as a prominent regulatory site in modernizing and reform politics. The marriage institution was increasingly understood as a conjugal model rather than lineage model, as companionate relationship rather than filial obligation, with “increased importance attached to individual self-interest and satisfaction ... contributing to a cultural environment in which childless conjugality and a rejection of marriage can be contemplated, even if not widely accepted” (Evans, 2008: 183).

According to Whyte, many people think that modernization towards industrial society and changes in family and household composition weaken traditional family obligations, especially filiality (1997). Hershatter similarly comments on the common approach of progressive development from “family-based oppression to limited individual choice – or in another register, from feudalism to socialism...” (2007: 7). And according to Goode’s now classic thesis, “development into a more modern society tends to foster the emergence of more ‘conjugal’ patterns

of family life". This includes the husband-wife bond emerging as stronger than to their parents or other extended kin, people choose marital partners independently, and less emphasis on obedience and extended kin obligations in child-parents dynamics (1963; Whyte, 1997: 3).

This progress narrative has increasingly been challenged by anthropological studies that demonstrate great variety and partiality in terms of women's transition to married life, experiences of trauma, oppression, and opportunities than conveyed in the 'victim narratives' and 'eating bitterness' (*chi ku*) narratives of high socialism and their later nostalgia or memory projects (e.g. Anagnost, 1997; Farquhar & Berry, 2004; Makley, 2005). China introduced the Marriage Law in 1950 which proposed to put an end to feudal practices such as polygamy and child-marriages, and to institute gender equality and freedom of choice, including the right to divorce (Hershatter, 2007: 7-20; Croll, 1981; Davin, 1976; Diamant, 2000; Friedman, 2006; Stacey, 1983). Similarly, Siu notes an increased acknowledgment of women's contributions in shaping and changing marriage practices and expectations (1990: 50).

As pointed out by, for instance, Friedman (2006), the Marriage Act was a crucial part of government attempts to draw individuals into the communist collectivist enterprise of building the socialist nation.²³ Important aspects of the changing practices of marriage reforms are, for example, the relative shift from arranged to love marriages (Friedman, 2006; Yan, 2003), resistance to reform attempts by, for example, older relatives and local cadres (Croll, 1981; Davin, 1973, 1976; Friedman, 2006; Johnson, 1983; Potter & Potter, 1990; M. Wolf, 1985), and the relative increase in divorce (Honig & Hershatter, 1988; X. Zang, 1999). Importantly, Croll has argued that changes in courtship and marriage patterns had greater effects in urban than rural areas (1981).

The Marriage Act was, however, less about enabling gender equality than balancing state-society relations in the crucial period of reform, development, and modernization after 1949 (e.g. Glosser, 2003; Huang, 2005). Yet, the Act, as well as the new Marriage Law of 1980, enabled greater protection for women in promulgating later marriage, fewer births, and by outlawing concubinage and girl-bride practices (cf. Hershatter, 2007: 18; Croll, 1985; Selden, 1993; X. Zang, 1999).

²³ Sigley (2001) discusses a Foucauldian approach to feudal vs. modern aspects of the family-state dynamics where he argues for the "governmentalization" of the current Chinese family by for example the regulation of reproductive sexuality.

Further revisions to this law in 2001 provided for legal protection in the domain of marital violence, divorce proceedings, and marital property rights (Hershatter, *ibid.*; M. Chen, 2004; Farrer & Sun, 2003; Woo, 2002). Further literature discusses aspects of marital life, such as romantic love and sexuality, affairs and fidelity, divorce, and other conjugal issues (Evans, 1997; Farrer, 2002; Friedman, 2005, 2006; Honig & Hershatter, 1988; McDougall, 2005; Yan, 2003). This diverse material on marriage strategies in a heteronormative context demonstrates the dynamics between structure and agency, between state-sponsored authority, patriarchal custom, individual strategies and agency, including women's opportunities to strategize and resist dominant norms.

Hershatter notes that much scholarship on the Marriage Law and marriage practices in the reform period "has tended to assume a high degree of internal unity on the part of the party-state" (2007: 17). As discussed here, patriarchy and women's inequality are not absolute structural referents for family and household arrangements.²⁴ Emerging scholarship focuses on practice, change, genealogies of everyday life. It is attentive to minority and subjugated groups. Examples of this are private everyday life and the romantic sentiments and individual desires in determining marriage unions and family life in northern China (Yan, 2003), the changing roles and contents of bride price in tandem with greater personal autonomy (Yan, 2005), and the changing perceptions of the role of genealogies and biogenetic kinship in Yunnan (Pieke, 2003).

An emerging and useful approach to thinking about "the state" and government sees the state as "a set of normalizing practices oriented toward the production of particular kinds of political subjects" (Friedman, 2006: 9; Abrams, 1988; Connell, 1990; Li, 1999). These practices engage in various ways with local communities and authorities, for example regarding the implementation of reproductive and birth control (Greenhalgh, 1994),²⁵ marital reforms (Friedman, 2006) and private life more generally (Pieke, 2003; Yan, 2003). In other words, state and society in China cannot be strictly separated (Perry, 1994; Zhang, L., 2001). More broadly, governing morals and politics operate through a universal circulation

²⁴ Zang, X., 1999, provides a comprehensive sociological survey on changes in family and household composition.

²⁵ On birth planning and the One-Child Policy, see for example, Banister, 1987; Bossen, 2002; Davin, 1975, 1985; Fong, 2004a/b; Gates, 1996; Greenhalgh & Winckler, 2005; Judd, 1994; Milwertz, 1997; Potter, 1985; White, 1994, 2006. See also overview by Hershatter, 2007: 26-36.

of power throughout the social body (Anagnost, 1997). As argued by Foucault (1991[1978], 1980) and Lefebvre (1991[1974]), the appearance of a divide between state and subject constitutes, after all, an effect of these normalizing forces.

In Evans' recent study of daughters and mothers and their relationships in contemporary Beijing, she observes that marriage remains: "an expectation deeply embedded in [women's] self-identification ... [and that] marriage [was] not first and foremost ... a relationship between two individuals, but ... one that encompassed expectations and desires closely associated with the notion of a family" (2008: 184). Hence, the notion and practice of filial obligation brings together concerns of the conjugal unity, biogenetic kin, and by extension, those of the state.

1.2.2.1. Transitions in kinship dynamics and filial obligation in urban China

Revisiting for a moment Hershatter's ambition to think "*with gender and China*" (2007: 109), it is clear that the transitions in terms of kinship norms and the nature of women's social roles as daughters, wives, mothers discussed thus far, are crucially linked with wider changes in family dynamics and state-sponsored societal reform. I appropriate filiality as a trope to discuss literature on gendered changes in interpersonal family dynamics.

1.2.2.1.1. Filial obedience and gender dynamics

Filiality in China is often described as the domain of men. It is the reason men live with or near their parents, and the reason it is so important for men to have sons. Sons carry the family line in this patrilineal kinship system and thus fulfil their filial obligation to parents and ancestors. They must also support their elderly parents. Women marry out; they must help their husbands carry on their husband's family line by giving birth to sons. Families that give birth only to girls are said to have experienced tragedy. (Rofel, 1999: 84)

The cultural logic of filiality represents the conventional, somewhat 'traditional', approach to the meaning of filial obedience as firmly structured by patrilineal

assumptions of kin and gender hierarchy and duty to the family. As Whyte notes, much scholarship assumes that the 'traditional' or 'Confucian' family life that this notion implies is sharply contrasted not only by Western family systems, but also the emerging modern and cosmopolitan family dynamics (1997: 1).

Recent studies of changing family forms and generational differences in urban China demonstrate that filial responsibilities remain a fundamental structuring component of kin relationships (Davis-Friedmann, 1985; Evans, 2008; Fong, 2002, 2004a/b, 2007; Guo, 2001; Jing, 2007; Whyte, 1997; Yan, 2003). This is not simply due to stubborn feudal, pre-reform residue; for example, Evans comments on a contemporary state-sponsored cultural tradition whereby the "promotion of the Confucian model of filial duty has been prominent in recent years to compensate for the government's policy focus on economic growth rather than social welfare" (2008: 173). She goes on to suggest that filial duties provide unifying social structures for collective support, especially with regards to care and economic support of the elderly, whilst the market-driven government has downplayed welfare and social service provision (*ibid.*). The contents and meanings of filial obligations, however, are changing in significant, gendered ways. As Fong's perceptive ethnography of youngsters in Dalian conveys, filial relations are being fundamentally shaped by demographic effects of the OCP (2002, 2004a).²⁶

Fong investigates urban single daughters who have come of age during a period of unprecedented fertility transition and family re-organization due to the OCP. She demonstrates that this particular generation of girls and women are enjoying a higher degree of freedom from traditional patrilineal constraints that had shaped the pre-OCP generations, when the filial favouring of sons meant fewer resources invested in daughters. Girls without siblings had access to emotional (parental, familial support) and material resources (money, especially marriage payments and inheritance) that enabled agency to choose alternative futures to those prescribed for women in traditional filial ideologies. Marriage became a potent avenue to seek upward mobility, especially for girls from lower-income backgrounds. Excelling in education similarly enabled girls to strive for financial independence and status, primarily based on career attainment rather than wife- and motherhood. Women of their mothers' generation had grown up in the 'high

²⁶ Introduced nationally in 1979.

socialism' period with its unprecedented possibilities for paid work, enabling them to demonstrate filiality by supporting old relatives financially. This generation of women was therefore already supportive of the post-OCP girls and women in their attempts to defy traditional gender norms, and to seek fulfilment through non-domestic social participation. The reason was that it was considered acceptable for women to provide filial support for old relatives beyond personal care giving (2002; 2004b).

The institution of filial duty remains crucial in that it defines relationships of mutual responsibilities between child/ren and parents. Yet its contents have been modified by changing socio-economic practices that benefit a new generation of urban women. An example is how traditional norms stating that only sons can take care of ageing parents are being modified by women's now enhanced socio-economic status and financial independence due to educational and career attainment. Women now take care of their old parents as many sons previously would.

Elsewhere, Fong discusses urban teenagers' filial devotion in the context of Chinese nationalism, modernity, and globalization (2004b). Fong suggests that young people experienced a contradiction between nationalist loyalty and simultaneously "identify with a global imagined community and ... become highly critical of China" (2004b: 632). She analyses this seeming paradox through the idiom of filial devotion, such as the example of the desire to study abroad. Teenagers tended to present an analogy between filial duty and "the duty of those who go abroad to return to China with skills, credentials, and connections that would aid in the country's integration into the global economy ..." (2004b: 641). Leaving China was an allegory for leaving one's parents (p. 642). Bound by their filial duty and allegiance to country and kin, the teenagers experienced strong pressure to remain close.

What Fong terms "filial nationalism" serves as an idiom for the seemingly contradictory relationship between individual young men and women's national pride in their "motherland", their desire to leave because of China's "backwardness", and the prevailing filial duty to honour familial responsibilities by caring for old relatives. Participating in the global economy as foreign students or leave working abroad was encouraged as a means to modernize China by "channelling wealthier societies' social, cultural, and economic capital into China" (p. 644). Fong

appropriates Herzfeld's notion of "cultural intimacy" to delineate the "uneasy truce" between a traditional China considered undesirable in the modern world, and the loyalty youngsters felt towards their families, and by extension, to their 'motherland' (*zuguo*) (ibid.).²⁷

The experiences of Dalian youngsters and their families clearly demonstrate the "strategic combination of conformity and resistance" (2002: 1102) with regards to changing expectations of filial devotion. These filial expectations are now mixing old and new, norms and trends, to young women's increasing advantage. The gender inequality of the traditional filial system is shown to be cancelled out by such strategies for upward mobility. These changes are based mainly on three factors: first, transitions in employment patterns and women remaining in the work force; second, the changing family dynamics due to the OCP; and finally, the duties of care and support for the elderly and sick have not been assumed by official welfare system. Hence the onus rests on individual families to provide care and support.

1.2.2.1.2. Same-sex strategies in navigating conjugality and kinship

Existing literature on Chinese sexuality and kinship forms in contemporary life is notable for its particular positioning of homosexuality in relation to normative family lives in terms of what may seem to be a categorical incompatibility, and I discuss this argument and literature extensively in chapter two. Moreover, the general impression gained from much queer scholarship is that of a fundamental dichotomy between normative family and same-sex intimacy (e.g. Cho, 2007; Weston, 1991).

It is true that normative kinship and family constellations exclude same-sex directed alternatives,²⁸ but based on my research findings discussed in the following chapters, I suggest that most women and men who were engaged in or desired same-sex intimacy would deal with their biogenetic families in far more consistent and lasting ways than what is commonly argued to be the case in a great deal of queer Euro-American scholarship. My data demonstrate that while marriage and normative

²⁷ Herzfeld, M. (1997). *Cultural intimacy: Social poetics in the nation-state*. New York: Routledge. He argues: "If the nation is credibly represented as a family, people are loyal to it because they know that families are flawed – that is part of love – and so they rally to the defense of its compromising but warmly familiar intimacy" (1997: 172; cf. Fong, 2002: 644).

²⁸ See Berlant & Warner, 1998; Butler, 2004, 2008; Fassin, 2007; Warner, 1999; Weston, 1991.

kinship were sites of considerable struggle and despair, they did at the same time constitute important sources of support, recognition, and were fundamental components in women's aspirations for future social and geographical mobility, and relative autonomy.

Literature on same-sex family and relationship strategies outside Western cultures is growing. Recent work on the Chinese (Evans, 2008; Rofel, 2007) and Korean (Cho, 2007) contexts provide useful comparisons for my study. Evans has recently discussed daughter-mother relationships and changing gender norms across generations in urban China (2008). Predominantly founded on heteronormative family constellations, her study does however include a consideration of one young lesbian who is experiencing marriage pressure from her parents: "I feel that they have given up so much for me ..., I should give something back to them ..." (2008: 183). Evans describes how this woman felt that marriage was about satisfying her parents rather than her own desire and ambition. Simultaneously, her agony about marriage was "an effect of her desire to be grateful for [the mother's] affectionate support" (ibid.). This aspect of filiality is echoed in other considerations of cross-generational relationships and the dynamics of marital processes (e.g. Rofel, 1999; Whyte, 1997).

Rofel has recently discussed gendered differences in experiences of marriage pressure by Chinese lesbians and gays, suggesting that it is more possible for lesbians to refuse heteronormative marriage than for gays (2007). Sons face stronger pressures to carry on the patrilineal family line and to have a son, she argues. Having a family provides men "with moral privilege and access to social power which is not true for women" (2007: 100; 1999: 84-86). Getting married evidences their gendered social identity as masculine virile men (ibid.). Thus, the affirmation of normative kinship by living in 'harmony' with family and society creates a sense of belonging, or cultural citizenship. For these reasons Rofel concludes that it is easier for lesbians to refuse marriage altogether, and, I assume, easier to live 'lesbian' lives. However, I suggest that we also need to consider alternative discourses on national belonging and how they mediate bonds of kinship, because this emphasis complicates the analysis of the compliance/alternative in queer Chinese lives (Sang, 2003: 10; see also Liu & Ding, 2005).

While I agree that 'men' as a social category is more powerful than 'women', my data suggest a complex gendered marital field, which intersects with wider

concerns, especially class and career attainment. Supported by the outlined diversity in literature on gender, marriage and kinship, my research demonstrates that pre- and post-wedding married life and marital discourses differed significantly for gays and lesbians due to normative gendered expectations. I found that gay men were more able to retain social and financial freedom than women were. Men also achieved greater social recognition for their married status as husbands than did women as wives. Women tend to lose independence due to prevailing filial and patriarchal norms that diminish their socio-spatial freedom and usually financial independence.²⁹ In turn, parenting issues remain complex beyond simply carrying on the family line through having a son. Money and class concerns, having elder siblings in conventional families, and new parenting ideals (e.g. adoption, IVF), individualism, and same-sex families complicate this picture profoundly. I suggest, therefore, that it is necessary to consider in detail the pressures and possibilities for men and women, gays and lesbians, in pre- and post-wedding married life. A major aspect that I discuss extensively in the ethnographic chapters, is the fundamental anxieties and deep extent of social pressure, doubling as personal desire, to conform and belong that appear paradoxical and self-contradictory.

Liu and Ding discuss novelistic representations of heteronormative pressure, and the break-down in lesbian relationships should one's private desires become known to family and society (2005). They argue that Chinese heteronormative patriarchy hinges on the violent exclusion of queers to the point of social and physical death should the illusion of natural heterosexuality be threatened by queers emerging from their 'shadowy' existence. Their idiom "reticent poetics" (*moxu*) aims to convey exactly this liminal (non)quality of queer life possibilities, with an emphasis on social appearances and appropriate self-representation ("face", or *mianzi*) that makes aspirational self-presentation impossible. Quite the opposite: it necessitates the strategic cultivation of a 'split self' - public conformity, privately queer - to manage, and survive, this binary.

²⁹ Sang supports my argument in her critique of Rofel's formulation of gay 'cultural citizenship': "Rofel argues that, in China, gay women feel freer than gay men to assert their wish never to marry. This is probably because the parental pressure on them to do so is not as strong. I suspect, nevertheless, that it also has something to do with the fact that, for women, marriages, even fake ones, mean subordination and a greater compromise of personal freedom. Therefore, gay women must be especially wary of entering marriages in which they are not emotionally invested" (2003, fn. 25, p. 292).

Cho's anthropological study of contract marriages between Korean lesbians and gays demonstrates – in ways very similar to my data – that lesbians and gays consider contract marriages a strategy for life in order to maintain normative kin relations and thus fulfil filial expectations, which in many ways they feel a strong personal desire to conform to beyond mere “obligation” or “pressure”. At the same time, they attempt to continue same-sex intimate relationships and life styles, yet always in separate spheres, and for the situation to remain so. Their aim is not to ‘come out’, but to integrate private same-sex life with public heteronormative ‘face’, although it remains a relatively powerful, albeit abstract, aspiration for many. Cho demonstrates how difficult this balancing act proves to be by comparing pre- and post-wedding life, especially in terms of the highly gendered effects of contract marriages on gays and lesbians’ post-wedding everyday lives. The women encountered deep-seated patriarchal expectations of submissiveness, domesticity, and filiality. This fundamentally limited their personal freedom and ability to seek the kinds of love and sociality that the contract marriage strategy was meant to provide (2007).

I have discussed the transformations and continuities of kinship and marital practice and discourse in modern and contemporary China. I showed that marriage has incorporated complex ideologies of nation, gender, and family. Changes in the governing of marriage via Marriage Acts, and nation-wide socio-economic development, enabled women's domestic and familial emancipation, and increased and sustained participation in public life, especially employment. Traditional filial duties that prescribed proper intra-familial and social relationships according to hierarchical, patriarchal notions have in turn been modified, not categorically discarded, to accommodate new demographic realities, shifting urban-rural residency patterns, and the generally increased material wealth and opportunities for urban social mobility. Scholarship on same-sex sexuality and intimacy trace the emergence of semi-public socio-spatial formations based on such affiliations, and demonstrate that gays and lesbians continue to experience tremendous pressures to conform and marry. Further, changing notions of belonging and citizenship have emerged through alternative urban-based arenas, as well as through the consumption of and aspiring towards modern life styles and material wealth, which cross-cut rural-urban and national-foreign domains.

In the final section I consider ‘the urban question’ (cf. Castells, 1977), by examining anthropological literature on contemporary urban China.

1.2.3. Research themes on contemporary urban China

Anthropological studies of urban China remain relatively few, compared with the abundant work on rural and peasant China.³⁰ There are several reasons for this. Hershatter has noted how China’s reform policies have radically improved the possibilities for undertaking scholarly research since the late 1970s (2007). Hence, most ethnography-informed publications on urban China have started to emerge only very recently (Baranovitch, 2003a/b; Evans, 2008; Farquhar & Zhang, 2005; Fong, 2004a, Gillette, 2000; Rofel, 1999; Watson, 1997, 2004; Wonorow, 2004; Yan H., 2003; Yan, 2004; Zhang, 2001).³¹ Others have pointed to what Liu calls the “invention of a rural tradition” and its historical meaning in Chinese anthropology (and China studies more generally), and in particular, that “anthropological investigation has been dependent upon an epistemological assumption that Chinese society is essentially rural in character” (Liu, 2002a: 110). This assumption is founded on two conceptual shifts in the development of Chinese anthropology; one that establishes equivalence between family and village, and the other, between village and society (ibid.: 112). Liu argues for the political reality of a fundamentally inter-connected urban-rural throughout Chinese history and the need to re-think an anthropological tradition that refuses to engage with this everyday urban reality.³² This inter-connected reality has become a dominant concern in much recent scholarship on post-Mao, late-socialist China, which is concerned with the fundamentally changed interrelationship between the rural and urban – and

³⁰ See Ma’s extensive bibliography of interdisciplinary studies on urban China (2006). Liu (2002a) provides a compelling analysis and overview of literature in urban Chinese anthropology.

³¹ For other urban-focussed anthropological publications, see: Bian & Logan, 1996; Chance, 1984; DeGlopper, 1995; Farrer, 2002; Fong, 2004a, 2007; Gillette, 2000. For historical work on Chinese cities, see: Bray, 2005; Burgess, 1928; Elvin & Skinner, 1974; Fei, 1986; Gamble, 1921; Kirkby, 1985; Skinner, 1997; Wheatley, 1971.

³² In Liu’s words, the problem is “the empiricist sentiment that refuses to admit that what is said to be real [i.e. China’s essentially rural character] is already a theoretical statement.” (ibid.: 123)

increasingly also the urban and the global – through tropes of development, modernity, and globalization.³³

In the following I outline some major themes in current scholarship in order to situate my own study and how it differs from, and contributes to, these directions.

The concern with marginalized urban lives, such as ethnic minorities, the floating population, and migrant workers is a predominant theme in this scholarship: Baranovich shows how Uyghur Xinjiang migrants to Beijing attempt to gain social and political rights against the dominant discourse of ethnic minorities being backwards, peasants, “marginalized and voiceless” (2003a: 727). Similarly, Gillette discusses how the Hui population in Xi’an creatively appropriate the exoticizing official ethnicity discourse to capitalize on being “traditional” and a “national minority” for tourism and tax credits purposes. In fact, their reference point for modernity is not Beijing but Mecca and Middle Eastern cosmopolitanism (2000). Zhang has studied the Zhejiang migrants living in settlements in the outskirts of Beijing and their diverse strategies to create space, leadership, economic viability and sustained residency against the state-sponsored citizenship rights embedded in the *hukou* household registration system (2001, 2002). Wonorow considers the spatial construction of social marginality in the case of makeshift schools for migrant children in Beijing (2004). Yan Hong shows how young rural women migrating to cities in search of labour and ‘modern identities’, in this process they are rejecting the countryside as “a field of death” (2003).

Another theme concerns mass consumption and perceived effects of globalization on China. One popular topic here is food consumption - or ‘eating modernity’ - for example the popularity of Western fast-foods (Davis, 2000; Oakes, 1999; Watson, 1997; Yan, 2000), the changing meanings of identity, of eating - and not eating - particular foods, hence maintaining or producing taboos against others (Baranovitch, 2003b; Gillette, 2000), as well as the relationship between socio-economic transformation, changing family demography, and children’s eating practices (Er, 1999; Jing, 2000).³⁴ Another main topic is the relationship between China and global, or trans-national, cultures: there are considerations of overseas and

³³ I note the prolific scholarship on civil society in China at present, although it goes beyond this thesis’ remit to discuss this. But see, Brook & Frolic, 1997; Howell & Shang, 1996; Kluver & Powers, 1999; Madsen, 1998.

³⁴ Similar types of arguments are presented in topically very different studies on contemporary China: Dutton, 1998; Gu, 1998; Solinger, 1999; Wu, H. 2000; Yan, H., 2003.

diasporic Chinese communities and Greater China cultural ties (Cartier & Ma, 2003; Ong & Nonini, 1997; Oakes & Schein, 2006). Ong considers transnational Chinese publics, the concerns with flexible citizenship across nation-states, and the mutual, flexible constitution of global and national in producing identities and belonging (1998). Yang discusses gendered transformations in the public sphere in transnational China and the enabling effects for women's participation in public (1999).

These studies provide highly relevant contexts to my own research, with their consistent emphasis on marginality and minority people's struggles for betterment in contemporary China. Litzinger appropriates a notion of the marginal intellectual (*zhishifenzi*) in his ethnographic study of Yao ethnic elites (2002). He seeks to broaden the meaning and conceptual contents of marginality from the conventional, dominant, state-sponsored emphasis on ethnicity and ethnic margins in order to include other "minority struggles for visibility and recognition into our understandings and theorizations of [China]..." (2002: 36). Similarly, and evoking Liu Xin's comment on Western anthropology's focus on the 'essential Chinese rural' (2002), Wang Ming Ming critically discusses Chinese 'nativist anthropology', which has continued the anthropological focus on otherness and marginality translated into ethnic minority nationalities (2002).

My research builds on this scholarship in important ways, but also differs considerably. Little literature on urban contemporary China has considered migrant, professional, upward mobile populations in urban locales, and the complex meanings of national and globalizing modernity in this regard. A majority of the women in my study were in some sense migrants, since their natal homes were not Beijing. However, they were migrants in a very different way from labour migrants and floating populations trapped in poverty, often based on ethnic minority status. Typically, they were younger students or middle aged, married career women, who came to Beijing, not with natal families, sometimes with a husband, but usually on their own. Generally then, my informants were not poor or socio-economically disadvantaged, and many harboured aspirations for social mobility in terms of going abroad and partaking in a distinctively globalizing cultural flow of queer life and culture, realized through increased ability to consume a modern, cosmopolitan, yet highly Chinese version of citizenship. Through education and career climbing, they envisioned futures where normative pressures, for example towards marriage and

natal families, were resolved through attaining material wealth, or perhaps even, moving abroad to marry a girlfriend.

1.3. Conclusion

I have discussed the major scholarly, social, historical, and cultural contextual framework that situates the subject of lala, same-sex, subjectivity and collectivity in post-millennium urban China. I have demonstrated that there exists a dynamic relationship between old and new practices and ideologies, and that their changing meanings enable an alternative form of same-sex intimacy and sociality to develop. This is happening alongside, not instead of, the increasingly modified versions of normative kinship and gendered social order.

This is the first anthropological study on women's same-sex sexuality in the PRC and which is based primarily on participatory research in spatial locations beyond the Internet. It complements existing studies on similar themes, including gay sexuality, online queer cultures, and various considerations of gender, women, kinship, and marginal communities. My study engages with considerable cross-disciplinary and cross-regional scholarship; most specifically in the domain of queer and sexuality studies, feminist and gender theory, and theories of subject formation and identity.

In chapter two I discuss the epistemological and methodological framework that informs my ethnographic analysis. I formulate a grounded theoretical approach in order to analyze the production of knowledge on sexual cultures, inspired by interdisciplinary advances in gender, feminist and sexuality theories, and ethnographically informed interdisciplinary research.

CHAPTER TWO

A critical anthropology of sexuality: Epistemology, ethnography, and methodology

It is one thing to study sexuality as an entity unto itself; it's quite another to study the infusion of sexuality into the very pursuit of knowledge.

Kath Weston, 1998: 3

We begin not with participant-observation, or with cultural texts (suitable for interpretation), but with writing, the making of texts.

James Clifford, 1986: 2

2.1. Introduction: An anthropology of sexuality

This chapter develops a critical and reflexive framework for the study of female gendered non-normative sexuality in a contemporary disciplinary and socio-political setting that is simultaneously global and local. I do this with specific attention to the analytical tension between ethnographic particularity and abstract theorization. At the heart of the discussion here is my ambition to extend an anthropological framework for studying the formation of sexual subjectivity and sociality that takes heed of three formative aspects. First, one that appropriates sexuality as a social phenomenon, as sets of social practices, and of symbolism (Ortner & Whitehead, 1981), and related to changing political and economic circumstances, including issues of power hierarchies (cf. Wekker, 2006: 67). This approach goes against essentialist, moralizing notions of sexuality as a 'natural' state of being, as "sexual innatism" (Teunis & Herdt, 2007: 10). Second is the aspect that seeks to mend the separation of sexuality and gender in much current theorizing, one that effects their conflation, with gender as a secondary aspect of an essentialized sexual subjectivity (Blackwood, 2007; Wekker, 2006). And third, one that accounts for the local-global dynamics of sexual practice and identity without resorting to what Gloria Wekker

has aptly critiqued as a “lazy tradition-modernity reading” (2006: 239), whereby local, non-Western expressions are deemed less developed versions of the original, authentic, Euro-American ‘out and proud’ queer subject.

In order to address these issues, I will first consider certain aspects of anthropological epistemology and methodology. More specifically, I frame an anthropology of sexuality within a broader genealogical understanding of the production of knowledge. By this I mean the models for representing, interpreting, and writing cross-cultural variation of human sociality, and the fundamental tension between empiricism and epistemology, including methodology and ethics.

In *Long slow burn* Kath Weston interrogates how sexuality – as an object of research, as a crucial aspect of the life and identity of anthropology’s practitioners, as elemental indexer of what constitutes valid knowledge and for whom – remains reductively “ghettoized” and a “fringe topic” in the social sciences, and specifically in anthropology (1998). In this regard, she argues for, as do I, the importance of understanding “precisely how sexuality came to be construed as a compact and isolated subtopic, a matter of specialized study for the few renegade scholars foolish enough to pay it any mind” (ibid.: 4-5). The re-emergence of sexuality in contemporary anthropology, in particular the sub-fields of ‘queer anthropology’ and ‘lesbian and gay anthropology’, must be seen against this dominant discursive production of sexuality as an isolated, discrete sub-field at comfortably distanced margins. This view has the effect of rendering trivial, inconsequential, and oftentimes invisible next to ‘important’ and ‘mainstream’ topics like economics, religion, and kinship ‘proper’. What I suggest, therefore, is a re-evaluation of the methods and theories we apply when producing ethnographic knowledge on sexual cultures, in order to open up the research imaginary to how the ‘infusion of sexuality’ profoundly influences ‘the very pursuit of knowledge’. This includes the partial and positioned ideologies and truisms of what counts as valid knowledge and proper sex.

In early anthropology sexual diversity was indeed a major theme, extending far beyond the politically correct Western Judeo-Christian marriage and procreation concerns that have taken over kinship and mainstream gender studies.³⁵ This earlier attention to human sexual diversity is rather remarkable compared with its more

³⁵ See, Boellstorff, 2007b; and Weston 1993, for exhaustive reviews and bibliography.

recent reduction to what Weston terms a fringe topic of ‘flora-and-fauna’ studies principally concerned with data gathering, considered obvious and easily available through empiricist participation. Weston demonstrates that early ethnography was abundant with descriptive studies and commentaries on sex and eroticism, albeit approached as a “unified object for inquiry ... a force both primal and given” (Weston, 1998: 9). However, the dominant focus on ‘simply’ observing and noting sexual practices without considering sexual meaning in context, meant that sex was not theorized beyond the ‘obvious facts’. This meant that sexuality’s infusion with symbolics and material significance across social domains was by and large ignored. Such an approach amounts to the fundamental problem of a prevailing data/theory split (Weston, 1998; Boellstorff, 2007b), and hence a reductive understanding of the cultural variation of sex that has sidelined its theorizing from the disciplinary mainstay of anthropology. Yet, Weston notes that:

[F]rom the very beginning, assumptions about sexuality infused social science concepts such as normality, evolution, progress, organization, development, and change. Likewise, judgments about sexuality remain deeply embedded in the history of scholarly explanations for who acquires power, who deserves it, and who gets to keep it. (1998: 20)³⁶

In short, the theory/data split in sexuality studies enabled a prevailing empiricist focus of chronicling sexual diversity and then presenting it as self-evident ‘facts’. Simultaneously, this move clouded its prolific intellectual legacy, erased its academic history, and produced its marginal position which made its ‘ghettoization’ tenable: “making it fit for queers or for no study at all” (ibid.: 25). Still, “there’s a cost when scholarship refuses to acknowledge its intellectual debts, or to recognize its hand in the production of what it finds” (ibid.: 27).

Anthropology’s growing body of ethnographic data on sexuality and gender variation has been increasingly important to the critique of universal and naturalized categorizations of gender and heterosexuality. It also undercuts their moral legitimacy and anti-gay bias originating in the “perversion” models of sexual

³⁶ Weston refers to, e.g., Lewis Henry Morgan, Frederick Engels, Henry Maine, John McLennan, Emile Durkheim, and Charles Darwin (1998: 16), and debates such as the racist “hypersexualization” and eroticization of “savage” “barbarians” in colonialist, evolutionist literature; did “savages” understand conception, the natural connection between intercourse and birth (e.g. Malinowski, 1927; Lévy-Bruhl, 1923), including the virgin birth debate (e.g. Delaney, 1986; Leach, 1969; Martin, 1991; Spiro, 1968).

variation, presuming pathology and gender dysphoria (see, Ortner & Whitehead, 1981; Rosaldo & Lamphere, 1974; Weston, 1998).

This brings us back to the project of writing, and Clifford's argument in the introductory quote that the point which marks commencement of anthropological enquiry is not fieldwork or so-called participant-observation. In fact, it starts with the constitutive process of developing and consolidating "writing, the making of texts" (Clifford, 1986: 2) and their "relations of production" (ibid.:13) from the moment of inaugurating the topic in the safety of the homely intellectual armchair. Writing, then, is not and never was simply about "keeping good field notes, making accurate maps, 'writing up' results" (ibid.), in other words: conveying transparently what the fieldworker saw or experienced through participant observation. And data, as Weston points out, is "... never simply data. Data is selected and collected, used and abused by researchers who are always in some sense a product of their times" (1998: 11). The interrelationship between text, method, and rhetoric (discourse) in the production of anthropological knowledge is therefore of fundamental importance to this study, and the aim of this chapter is to develop a theoretical framework for the following ethnography that links these concerns.

In the following I enquire into the ways in which sexuality and 'the pursuit of knowledge' remain in a contentious relationship amidst the recent proliferation of queer, gay and lesbian anthropological scholarship in light of local/global, self/other, subject/collective tropes in theorizing and research alike. As a crucial feature of this discussion, I explore the interrelationship between sexuality and gender in subject formation. I critique how recent sexuality scholarship has tended to separate the two, focussing on an alleged primacy of sexual difference and subjectivity, with gender variance as a secondary attribute. By way of a critical discussion of recent ethnographies of sexual globalization that engage gender and feminist theories (Blackwood, 2007; Sinnott, 2004; Wekker, 2006; Weston, 1993; Wieringa, Blackwood et al., 2007), I argue against the current tendency towards a conflation of sexuality and gender, and the effect that marginalizes female gendered sexuality and agency (Boellstorff, 2007a/b).

In sum, this chapter presents a gender-sensitive and politically engaged analytical framework for the discussion that follows. I begin by presenting a brief

ethnography-based and contextualizing introduction to the main category of my research topic, broadly defined as lala.

2.1.1. Lala: Defining the topic of inquiry

The lala category, by which I mean the multiple ways in which the women I knew in Beijing applied this term, is probably best described as a collective category incorporating women who came to see same-sex erotic desire and intimacy as a defining marker of subjectivity and to some extent an organizing principle for their life aspirations, if not their actual life trajectories past and present. Sometimes, for some women, in some contexts, these identifications translated into categorical self-identified sexual identity similar to ‘lesbian’ or ‘dyke’. However, the actual terms usually applied were by and large the gender-defining *T* for ‘tomboy’ and *P* for *po*, or “wife” (see, chapter four). In contrast, lala tended to cover social events and spaces like bars and parties, and constituted a female-gendered identity category similar to the gender-neutral *tongxinglianzhe*/homosexual and *tongzhi*/comrade in discursive interaction with ‘outsiders’, such as the mainstream media and academic events. Over time, I came to understand lala primarily as an umbrella term that provided a categorical unifying marker of sociality based loosely around sexual orientation. Women’s participation in lala social spaces, whether online in lala chat rooms or the Salon for example, was what marked their adherence to or membership of the categorical collective lala, not sexual subjectivity and identity per se.

In line with Valentine’s appropriation of the ‘transgender’ category in New York and Blackwood’s of the Indonesian ‘lesbi’, I suggest that lala, far from being a marker of marginality and inconsequential sub-cultural variation, actually provides “a central cultural site where meanings about gender and sexuality are being worked out” (Valentine, 2007: 14; and see Blackwood, 2007: 182). This critical site (cf. Jean-Klein, 2000) provides a conceptual framework for understanding the mode of existence of social relationships, in this case, lala sociality (cf. Lefebvre, 1991 [1974]). Lefebvre argues that the underpinnings of social relations are spatial. These fundamental connections, including their genealogies, must be accounted for and analyzed in each individual case. The social space of lived and experienced action,

and agency, is the emphasis here. This is reminiscent of the anthropological quest for ‘thick description’ and ethnographic, localized particularity, rather than the static given of a generic subject in timeless space.

In the following, I explore sexuality between women at the juncture of globalizing processes, local sexual ideologies, and subjectivities in current scholarship in order to identify and discuss tensions. The fundamental theme that emerges is that of similitude and difference, and the mediation of the two in the face of increasingly rapid communication and travel of signs and imaginaries. A related concern is that of the interrelationship between sexuality and gender as co-constitutive factors of subjectivity, and the relative transformations of normative sexuality and gender regimes. (Wieringa, Blackwood et al., 2007: Ch. 1). How can we empirically study and conceptualise sexuality in such trans-national, multiple contexts; how can one reconcile theoretical abstraction with micro-context? One place to start is to consider what relationship we might stipulate between globalization, or the global, and an ethnography of same-sex sexuality.

2.2. Theorizing sexuality and globalization

[G]lobalization refers to fundamental changes in the spatial and temporal contours of social existence, according to which the significance of space or territory undergoes shifts in the face of a no less dramatic acceleration in the temporal structure of crucial forms of human activity.³⁷

This definition is useful as an entrance point to the present discussion because it sums up quite neatly the ways in which changes in spatial and temporal understandings and processes impact on forms of social life across the globe at present time. What is specific to globalization now as opposed to, for example, previous eras of interchange and exchange, is the “dramatic acceleration” in how ways of life and systems of meaning attached to them are perceived across different geographical regions. What used to be relatively easy to demarcate as the self versus the other, i.e. us versus them, is becoming increasingly difficult to identify and separate, given that technological innovation has led to specific spatio-temporal

³⁷ Source: <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/globalization/>> (accessed, 23 January, 2008)

effects that Harvey termed “time-space compression”, and the shrinking time horizons of social life (1989). Hence, the “crucial forms of human activity” mentioned above can take place in very similar veins across the globe almost simultaneously. Tracking place of origin and cultural ownership of signs and meanings according to territory and nation becomes a diffuse exercise, perhaps even meaningless.

Signs once considered distinctive for Western modern life, such as sexual identity and language along the homo-hetero binary grid (e.g. ‘lesbian’), are now increasingly appropriated – and simultaneously rejected by many who consider them alien to their cultural history – in places where one would not so readily expect such practices. Several studies critically assess the desirability of certain defining aspects of Western queer culture in non-Western places, such as coming out (Boellstorff, 2005; Chou, 2000; Manalansan, 2003), activism (Boellstorff, 2005, 2007a; Chou, 2000; Wang P., 2001), and family (Boellstorff, 2005; Cho, 2007; Chou, 2000; Liu & Ding, 2005). These studies critically explore these themes in the context of wider socio-economically and historically varying processes of change, and demonstrate the futility in assuming the subject of sexuality cross-culturally against the yardstick of a US-based folk theory of queer identity and rights.

Claims to authenticity take on specific importance due to the relative (in)ability to trace a cultural product or effect (image, object, practice) to a territorial and cultural place of origin. Implicit to these discursive struggles of ownership, are complex power inequalities and hierarchies that assign relative recognition and discursive dominance according to shifting criteria of belonging and citizenship, both in national and cultural terms.

The extensive body of literature focusing on non-Western same-sex identities, practices, and cultures published since the mid-1990s contribute considerably to the epistemological concerns with subject formation, identity and practice, the complexities of love and desire, and their meaning-making processes in socio-cultural terms. A related contribution concerns the focus on changing socio-economic conditions, development, and modernization in a globalizing world and their effects on the formation of sexuality; especially in terms of how identity terminologies originating in the West - such as ‘lesbian’, ‘gay’ and ‘queer’ - are seen

to travel to distinctively non-Western places.³⁸ This focus challenges the traditional anthropological emphasis on the categorically different non-Western ‘other’; it offers new and original epistemological as well as methodological approaches to think and study the perceived categorical dichotomy between similitude or selfhood and difference or other. The blurring of categorical boundaries between Western queer self and non-western queer other already mentioned, firmly rejects the kinds of approaches that place non-Western sexual cultures outside the contemporary temporal frame of inquiry, and rather, into an idyllic past of “pre-colonial tolerance” (Boellstorff, 2007b: 22). Such approaches tend to view non-Western queer cultures, and identities that resemble Western ones, as contaminated and inauthentic, seeking instead to explore ‘proper’ avenues of research: sufficiently different “ritualized forms of transgender or homosexual practices” (ibid.). This approach rejects the “traditional epistemology of difference” (ibid.) that still haunts mainstream anthropological enquiry. It also refutes the tendency to place others in a static past, which, in the context of enquiring processes of cultural interchange and globalization, naturally limits our ability to adequately analyse the topic of research. This new approach looks at the constitution of sexual subjectivity and community in the context of factors such as the mass media, consumerism, travel, class, ethnicity, religion and belief (Boellstorff, 2005, 2007a; Donham, 1998; M. Moore, 2006; Wilson, 2004; Yue, Martin & Berry, 2003).

This contemporary global reality has increasingly spurred the reflexive recognition that what was originally seen to be ‘ours’, ‘us’, ‘self’, and ‘Western’ according to modernist narratives that also foreground the imagined sovereign nation-state as default territory, was itself enabled by the cyclical influx of new cultures and life ways. Chauncey demonstrates how the explosive diversity of gay men’s community and identity in New York since the early twentieth century was enabled by, first, the immigration of Southern European Catholics and Jews who brought different sexual norms and bodily practices to the earlier northern European Protestant immigrants who settled there; and second, the wave of Puerto Rican immigration in the

³⁸ See, for example: Altman, 1997, 2001; Bereket & Adam, 2006; Blackwood, 1998; Boellstorff, 2005, 2007; Carrier, 1995; Carrillo, 2002; Chou, 2000; Cruz-Malave & Manalansan, 2002; Donham, 1998; Elliston, 1999; Epprecht, 2004; Essig, 1999; Gopinath, 2005; Johnson, 1997; Knauff, 2003; Lorway, 2008; Manalansan, 2003; McLelland, 2000; Morgan & Wieringa, 2005; Morris, 1995; Parker, 1999; Rofel, 2007; Sinnott, 2004; Sullivan & Jackson, 1999; Tan, 1995; Wekker, 2006; Wieringa, Blackwood et al., 2007; Wilson, 2004. But, again, see, Boellstorff, 2007b; Weston, 1993, for extensive literature reviews.

1950s again transformed New York's sexual culture (Chauncey, 1994; cf. Povinelli & Chauncey, 1999: 440). Manalansan discusses how Filipino gay immigration to New York has influenced local conceptualizations of the interrelationship between nation, gay *and* straight sexuality, and race (2003). In short, diasporic sex and transnational movements of sexual systems and meanings affect and shape sexual practice, subjectivity, and movements amongst people in the so-called place of origin or host nation (Manalansan, 2003; Povinelli & Chauncey, 1999).

I will now discuss and critique recent studies on sexuality and the ways in which these linkages and claims to identity, authenticity, and belonging shape the focus of the sexuality scholarship that my research engages with. These concerns interact with those relating to space and place (making). Hence I explore the possibility for a grounded sense of spatiality when discussing the increasing difficulty of making any absolute territorial and origin claims in light of globalizing processes. These concerns also include political implications of cultural forms and life ways in the domain of sexuality, in terms of inequality and hierarchy.

2.2.1. Local/global tensions: Definitions, scales, and their limits

In this thesis, I work from the idea that the local/global dynamics itself is not a problem that needs resolution, and that the distinction is not to be defined or concretely specified in categorical, boundarized terms. I disagree with Blackwood and Wieringa's assertion that the local/global dichotomy is itself 'simplistic' and that applying the term 'transnational' somehow moves beyond the problematics of global/local (2007: 4). I also disagree with Blackwood's suggestion that "[t]he term 'local-global' in relation to sexualities suggests the difference between traditional or oppressed sexualities and a Western-defined liberated gay-ness" (2007: 181). I suggest that it is possible to retain this dichotomous conceptualization - a discursive strategy that of course always will be 'simplistic' compared with reality - for the purpose that it is good to think with. I agree with Moore who suggests that we approach the global - and, I think, hence, a notion of the dynamics between local and global - as a concept-metaphor and that its role "is not to resolve ambiguity, but to maintain it. [Its] purpose is to maintain a tension between pretentious universal

claims and particular contexts and specifics. [It is] the spaces in which details, facts and connections make sense” (2004: 74; and see, Johnson, 1997).

These imaginary spaces necessarily have concrete local manifestations, which is where ethnographic particularity comes in. Yet, ‘queer’ fails to adequately name and represent all people that could possibly be encompassed within this category but never could or would (Boellstorff, 2007b: 18-19), and there is no adequate referent in concrete terms. What it does, and what is useful, is that it serves as a conceptual shorthand, a productive discursive ambiguity. In Boellstorff’s words: “Terms are conceptual tools rather than transparent labels for entities in the world, and we should ontologize them with care” (ibid.: 20). The problem, therefore, is not in the binary itself, implied by Wieringa and Blackwood. The problem is rather, how binary conceptual short-hands are applied in academic ‘writing, the making of texts’ (cf. Clifford, 1986). How, then, is it that recent explorations of transnational sexuality have come to critique this dynamics so, and how does this critique relate to wider anthropological concerns with contemporary ethnographic particularity?

Globalization interacts in fundamental ways with particular regimes and practices of nation-states, and alternate modernities (Babb, 2006; Chalmers, 2002a; McLelland, 2000; Manalansan, 2003; Moore, 2004; Sinnott, 2004; Wekker, 2006; Wilson, 2004). The ethnographic literature demonstrates that globalizing processes do not cancel out the importance and fundamental role of nation-states, and national imaginaries through which people think and practice their sense of self, including those of sexual subjectivity and identity, individually and collectively. A related concern here is how a large body of interdisciplinary and ethnographically informed literature, including history, demonstrates the fundamental position of heterosexuality in the constitution and maintenance of the nation-state imaginary, and in turn, the struggle to recognize non-normative non-conjugal, hetero-genital sex/uality.³⁹

Povinelli and Chauncey (1999) outline ‘the transnational turn’ in lesbian and gay studies and queer theory since the mid-nineties, and are concerned with “the difference that global and transnational perspectives make to the study of sexuality and corporeality, intimacy and proximity, and how theories of sexuality complicate

³⁹ See, Berlant, 1997; Berlant & Warner, 1998; Boellstorff, 2005, 2007; Bunzl, 2004; Butler, 2004; Epprecht, 2004; Foucault, 1978; Herzog, 2005; Stoler, 1995, 2002; Valentine, 2007; Warner, 1999; Wekker, 2006.

the task of globalization studies” (1999: 440). Historical movements - of people, ideas, etc - and new forms of territoriality and belonging, affect sexual systems and permeate disciplinary boundaries, such as those between theory and data. Lesbian, gay, and queer studies therefore must reconsider “the self-evident nature of the national, the local, and the intimate in ways that have profound implications for the histories, ethnographies, and literary-critical theories of sexuality we write” (ibid.: 442). Trans-national sexuality studies, then, question “the notion of a foundational sexual subject” (ibid.: 444; cf. Halperin, 1995), and ‘assault’ commonsense referents and the ‘self-evident’ nature of the national, local, global, and the intimate. They rightly point to the importance of separating the emergence of globalization as a new phenomenon and the increasing consciousness “of the global ecumene” (ibid.: 440).

This reconfiguration of sexuality in Western scholarship in terms of practice, identity, intimacy, community and politics, and its relationship with different sexual systems, is the topical location of trans-national sexuality studies (Blackwood, 2007; Grewal & Kaplan, 2001; Povinelli & Chauncey, 1999). The concept of ‘location’ is itself fraught with tensions, and in the following I shall dwell on some ways in which we may consider intimate, local, national, regional, and global locations.

Several recent anthropological studies on same-sex sexuality present analytical attempts in order to bridge the seeming dissidence between the anthropological requirements of ethnographic particularity and the changed geopolitical realities in the light of globalization.

Tom Boellstorff studies queer sexuality in Indonesia and questions of disciplinarity and temporality (2005, 2007a). He offers an elaborate analysis on notions of similitude and difference, and on the productive ‘coincidence’ between anthropology and queer studies (2007a).⁴⁰ His argument is intriguing in its insistence on bringing queer studies and anthropology together: “anthropology has always been a bit queer, and queer studies has always betrayed an anthropological sensibility” (ibid.: 2). The similitude/difference binary contains an important analytical tension here, in large part due to the fact that globalization is often perceived as a process of homogenization, i.e. the world is becoming Westernized. Yet, same-sex sexuality is different exactly because of its insistence on sameness, *homo*, as the defining feature

⁴⁰ ‘coincidence’ as ‘correspondence’: “occurrence of events that happen at the same time by accident but seem to have some connection.” Cited from the Merriam-Webster Dictionary: < www.m-w.com >

of desire and identification that in turn renders subjects non-normative and different-as-unequal. Boellstorff emphasizes the oft-forgotten point with regards to dominant globalization discourse that primordial national forms of identification tend to be linked to ethnic and religious attachments. In turn, contemporary non-normative sexualities such as 'lesbian' and 'gay' – seen as established in relation to globalization, hence supra-national – are somehow less authentic, less complete, less lasting or meaningful due to their perceived primary linkage with abstract, supra-local 'global' imaginaries (ibid.: 214-215).

The important point here is that trajectories of sexual subjectivity are crucially connected to and shaped by nationalist ideology, in the sense that state-sponsored dominant discourse provides a major way in which 'global sexuality' is re-territorialized into national imaginaries, and how historically prior discourses on sexual subjectivity are altered in the course of this process. Furthermore, given the fundamental role of heteronormativity - especially the naturalization of procreative hetero-sex through the private/public binary - in modern nation building projects, it is clear that non-normative sexuality constitutes a defining, oftentimes implicit, aspect of the constitution of the nation itself (ibid.: 215).⁴¹ In short, national identity and citizenship (belonging) shape non-normative sexual subjectivity in fundamental ways, and vice versa (Boellstorff, 2007a: 215). Contemporary globalizing processes do not erase the importance and relevance of nation-states and national/ist imaginaries. Rather, these processes speak to and interrelate with national sexual politics and governmentality in multiple, intersecting ways. Sex, in its myriad perverse and proper manifestations, constitutes the fundamental site whereby such projects are founded and fought.

It is clear, then, that this national spatial and imaginary dimension shapes global/local processes of sexual subject formation in important ways (e.g. Boellstorff, 2007b: 21-23; Manalansan, 2003). I will demonstrate in the following chapters that a notion of Chinese belonging, or Chineseness, which incorporated cultural imaginaries and normative ideologies regarding Chinese identity in the world and the East Asian region, was crucial in shaping Beijing women's understandings and practices of same-sex subjectivity and intimacy (all chapters),

⁴¹ See also, Berlant & Warner, 1998; Bunzl, 2004; Dikötter, 1995; Donham, 1998; Evans, 1997; Herzog, 2005; Stoler, 1995, 2002; Stoler & Cooper, 1997.

and in their dealings with social life beyond this sphere. This included the immediate family in terms of marriage pressures and conjugal strategies (chapters five, six), and the formation of semi-public community (chapter seven). In the Chinese context, the national imaginary remains prominent, given that state-sponsored discourse and governance despite (or rather because of) socio-economic transformation have stayed hegemonic to an extent considered antithetical to Western multi-party, democratic nation-states.

In terms of the spatial scales this line of thinking engages with, aspects of comparison and ethnographic particularity need elaboration. The concept of 'critical regionality' (Johnson, Jackson & Herdt, 2000) has been partially applied by Boellstorff (2007a) and Blackwood and Wieringa (2007) in their discussions of queer globalization. In short, a focus on critical regionality aims to historicize and localize cultural specificities of gender and sexual diversity. Such a focus "provides one means through which we can move beyond the essentialized field of the 'local' and the unspecified and un-situated field of the 'global' " (Johnson et al., 2000: 373). It promises an emphasis on ethnographic particularity, yet it mirrors the shortcomings in Blackwood and Wieringa's appropriation of 'trans-national', since it presents equivalent problems of over-simplification, reductive binary categorical thinking and, as I see it, the implicit premise that grounded 'data' ('the local') somewhat precedes theorizing.

An interesting illustrative example of the extent of complexity and difficulty here is the increasing appropriation of categorical terms such as 'lesbian' and 'gay' in non-Western locales, and how to make sense of this process and its relative importance. Blackwood and Wieringa (2007) argue, correctly to my mind, that a prevailing problem with trans-national queer studies is a "tendency to essentialize and universalize human experiences by assuming the relevance of "Western" categories to the lives of people elsewhere" (ibid.: 5). These categories' origin is decidedly urban, culturally Euro-American, linguistically Anglo-US based, and founded on a premise of sexuality as primary constitutive aspect of identification, as they (and many others) rightly argue (ibid.: 5-6). However, I disagree that an analysis that apply these terms - including contexts where local people themselves use these terms, which makes for an ethical challenge - is necessarily and by default "obscuring indigenous meanings" (Elliston, 1995; cf. Blackwood & Wieringa, 2007).

As with the global/local conceptual shorthand, and in light of my discussion on ‘writing’ anthropological scholarship and the interrelationship between practice and theory, it is the context of categorical analysis in the ethnographic enterprise that ultimately determines what makes a reductive or productive analysis. However, the categorical exclusion of certain aspects of personhood disables their validation, and serves to reify certain paradigmatic ‘truths’, i.e. that queer identification is *a priori* founded on sexual subjectivity with gender as a detachable attribute (Valentine, 2007).

A major problem here is the modernist notion that a local particular (i.e. the domain of practice) can be easily identified against the abstract global backdrop (i.e. the domain of theory), and that the former could and should be studied prior to engaging with globalizing processes. Weston’s critical appraisal of ‘ethnocartography’ (1993, 1998) and Boellstorff’s ‘critical empiricism’ (2007b) illuminate the local/global and practice/theory tension further in light of the problem of foregrounding ‘local’, in itself an empiricist ethnographic particularity qualifying as valid data in and of itself. In contrast, critical empiricism does not fetishize data; “nevertheless [it] demands that theorizations be accountable to their subjects of study ... [it] asks after the relations of adequation between any theorization and the discursive realities it claims to interpret” (Boellstorff, 2007a: 19). His approach grows explicitly out of Weston’s critique of ethnocartography or sexual cartography, which she defines as a fundamentally empiricist project of “looking for evidence of same-sex sexuality and gendered ambiguity in ‘other societies’” (1993: 341). The problem here is that of a presumed primacy of documentary data-gathering:

many an author opens with an obligatory nod to Foucault before presenting research findings, but more commonly, the researcher’s theoretical perspectives remain embedded in apparently straightforward reports from the field. In effect, the absence of theory becomes the submersion of theory (ibid.: 344).

Boellstorff’s recent queer adaptation of Weston’s seminal insight reads:

many a queer theorist opens with an obligatory nod to participant observation before presenting theoretical claims, but more commonly the theorist’s empirical perspectives remain embedded in apparently straightforward theorizations. In effect the absence of data becomes the submersion of data; the theorist’s own experiences stand in for the ostensible object of study. This

is, once again, a question of adequation, one shaped by an identity politics of knowledge and thus by forms of queer normativity (2007b: 17).

Yet, as Weston hastens to point out, “the ethnocartographic moment” (1993: 345), in other words the empirical moment of ethnographic research, remains fundamental to the production of anthropological knowledge of sexuality. This discussion has aimed to demonstrate the importance of maintaining an ethnographically grounded yet analytically complex awareness of disciplinary history, analytical ambiguities, and their ideological truisms. Tensions such as those between theory and data, local and global, need no resolution to determine the primacy of the one over the other. Rather, ambiguity, paradox, and seeming contradictions are what sustain creative and engaging scholarship. By using this approach, we ensure that sexuality moves back into the very core position of scholarly debate, and remains in constant dialogue with writing on all other aspects of human sociality. A feature of sexuality that has been downplayed consistently in both anthropological studies of same-sex sexuality and recent queer transnational sexuality studies, is that of gender and its role in producing sexual difference and subjectivity, and it is to this aspect I now turn.

2.3. Foregrounding women: Female desire, gender variance, and transgenderism

Despite the vast amount of ethnographically informed work on self-identified queer, lesbian and gay cultures, and other sexual and gender variant practices, most publications to date are dominated by a male focus and especially on gay men and cultures. Usually such research is also undertaken by men, and often they identify as gay themselves (Boellstorff, 2007b: 20).

Since the early nineties, work on female non-normative sexualities has increased significantly. These publications often have a feminist focus, and are undoubtedly echoing the increased possibilities for women to undertake such research altogether, which in turn is related to changed and improved attention to gender issues in development and health policy, and in academia at large.

Publications by self-identified lesbian anthropologists started to emerge in the 1990s (e.g. Blackwood & Wieringa, 1999; Lewin, 1996), which consolidated earlier, scattered chapters, and articles into a single body of scholarship, and furthered visibility and provided inspiration. Similarly, *Out in theory* (Leap & Lewin, 2002) and *Out in the field* (Lewin & Leap, 1996) contributed to the consolidation and encouragement of lesbian (and gay) efforts in anthropology. These publications provided significant contributions to the social constructionist body of knowledge (arguing sexuality and gender as socially produced, not merely reflecting biological, normal truths) in presenting female-centric knowledge of the constitution of sexuality in the context of cultural ideologies of embodiment, female practices relating to procreation and childbirth, and to forms of violence (Boellstorff, *ibid.*; Vance, 1991; Weston, 1993). Further, they provide feminist-inspired insights to practices of female agency and power, and their dynamics within and resistance to structural domination, stigma, and exclusion (Boellstorff, *ibid.*).

However, monographs with a primary focus on women's same-sex sexualities remain few (Chalmers, 2002a; Green, 1997; Kirtsoglou, 2004; Sinnott, 2004; Wekker, 2006; Weston, 1996; Wilson, 2004). The same is true for journal articles and chapters (Blackwood, 2000; Johnson, 2005; Kantsa, 2002; Lorway, 2008; Marin, 1996; M. Moore, 2006; Puri, 1999), and edited collections (Morgan & Wieringa, 2005; Wieringa, Blackwood et al., 2007).⁴² It is often assumed that lesbian invisibility in other cultures, due to stigma and patriarchal social organization where women are confined to private spaces, is a major reason for this absence, i.e. the topic of research can 'simply' not be found. But to me it seems obvious, rather, that the main reason for this is to be found far closer to home. I suggest that the disproportionate lack of such research on and by women is down to wider structures and politics of gender disparity in academia, whereby women are discouraged from studying such topics, and institutionalized discriminatory practices deject non-conforming women's careers at student and senior levels (personal experience; Boellstorff, 2007b: 21; Newton, 2000: 219-24). With few exceptions research on non-normative women's sexuality come out of North-American academia where such research has achieved a degree of fringe legitimacy, influenced by the work of

⁴² There are a number of edited collections on sexuality, which include work on same-sex sexuality between women: e.g. Cruz-Malave & Manalansan, 2002; Lyons & Lyons, 2005; Manderson & Jolly, 1997; Markowitz & Ashkenazi, 1999; Murray & Roscoe, 1997; Robertson, 2004.

the SOLGA network within the AAA. British anthropology remains exceedingly reluctant to shift its gaze and go beyond the heteromartial and reproductive sphere of human sexuality, to look at same-sex sexuality and non-normative gender cultures (but see, Boyce, 2006, Green, 2007; Johnson, 1997, 2005; Kirtsoglou, 2004; Kuntsman & Miyake, 2008; Niehaus, 2002).

Publications on women's same-sex sexuality tend to focus on important links between gender and sexuality. My own study demonstrates that lala sexual subjectivity is usually conceptualized in distinctively gendered terms. I suggest that this aspect complements other studies on female masculinities and gendered sexualities in, for example, Indonesia (Boellstorff, 2005, 2007a; Blackwood, 1998, 2007), African societies (Morgan & Wieringa, 2005; Lorway, 2008), and in the United States (Halberstam, 1998; Kennedy & Davis, 1993; M. Moore, 2006). It is therefore a paradox of sorts that trans-national sexuality and queer studies scholarship not only predetermines sexuality as a primary and core constituent of identity, with gender being an honorary performative accessory, but more importantly it excludes gendered practices and regimes as co-constituent factors in the production of sexual subjectivities (Blackwood & Wieringa, 2007: 8; Moore, 1997: esp. 157). It is clear both from my own research (supported by Ho, 2007a/b, and Wang, 2004), insights from gender and feminist theory (e.g. Blackwood, 1998; Butler, 1990, 1993, 2004; Moore, 1988, 1999, 2007; Morris, 1995), and from recent ethnographic sexuality scholarship on gender-nonconforming and alternative femininities,⁴³ that "the differences that masculinities and femininities encode in the practices and ideologies of sexuality" (Blackwood and Wieringa 2007: 14) need to be addressed. I am attempting exactly this, from an ethnographic perspective, in the following.

Wekker studies women's sexual practices and meanings in the Afro-Surinamese diaspora. She provides a refreshingly feminist and gender sensitive critique by appropriating the trope 'grounded globalization' (2006). Wekker laments the persistent lack of attention to women's same-sex sexuality and the continual focus on gay men, whether implicit or explicit. She critiques the "focus on the surfaces and commonalities of same-sex sexual globalization without adequately

⁴³ See Blackwood, 2007; Blackwood & Wieringa, 2007; Morgan & Wieringa, 2005; Sinnott, 2004; Valentine, 2007; Wang, 2004; Wekker, 2006; Wilson, 2004.

understanding the particular historical and social contexts in which these sexualities are embedded” (ibid.: 223). Similarly to Wekker, Blackwood and Wieringa advocate a trans-national feminist approach to the global queer perspective in the study of the production of gendered and sexual subjectivities (2007). They draw attention to the fact that “[s]ame-sex attracted women are often trapped by the gender regimes and sexual codes produced by the collusion of new fundamentalist, state, and global patriarchies” (ibid.: 17). They critique the queer approach as benefiting a dominant Western hegemonic discourse in that it “[sets] the conditions and terms of gay and lesbian identities, strategies and practices” (ibid.: 1-2), and that the gender-specificity of women’s oppression and marginalization is silenced by a gender-neutral ‘queer’ and heteronormativity alike.

One problem concerns predefined assumptions of sexual identity formation, whereby gender difference is in effect added to the (already) categorically sexed body and not treated as a co-constituent aspect of subjectivity. I argue that the gendered reduction of ‘queer’ into ‘men’ or ‘gays’, and ‘women’ or ‘lesbians’ as a method to investigate the co-constituent qualities of gender and sexuality constitutes a re-essentializing manoeuvre. The sexed body thereby comes to predetermine sexuality as categorical identity. In this respect, Weston has commented that “lesbian and gay men continue to wrestle with the limitations of a political strategy (coming out) that takes sexual categories of personhood (lesbian, gay, bisexual) as givens” (1998a: 174).

In fact, the problem goes even deeper, which resonates with Wekker’s recent observation of a “hegemonic logic, which sees gender only as pertaining to women and ethnicity as having pertinence only for people of color ...” (2006: 70). In turn, male gender beyond sexual practice is “still seldom thematized in sexuality studies” (ibid.). The gender-neutral ‘queer’ implies in effect (already) gay-identified men and male-to-male sexual practice. The result is that women’s same-sex practices, sexual agency and sensibilities as well as gendered presentations of sexual subjectivity that traverse heteronormative gendered embodiment, remain marginalized and excluded from the mainstay of sexuality scholarship.

Valentine has pointed to this problematic relationship between categorical understandings of gender and sexuality by arguing, with reference to his data from an ‘alternative lifestyles’ support group, that “the use of particular kinds of identity categories disable certain kinds of desires from being validated” (2003: 126; 2007).

And further: “essentialized categories of identity obscure the cross-cutting nature of social experience and identification” (2003: 125). Mignon Moore (2006, esp. p.124-34) demonstrates the diversity in gender presentations and its influence on sexual identification among gay-identified black women in New York. In light of this evident tension between sexuality and gender in the relevant scholarship and my research, I argue with Valentine - and I quote him at length to convey his careful argument - that:

while there is a common-sense recognition that sexuality and gender are both separable *and* connected categories and experiences, the ways in which “gender” and “sexuality” as cultural and theoretical categories have come to be conceptualized and institutionalized as separate experiences need to be re-opened for investigation. The insistence on this conceptual split – and its ossification in the politics and scholarship which posit “gender” as distinct from “sexuality” – erases “gender” from the realm of (unmarked male) homosexuality, renders lesbians’ demands for reproductive rights as a “not-gay” issue, denies the powerful connections among gender, sexuality, publicity, race, and class, and, further, essentializes the experiences gathered under the terms “gender” and “sexuality.” (2007: 239-40)

A considerable and growing scholarship details diverse genders among female same-sex couples and individual identifications in South East Asia in order to trouble the prevailing tendency towards implementing a binary, essentialist discourse in queer studies (e.g. Sinnott, 2004; Wang, 2004; Wieringa, Blackwood et al., 2007; Wilson, 2004). This disciplinary discursive practice resonates with another problematic of current queer studies that I will address in detail in the next section, namely the pre-theoretical, ethnocentric ideologies that structure Anglo-US dominance in theory and discourse as regards trans-cultural studies of same-sex sexuality.

Moore argues that to “theorize the relationship between gender difference and other forms of difference” would involve “thinking about sexual difference in terms of the way it is insistently figured through other forms of difference, through the specifics of concrete social, cultural, and historical circumstances” (2007: 119). While it is true that processes of subject formation and social selves are imagined, lived, and aspired to through a variety of interconnected forms of differences and in a series of relational capacities (ibid.: 185), the relationship between sexuality and gender carries particular significance:

Sexuality and gender are the terrain of social transformation, the location of intense struggles over power, symbols, meanings, values and resources. They are the major means through which a society represents itself to itself, and through which individuals and collectivities engage with the problem of history, and its relationship to agency and structure (ibid.: 207).

This perspective builds on earlier groundbreaking feminist scholarship that presented analytically distinctive approaches to sexuality and gender. I am here mainly concerned with the mutually constitutive relationship between sexual and gender difference in the context of same-sex sexual subjectivity and practice. I consider the ways in which gender and sexuality are fundamentally conceptualised in relation to subject formation and identity, and the consequences for theorizing non-normative sexuality. I do this by discussing the specific issue of transgenderism.

2.3.1. Transgenderism

Transgenderism has seen a notable surge in research and publications, following on from earlier 'third sex' themes in anthropology (e.g. Herdt, 1993). This diverse body of work engages with the male-female gender binary and challenges dominant modernist paradigms.⁴⁴ Importantly, this theme intersects with interdisciplinary literature on butch-femme roles among lesbians in Western cultures, mainly the United States (Faderman, 1991; 1992; Halberstam, 1998; Kennedy & Davis, 1993; M. Moore, 2006; Newton, [1984]2000, 1993).

Work that engages specifically with female forms of transgender identities and practices, offers considerable ethnographic data on the variation in female genders cross-culturally. It thereby challenges the male-female/masculine-feminine double dichotomy. By this dichotomy I mean to say that biological sex as well as social gender role and identity do not necessarily correspond in heteronormative ways. In other words, the normative dictum argues that the unmistakably 'female' sexed body generates the distinctly feminine social identity 'woman'. This identity further contains presumed hetero-genital sexual preference and procreative desires.

⁴⁴ Besnier, 2002; Blackwood, 1998; Chou, 2000; Cohen, 1995; Elliston, 1999; Graham, 2003; Johnson, 1997; Kessler, 1998; Kulick, 1998; Morgan & Wieringa, 2005; Prieur, 1998; Reddy, 2005; Sinnott, 2004; Teh, 2002; Valentine, 2007; Young, 2000; Wilson, 2004; Wieringa, Blackwood et al., 2007.

This material, however, interrogates what constitutes the so-called queer subject and same-sex sexuality and identity as such. Is it sexual desire, practice, or self-representations of such desires in term of bodily and narrative categorical terminologies that constitute ‘our’ object of study? (Blackwood, 1998; Sinnott, 2004; Wang P., 2001; Wieringa, Blackwood & Bhaiya, 2007; Wilson, 2004; Young, 2000)

The extensive work on tomboys (or similar categories that denote masculine women who prefer other women, such as T in Beijing) and their feminine partners in East and South-East Asia provides considerable insights into fluid and temporal gendered subject positions and sexuality. I discuss female masculinity and the T role in detail in chapter four. As I will show, this approach highlights tomboys’ interrelationship with shifting parameters of public-private domains, changing socio-economic circumstances, and the generally increased possibilities to enter the labour force and provide for themselves financially, independent of normative family constellations.⁴⁵ Furthermore, this work offers insights into how markers related to class and age in particular, modify the lived experience of gender and sexual subject position, their relative importance in everyday life, and their overall consequence for managing the parameters for normative social identity.

Two important analytical matters emerge from non-Western studies on same-sex and transgender practices, and on female masculinity: the first is the relative importance of categorical and static identity categories seen as based on sexual object choice. This point relates to the earlier discussion about queer or sexual globalization, and the travel of identity categories like ‘queer’ and ‘lesbian’. What emerges as key here is the need to situate the moments and locations where self-presentation based on categorical sexuality such as lala, lesbian, or TP roles, are important, and why. Chapters 3 and 4 relate lala and TP-based roles to women’s wider sense of selfhood and social status.

The second matter is the relative importance of making sexuality-as-identity known – through verbalized self-presentation, and across all aspects of life, in public and private, to family and external authorities. These issues of ‘being open’ (*gongkaide*, in Beijing) and ‘coming out’ are discussed especially in ethnographies of marriage practices, conjugal strategies (see, chapters five, six), and community and social activism (chapter seven).

⁴⁵ See, Blackwood, 1998, 2007; Chou, 2000; Ho, 2007a; Johnson, 2005; Lai, 2007; Sinnott, 2004; Wang C., 2004; Wang P., 2001; Wilson, 2004.

2.3.2. Gendered analytics and sexual categories

Current insights on gender and sexuality as just outlined, make it clear that in order to come to a grounded understanding of the workings of sexuality in a given time and place, gender as its co-constituent feature needs to be built into the epistemological and methodological project. However, as I have argued, this is repeatedly shown not to be the case in mainstream queer anthropology. Instead, there exists a conflation of alternative sexual subjectivity figuring as the basis for categorical identity with effects that are presumed to be subversive. In this way, sexuality-as-identity remains at a categorical core that in turn achieves certain rhetorical prominence of choice, rights and equality, with aspects of gendered difference at best as performative accessories. Weston is right to flag Duggan's (1992) argument that, unlike lesbian and gay studies' emphasis on fixed identity, "queer defines itself by its difference from hegemonic ideologies of gender and sexuality" (Weston, 1993: 348). However, this act of deconstruction and opposition probably adheres more to structurally fixed processes of 'subjection' than to 'subjectification' (McNay, 2000). McNay critiques the overly voluntaristic aspects of queer where "[t]he fetishization of symbolic indeterminacy fails to accommodate adequately notions of structural and institutional inflexibility and can result in naïve accounts of the transformatory potential of libidinal practices" (2000: 155-6).

I argue two major points; the first is that transgressive potentials, together with symbolic and material constitutive aspects of subjectivity and lived practice, tend to effect changes, but that they usually invoke complementary effects that are 'normalizing'. Liu and Ding, for example, have argued that tolerance for Taiwanese same-sex erotics predicates on its remaining reticent, or non-confrontational, and that this, in turn, is based on an ideal of 'traditional' filial virtues (Liu & Ding, 2005). Thus, the possibility for same-sex erotics in Chinese society requires an appearance of normality, which *ipso facto* means the absence of unequivocal homosexuality. The second point I argue is that the 'subversive spin' by which I mean the tendency to equal queerness, or other forms of difference, with absolute transgression, hinges on a rarely acknowledged and culture-specific ideology borne of Anglo-US-centric notions of sexual selfhood in categorical terms. These notions lock the thinking of sexual difference within modernist assumptions of individualism and freedom. It contributes profoundly to a reification of the truisms that reinforce what Boellstorff

has termed “the current hierarchy of academic production which valorizes Anglo-American scholarship” (2007b: 24).

Weston’s *Families we choose* is one of few ethnographic studies of the interrelationship between Western lesbians and gays, their normative families and alternative family and kinship formations (1991). Against this, most ethnography that focuses on Euro-American queer cultures is concerned with sexual identity, community, and politics external to heteronormative origin families. This thematic preoccupation has coloured much of non-Western ethnographic sexuality studies.⁴⁶ However, some ethnographic studies demonstrate the interrelationship between same-sex sexuality and belonging to dominant family and social structures in society. For example, Lewin studies lesbian and gay commitment ceremonies as anthropological symbolic rituals (1998). She demonstrates that such ceremonies both transgress *and* conform to dominant norms at the same time. In particular, upholding traditional marriage values, secular and religious, is considered very important, and seen to create tradition, integrate with society, and affirm love, rather than being a postmodern parody.

In chapter one I argued that the possibilities for aspiring to and living same-sex intimate lives were fundamentally shaped by wider social concerns, including family and socio-economic transformation. This emerges in my data, too, as women who are successful in strategizing the combination of marriage pressure, family duty, and upward social mobility – and these are often linked – are much more likely to relate same-sex intimate relationships as positive and central parts of their adult lives (and see: Blackwood, 1998; Cho, 2007). This perspective is significant for methodological and theoretical practices since it poses particular demands on the way we theorize the relationship between subject formation and collective structures, the possibilities for difference, and the shifting dynamics of generative and creative agency and collectively imposed restraint, to which I now turn.

⁴⁶ For example, Weston comments that being lesbian or gay is still ‘a big deal’ to women’s families, and to society, “because very little in society is set up to acknowledge the family ties you propose to make” (1991: xii).

2.4. Self, subject, and identity

The kinds of social and subjective experiences outlined in the preceding sections, as well as the research questions at the beginning of this chapter, point to seemingly large paradoxes or ruptures between a collective, structural referent – often conceptualized as ‘state’, ‘tradition’ or ‘norms’ – on the one hand, and subjective, intimate same-sex desires and sociality on the other. A mediating aspect here is that of processes of power and knowledge, or ideology, and their role in constituting selfhood and social life, as well as vice versa (cf. Moore, 2007: 37). A key aim of Yan’s *Private life under socialism* is to counter the common ethnocentric assumption that Chinese people are less expressive and emotional, and less compelled to desire romantic love, while personal sentiments are over-determined by external socio-moral systems, or rather, the collectivist one-party state (2003). Yan identifies this approach as a ‘corporate model’ which he posits against his preferred focus on individual experiences and interpersonal dynamics in everyday lives, including “emotionality, desires and personal freedom” (ibid.: 6-7; see also Stafford, 1995, 2000). What often happens with a model that hinges on dichotomies and absolutes of the kind critiqued (but also subsequently applied) by Yan, is that the complexities and seeming paradox of the collective social and the subjective self are being explained reductively as incomprehensibly paradoxical, as inauthentic, as contradictions and so on. Hence they are denied the status of being experientially ‘true’.

Such explanations presuppose a static stability in terms of subjective selfhood and its being in the social world. However, as I experienced during fieldwork, people change their stories on a day-to-day basis, they contradict themselves and seem to be lying or scheming. How does an anthropologist account for these changes, and which stories and representations are to be emphasised against others? Part of the problem is that the process of subjectification in much of the literature that deals with the encounter of marginal or minority cultures with the normative - often state-authorities - collective, is interpreted as ‘subjection’ rather than ‘subjectification’. This implies an inherently negative positioning, and a presumed lack of choice,

agency and ability to resist, if not transgress and overturn, dominant power regimes (McNay, 2000; Yan, 2003).⁴⁷

Mageo suggests that anthropological theories of cultures and personhood remain too monolithic and static, despite the onset of reflexive trends and postmodernist critique (1998; Mageo & Knauff, 2002). The prevailing dominant vision of culture, she argues, “is not architecturally sufficient to do the work it has to do” (ibid.: 4). Mageo suggests that there exist two main ontological premises for selfhood in cultural life, namely sociocentrism and egocentrism. These are not absolutes but, rather, ends of continuums that are differently appropriated in order to construe what she calls cultural lexicons, including cultural categories, in different cultures. To make sense of the seeming ambiguities and paradoxes of shifting identifications across shifting modes of temporality, Mageo argues that individuals will strategize in the context of available cultural lexicons which are in turn embedded in moral hierarchies in order to produce certain versions of selfhood against others (1998).

The usefulness of Mageo’s approach is that she acknowledges a degree of paradox inherent in the experience and presentation of multiple forms of selfhood and in the change in social relations over time, but not by resorting to an either-or analysis of the kind Yan critiques in the Chinese context. Mageo argues for an intersectional approach whereby multiple individual and subjective strategies, social relations, and hierarchies of moral lexicons are being simultaneously recognized. Here, the psychological and discursive desire to capture a stable and fixed self is an ambition that is doomed to fail. However, this does not mean that the claim to stable subjectivity or identity is false or inauthentic. The focus of inquiry is merely a different one to the one requiring a monolithic and unambiguous, or at best dichotomizing, point of origin. In other words, the positioning of inquiry, as well as the positioning of the subject, is fundamentally plural. The process of subjectification thereby evolves around shifting subject positions, and involves – but is not over-determined by – a range of socially constituted discourses and practices, which in turn are embedded within hierarchies of power and claims to legitimate, ‘true’ knowledge.

⁴⁷ But see also Joseph, 1994; Kondo, 1990; Liu, 2002b; Sökefeld, 1999.

Ewing has developed a theoretical framework for interpreting multiple selfhood, and “how an individual constructs an illusory sense of wholeness and personal continuity out of what are actually inconsistent self-experiences” (1990: 266). She suggests that “the essence of the “cohesive self” is flexibility...that, as long as an individual is able to maintain contextually appropriate self-representations in interaction with others, he or she may experience as sense of continuity despite the existence of multiple, disintegrated or partially integrated self-representations” (ibid.: 273).⁴⁸ Ewing’s model of shifting selves to account for the seeming inconsistencies of shifting self-presentations in Pakistan, along with Mageo’s model of cultural lexicons of selfhood in Samoa, offers an analytical avenue to make sense of what I have discussed already as an apparent inconsistency amongst queers in China (and elsewhere), and to resolve the conundrum with regards to integrating social expectations (official cultural lexicons) with intimate same-sex desires. But given the prevailing incompatibility of these two spheres, which could be appropriated to some extent as a public-private divide, I rather want to concentrate on the nuances of agency and negotiations of dominant power regimes which cannot be resolved.

Jean-Klein develops a theory of the “collaborative, cross-subjective exercise of self” (2000: 102-3) in order to analyze the differentiated forms of subjective agency engaged in by different members of Palestinian households against the structural violence of the Israeli army. Rather than seeing the Palestinians as categorical victims of Israeli structural violence, she demonstrates how individual family members, through modes of authorial agency, enable different experiential outcomes than total subjugation and loss of power in their everyday lives. The focus on collaboration between subjects in producing and reproducing subject positioning - within households, and between Palestinians and Israelis - acknowledges the temporal continuity of producing selves less explored by Mageo (1998) and Ewing (1990).

Jean-Klein’s analysis discusses the production of heroic selfhood on the part of young Palestinian men in the context of Israeli detainment and imprisonment, and how this heroic self is co-produced by family members and neighbours (and unwittingly, the Israeli military). I would argue, however, that this process of subjectification also co-constitutes far more adverse and negative effects, specifically

⁴⁸ Ewing makes compelling suggestions regarding the possible universality of the experience of wholeness (1990, 1997), but I shall be leaving this line of inquiry for future work.

the effects of the monumental power and violence encountered by the Palestinians. Other scholars discussing Jean-Klein's work and similar kinds of power dynamics, have emphasized the inherently positive potentials for self-realization and self-promotion as well as political resistance on the part of the young men, supported socially by significant others (e.g. Moore, 2007: 39-40). However, I would also point to the flipside of these productive processes in the context of a political life marked by structural violence: namely, that the specific male subjectivity produced as heroic and resistant necessitates the re-production of subjugated selfhood ('subjection') on the part of other family members.⁴⁹ Jean-Klein argues specifically that the adverse effects on old men (patriarchs) are diminished status and authority (2000). The process of subjectification also necessitates a re-production of moral female selfhood as proper daughters, sisters and wives. The collaborate process here is inherently infused with power inequalities that have sustained degenerative effects on certain subjects but generative effects on others. This is true both for family dynamics as well as the state-level dynamics between Palestinians and the Israelis. Room for actual manoeuvre and authorial agency is thus fundamentally limited.

My point is that, whilst the process of subject formation might be more generative and multi-layered than conventional accounts are able to delineate, the productive effects are not unequivocally positive. The effects may be interchangeably positive and negative - but they are never simply neutral or vacant of power inequalities. As I discussed in the previous section on same-sex identity and normative family constellation in the context of the marriage predicament in China, queers appropriate a number of discursive and practical strategies to negotiate normative pressures, and these often appear contradictory. By applying the models of multiple and intersectional subject formation and the models that acknowledge the somewhat overwhelming effects of power and politics to circumscribe agentic possibilities, I am able to convey the multiplicity of cultural and political factors that shape my informants' 'illusory' sense of self-control and desires.⁵⁰ In turn, by incorporating aspects of contemporary queer theory that emphasize a certain transgressive and subversive (i.e. a kind of generative) quality of differential sexual

⁴⁹ A point to bear in mind for the discussion to follow in subsequent chapters is of course that a process of subjection is not by default the same as that of victimization.

⁵⁰ Ewing (1990, 1997) and Moore (2007) are predominantly concerned with theorizing psychological aspects; but again, I will leave this aspect for my future work.

desire in and of itself, we might come to a comprehensive understanding of the power of an illusory sense of the importance of sexuality in constituting selfhood.

The constitutive process of framing a subject of inquiry for the production of anthropological knowledge involves a fundamental acknowledgement of the interrelationship between theory, method, practice, and politics. Sexuality provides a conceptual lens with which to focus on the genealogies of socio-cultural transformation, and despite it disappearing from sight, has been important in anthropological scholarship since the inception of the discipline. Homosexuality and non-normative sexuality and gender however, remain sub-fields of inquiry, separated from mainstream disciplinary attentions to core topics. This has also been the case in China scholarship where rural, heteronormative social organization and macro-aspects of the post-Mao transformation have taken precedence. The recent revival in queer, and lesbian and gay anthropology alongside the reflexive turn and increased attention to ‘research that matters’ beyond the academy, provides important knowledge on how sexual diversity is imbricated with patterns of historical processes, although dominant knowledge regimes have by and large excluded a fundamental examination of sexuality within the disciplinary mainstay.

I appropriate sexuality – as concept, productive effect, field of knowledge, and genealogical process across time and space – as a conceptual shorthand in order to explore the ways in which female gender and same-sex sexuality change and contribute to change in post-Mao urban China, on the levels of intimate life, family and marriage, and the level of national politics of modernity and development. In a genealogical vein, I attend to the production of lala socio-spatiality and cultural formations in terms of a grounded sense of ‘ethnocartography’ but one that is always already in co-constitutive relationship with epistemological and methodological concerns. Research practice and methodological concerns produce epistemological framings, and vice versa, and these are always implicated in wider historical and political relationships. I have suggested that an engaged, self-reflexive and grounded methodology is needed to situate these interrelationships appropriately. The topical considerations in the following chapters - conjugality and kinship, subjective and collective identity formation, social activism and changing appropriation of cultural citizenship - are largely borne out of the experiential process of fieldwork, alongside the academic process of anthropological research and writing.

2.5. Research methodology and fieldwork

It is no longer regarded exceptional or professionally irrelevant to consider the management of researcher identity, subjective positioning, and multiple aspects - private and professional - of the research process in the making and shaping of ethnographic writing, including pre-and post-fieldwork circumstances (Kulick & Willson, 1995: 2; Lewin & Leap, 1996: 1). I agree fundamentally with Lewin and Leap's "insistence that anthropologists recognize how positionality affects processes by which they construct understandings of cultural phenomena" (1996: 22). Reflexive awareness, subjective positioning, and attention to fieldwork as a process multiply situated and negotiated, are integral to producing ethnographic knowledge that matters.

In the face of these issues, supporters of naïve ethnocentric positivism tend to refer to ideologies of scientific objectivity and the requirement for hard undisputable facts. They tend to argue an absolute unbridgeable difference between subjective self and 'others', and claim that personal lives are categorically irrelevant to the production of (scientific) knowledge. In this way, "what was out there was simply there" (Lewin & Leap, *ibid.*) for the ethnographer to collect, record and document. Anthropological scholarship has, however, progressed significantly towards an appreciation of fieldwork as a collaborative exercise between researcher and the people being researched, and as a process that spans temporal periods past and present to fieldwork in ways that cannot be neatly ordered and quantified. The issues of sexuality in the field and the researcher's erotic subjectivity have emerged as somewhat respectable concerns beyond the uproar in the wake of the publication of Malinowski's *Diary* (1967).

2.5.1. Arrival, entry and location

Prior to my arrival in Beijing, I was not at all certain that I would be able to undertake fieldwork on women's same-sex culture there, due to the little information available. I did know, however, that an informal lesbian network, The Beijing Sisters, had existed in the 1990s. During my participation in a tongzhi conference in Hong Kong in 1998, I had met and spent time with the then Beijing Sisters leader, as

well as other mainlanders and ‘insider’ foreigners who talked to me about their experiences. But that was years earlier, and no emails or web-searches confirmed the continued existence or presence in Beijing of these people and events, or provided contacts to call, email, or visit those who might be able to help. I could have travelled to Hong Kong or Taiwan, or even Shanghai, recommended by many who anticipated problems ahead for my project. But it was Beijing that interested me - it was primarily due to what I perceived to be a fascinating dynamics of, on the one hand, Beijing as China’s cultural and political capital, and on the other, my stubborn belief that I would be able to ‘find lesbians’, a particularly stigmatized minority in China, and somehow be able to do fieldwork amongst them. I was excited to have the opportunity to live in Beijing for a sustained period of time. I had first visited the city in 1995, then several more times at later dates. Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, were not the kind of China that interested me in cultural or political terms.

As noted, there was little current research available, apart from He Xiaopei’s accounts (2001, 2002), and some reports on HIV/AIDS advocacy work among (gay) men. Due to my long-standing interest in the topic of same-sex sexuality in China, which includes writing my undergraduate and a postgraduate thesis on similar topics (Engebretsen, 1997, 2000; and see, 1998), I did have names and email addresses that I contacted. I contacted local AIDS/HIV projects and networks, and individuals working in international aid organizations and NGOs in Beijing, who in turn provided valuable information. This corroborated my impression that there existed a long-established, unofficial gay social and health-related advocacy network working within and beyond the remit of official HIV/AIDS and public health bodies. My informal, bilingual postings and open profile on the Asian lesbian and gay website *Fridae* resulted in one contact with a local lala woman, who introduced me to the Saturday bar, and also invited me to meet some of her lala friends.⁵¹

The one catalyst, door-opening event just after I arrived in Beijing, was a public lecture by American out-gay scientist Dean Hamer, who has claimed to have discovered a genetic link to sexual orientation.⁵² At the lecture I met a number of gay and lala activists, artists, students and other lesbians and gays, and I was comforted to experience their positive and welcoming attitude to me and my proposed research. That evening I walked the streets for over an hour with two women, and we

⁵¹ Fridae at: <<http://www.fridae.com/>>

⁵² Hamer’s personal website at: <<http://rex.nci.nih.gov/RESEARCH/basic/biochem/hamer.htm>>

discussed their lives, and mine, being lesbian in China and Europe. Within six weeks I had met countless other lesbians (and gays), visited several queer bars, and been initiated to the new Salon as well as the Sunday afternoon mixed badminton group.

2.5.2. Fieldwork: Recruitment, data management, and writing

Recruiting participants to my project was not at all difficult. Initially, I had worried whether gatekeepers would shun me or welcome me, and would they accept my research. However, I found that with few exceptions, the women I met in lala spaces were enthusiastic about my research and happy to talk to me about their lives and have me there. I was frequently invited to private dinners and social gatherings in people's homes and elsewhere. I was always open about my researcher role and my project to the women I met in lala spaces. Because they were curious about me and my research, news about it spread fast, and I therefore had plenty of opportunities to discuss the topics that interested them - and me. I also posted to lala Internet blogs where I introduced my research and myself, but I rarely received replies to these.

My ability to speak Chinese was, I think, what opened doors in Beijing more than anything else, and usually what kept them open or helped open others in turn. Combined with my genuine interest in the lives of the women I met - demonstrated through my constant active participation and choice to spend time with them, and not the Anglophonic expat queers gathering in the upmarket Sanlitun bars and clubs - this sustained my welcome, generated new favourable, positive introductions, and a degree of good-will from organizers and social gate-keepers that I could probably not have achieved otherwise. Their friendship, interest in my well-being, and care sustained me through periods of field fatigue, bouts of depression and loneliness, and anxiety about my academic project and its future. Often, I felt like I was also an ad-hoc counsellor or agony aunt, someone always eager to listen and give them full attention. I repeatedly experienced that women I had not spoken with previously would sit down in the Salon or bars and tell me their life stories. Still, interaction was generally dialogical, and not interview-based.

My primary research methods were participant observation in social spaces, and conducting informal and largely unstructured conversations, and without

recording equipment. I did, however, conduct fifteen semi-structured recorded interviews, which were organized around key themes but not ready-made questions or questionnaires. I found this method less useful because I got the impression I was being told rehearsed stories and information according to what they thought I wanted to hear. The presence of my digital recorder and pen and notepad, furthermore, clearly unsettled many women. This was a major reason why I did not conduct a larger number of interviews. The rapport would markedly improve in informal chatting; personal stories and intimate details were easily narrated over a beer, a meal or when walking down the street shopping for clothes or food. Wherever possible, I would slip out to rest rooms to jot down key words and phrases. It was generally known that I did it. I never hid or lied about the fact that I did it. Women generally preferred this anyway - the absence of equipment that would have formalized my primary researcher identity, perhaps remind them of different, more official, circumstances. I would type up field notes on my laptop every night whilst experiences and conversations were still fresh.

By regularly socializing in a number of social spaces, I gained repeated, continuous access to a very large pool of women. I observed them in interaction with each other, and listened to conversations without necessarily being the interviewer. Depending on the context I launched questions, asked for clarifications, or simply engaged in the conversations as I saw appropriate or desirable - or as they did by asking for my opinion or other.

Mostly, I spent time with women in their own time and chosen spaces such as tea houses, restaurants, bars, badminton play and hiking, weekend or holiday trips, karaoke bars, dinners in private homes, online chats, network meetings, conferences, and so on. I travelled to one informant-friend's home town for one Spring Festival/Chinese New Year, and spent two weeks with her family and friends.⁵³ I also met twice with the parents of the woman I shared a flat with for the last six months of my fieldwork. This was - unsurprisingly - my only direct access to informants' families. Although the Internet was a key source of information about events and news and most were avid readers (and contributors to blogs and

⁵³ I decided to not write about this experience explicitly here, for confidentiality reasons. I plan to develop the insights I gained through this exceptional engagement and access to kin, in my future work.

discussion threads), using mobile phones - especially text messaging - was the most important, and convenient, tool for negotiating meetings and contacts. Phones were easily available and cheap for everyone, and they enabled totally anonymous contacts and sharing of information.

The highly sensitive conditions of lala sociality required a more *ad hoc* and thus less structured approach to fieldwork and participant observation, and a willingness on the part of the researcher to modify theoretical and thematic priorities *en route*. Whilst this methodology required considerable effort and work that could not be pre-planned and was often highly frustrating, it was clear that, given this particular topic's sensitivity and the socio-political circumstances of the PRC, it required a sustained willingness to modify and evaluate pre-determined methodological models.

2.5.3. Logistics: Affiliation, living, and risk management

It is common knowledge that for anthropologists to be able to undertake research in China, it is essential to secure official affiliation with a university or a similar institution (Fong, 2004: 4-10; Pieke, 2000; Rofel, 1999; Zhang, 2001: 214). This was difficult also in my case and I had to take the necessary precautions in order to ensure, as far as possible, a safe and lawful stay. With regards to risk and ethics (but see also 2.5.5.), I decided that the likelihood for research success and maintaining confidentiality and trust with Chinese queers would be greater if I kept away from the gaze and space of official institutions. Beijing's current cityscape facilitated this strategy, as many foreigners live there or travel as tourists.

A key aspect of the constant stress of fieldwork was that I was never certain of what I could get away with, whether anyone was taking notice of me, my activities, and of the people I spent time with. For this reason I was suspicious of many social encounters that seemed coincidental and innocent, and I never divulged my actual research topic in everyday casual conversations. I was reticent about appearing in the media, even when local lalas encouraged me to do so, to speak their case. I knew little about wider implications and edited versions, and I worried about confidentiality should I be recognized elsewhere, so I resisted participating in the

media. I also had to closet myself on the few occasions I met with lala friends' family members, and invent stories about my research and life in general. My strategy prevented me from gaining potentially interesting information on lay people's views on homosexuality. Yet, I found that it was not worth the risk. Furthermore, this closet strategy, as many other have commented (e.g. Lewin & Leap, 1996), contributed to considerable stress both on professional and personal levels.

2.5.4. 'Insider' positioning and the erotic equation

Taking positionality⁵⁴ seriously means that we go beyond apologizing for a lack of objectivity and recognize explicitly that the subjective experiences of the researcher are precisely what make sexuality research possible and insightful. Translation of theory, method, and data will fail without this subjectivity. It is this sense of positionality that formulates so many of the relevant and critical questions ... (Teunis & Herdt, 2007: 17).

Positioning is never apolitical or transparent, insider and outsider positions fluctuate, research participation turns to activist involvements by helping with seemingly mundane activities such as funding applications and gathering resource, as I did.⁵⁵ Valentine, drawing on Marcus' notion of 'complicity' as a crucial mode of contemporary ethnographic research (1998), ponders in his research on transgendered people in New York City (2007: 205) the ethics and politics of research, of involvement and obligations to the people whose lives are being studied. Researcher positionings, Valentine argues, become entangled. They are never fixed. My participation was active, never passive, never just taking notes apolitically. For example, I was thoroughly involved in the Tongyu network, the Salon, in trips, parties, and the webs of elaborate social and intimate relationships.

A crucial aspect of the complicity approach includes re-considering aspects of the self-other dimension, especially when the researcher is herself a partial insider or 'native' (Lewin & Leap, 1996: 7). In the context of homosexuality, the question of

⁵⁴ "By *positionality* we mean the social scientist's subjectivity in the context of the social, cultural, psychological, and political conditions" (Teunis & Herdt, 2007: 12-13, italics in original).

⁵⁵ Both Boellstorff, 2007a, and Valentine, 2007, also detail such involvement.

coming out and being out is fundamental, whether it is in one's personal life outside the academy, within the academy, or whilst undertaking research. These concerns carry considerable health, political and ethical implications, and lesbian and gay anthropologists who, in retrospect, have spoken out about their experiences of keeping their sexuality secret (e.g. Williams, 1993), or of being marginalized in academia (Newton, 2000), certify to a normative ideology whereby homosexuality was considered a liability, or at best irrelevant (e.g. Lewin & Leap, 1996: 14).

As a self-identified lesbian and feminist, as someone knowledgeable about and feeling somewhat 'at home' in China, and speaking the language, as someone feeling far less at home within polished queer space and politics in Europe, my partial insider status ensured that fieldwork was a continuous process of negotiation, re-thinking, back-tracking and never-ending questions and debates, with others and with myself.

Given that I conducted research in an environment where all interlocutors were potential sexual and romantic partners, and the research topic concerned matters of intimacy, love and sex, an integral part of my socialization process into lala life, and fieldwork, was learning to manoeuvre flirting and sexualized interaction. Numerous recent publications discuss same-sex sexuality and fieldwork, including reflections and guidance on sexual conduct in the field, managing sexual identity, and surviving discrimination more generally (e.g. Blackwood, 1995; Chalmers, 2002; Chao, 1999; Leap & Lewin, 1996; Markowitz & Ashkenazi, 1999; Newton, 1993; Weston, 1998; Williams, 1993). What has struck me from reading much of this literature, is the obsessive focus on sexual practice itself, in which the contexts and nuances of sexual subjectivity appear less important. The erotic subjectivity in fieldwork and the erotic and social power of fieldworkers, as discussed by Newton (1993) resonate with my own experiences in this regard. The interaction and relationships with my informants were often executed and sustained by a combination of joking, flirting, and physical affection. Because I was usually perceived as a T due to my relatively masculine appearance, I was rarely propositioned by others (see, chapter four). In the case of the one woman I was deeply attracted to, I was let down gently by her explanation that we were too different culturally, and I was in any case leaving soon.

While I was initially worried about alienating interlocutors, getting a 'bad' reputation, and ruin goodwill if I (unintentionally) crossed people, and the

repercussions this could have for my status and access, I found that I needed to establish boundaries between myself, fieldwork and interlocutors. Invitations often overlapped and I could not be all things to all people, at all times. So for the most part, I lived alone; I was selective about social invitations, and trusted my gut feeling in decision-making as I would at home. I also allowed for the research to develop less according to the pre-defined proposal, and rather tune in to the concerns and interests of the women I met.

2.5.5. The constraints of ethical methodology

O'Reilly suggests that "ethics is about trying to ensure that you cause as little pain or harm as possible and try to be aware of your effects on the participants and on your data" (2005: 63). Categorical ethical principles cannot be determined prior to fieldwork, as events, interpretations, and their contexts are beyond the fieldworker's control and power. Major ethical considerations in my particular research concern the intersecting themes of risk, disclosure, confidentiality, and consent.⁵⁶

Concerns about covert and overt research as well as consent are of course crucial aspects of fieldwork (e.g. O'Reilly, 2005). I was rarely told people's real names as most women used nick names - sometimes several, which was confusing. Over the course of fieldwork I came to know only a handful of women's real names, not to mention details of work place, and similar personal information that could divulge their identities. For this reason, I am using fictitious names for people and places in this thesis, with minimal exceptions. I have endeavoured to protect confidentiality as far as possible. However, people already familiar with Beijing's local queer world are likely to recognize several people and places in the thesis. I have refrained from writing about people's backgrounds or include sensitive circumstances if not entirely relevant to the argument. It is my hope that people who recognize themselves or others will appreciate that my principal intent was and remains to contribute to the knowledge and understanding of a marginalized culture.

⁵⁶ As far as possible, I have conducted my research and writing in accordance with the Association of Social Anthropology's Ethics Guidelines: <http://www.theasa.org/ethics/guidelines.htm> (retrieved 14 June 2008); and the ESRC's Research Ethics Framework, at: http://www.esrc.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/Images/ESRC_Re_Ethics_Frame_tcm6-11291.pdf (retrieved 29 June 2008).

Many choices I made during fieldwork, and certainly afterwards in terms of topical bias, narrative focus, and thinking, may be considered problematic in absolute ethical terms. When one undertakes research on marginal, stigmatized groups and individuals, and certainly in a totalitarian country like the PRC, I believe that categorical ethical guidelines - such as signatures on forms of consent, which always explicitly remind people about the research, and being categorically overt about the topic - must be constantly revised according to changing and complex circumstances. Naturally, I could not be categorically 'out' at all times; that would undeniably have harmed my interlocutors greatly. I also had to be mindful about the ways I managed my own 'queer credentials', personally and politically. Many times I found myself judging events, relations, and statements according to my own beliefs and experiences, and labelling what I saw or heard, therefore as, for example, willed ignorance, harassment, or internalized homophobia. This was difficult when I was called upon, as I often was, to voice my opinion or contribute to conversations. I gradually became more confident to voice disagreement in socially acceptable ways, such as by asking questions rather than making definitive statements. This often led to insightful conversations.

Retrospectively, I am satisfied that I went to the greatest lengths possible to protect the integrity and confidentiality of the women and men whose lives are the focus of my thesis. I remained committed to these principles to an extent that I have later thought to have been excessive. Yet at the time it was impossible to determine the exact circumstances and consequences in terms of censorship, authorities, and wider risk. I could have acted differently many times. I could have engaged with people I did not get the chance to know better, or made different priorities with regards to which groups of people, and individuals, I ended up spending more time with. There are, however, no easy answers or simple solutions, but those I have ended up with, I think, should satisfy ethical, academic, and personal responsibilities to the expected reasonable extent.

CHAPTER THREE

A social geography of the women in my study

In this thesis I propose an approach to the study of sexuality that considers sexuality as sets of social practices and ideologies. In this way I demonstrate the complexity of sexual categories, subjective experiences of sexuality, and erotic intimacy. To this effect, this chapter presents a social geography of the study's participants. I define socio-geographical analysis as an approach that considers the interrelationship between known sociological markers (e.g. age, marital status, natal family place, educational and employment attainment), and lived experience as presented in social narratives (social biographies). This analytical approach is possible due to data gathered during long-term participant observation in a variety of spatial locations. Crucially, this method goes beyond the common popular focus on verbalized narratives and self-presentations, and includes considerations of their contexts, non-verbal interaction, and changes to subjective and social experience over time.

The consistent emphasis on micro-level narrative and experience in socio-spatial and everyday contexts enable particular attention to the temporal character of lala experience. These contexts could be community spaces such as the bars and the weekly salon; they could be the ways in which women socialized informally in each others' homes or in semi-public spaces that afforded some privacy, such as restaurants and karaoke clubs with private rooms. They could also be weddings, birthdays, and the Chinese New Year or Spring Festival with homecomings to natal families, as well as the management of everyday life.⁵⁷

My argument thereby differs from much scholarship on same-sex sexuality and cultures, which tends to presume a known queer subject, and anchored in the empiricist, pre-theoretical, ethnocartographic moment (cf. Weston, 1993; Boellstorff, 2007b; Moore, 2004). The focus is typically on how an already formed, autonomous queer identity interacts with, or is excluded from, certain normative or mainstream social arenas, such as family and employment (Weston, 1991). Alternatively, it

⁵⁷ Burke, E. *How to write a social biography*. At <<http://cwh.ucsc.edu/Writing.Social.Biogs.pdf>> (accessed 26 April, 2008)

focuses on a neatly configured queer sub-culture, which exists largely separate from everyday lives (e.g. Faderman, 1991; Kennedy & Davis, 1993; Lai, 2007). These kinds of approaches present us with a major epistemological paradox, primarily because they usually advocate, or implicitly presume, social constructionist theories of sexuality. Yet the wider social context and genealogy remain unexamined, as if sexual identity exists separate and prior to social life. For example, 'born gay' may be a useful political and rhetorical device in certain locations, but accepting the statement outright as empirical truism leads an anthropological analysis nowhere.

During my research I have gained extremely helpful insights from reading anthropological and ethno-historical work on lesbian, drag, and gay communities in the United States (Faderman, 1991; Kennedy & Davis, 1993; Newton, 1972, 1995). Although the US and Chinese situations are vastly different in many respects, I suggest that there are structural connections between macro-level historical transformations on the one hand, and subjective experiences of intimacy across cultural and historical domains on the other. In Beijing, I was often told that lala community and recognition were decades 'behind' the West, and that more socio-economic development and globalization would 'develop' lesbian and gay culture.⁵⁸ Whilst not accepting or rejecting these pervasive statements outright, I want here to suggest that such similarities support arguments about the correlation of social change and alternative possibilities for intimacy (Giddens, 1992). In the case of female homosexuality, the potential for female-gendered personal autonomy is, as we shall see, a crucial indexer for lala subjectivity.

I begin the discussion of social geographies with a roundabout consideration of my interlocutors' overall lives in order to situate patterns in their diverse, intersecting trajectories in terms of social histories and present circumstances. In chapter one I discussed the seeming paradox between duties to fulfil normative family expectations and personal desires to lead lesbian lives. I introduced the term 'desirable duty' to highlight the ways in which the aspiration to abide by normative expectations - especially by marrying and 'passing'/staying 'closeted' - would often convey complex tensions between desire and duty that could not be explained merely

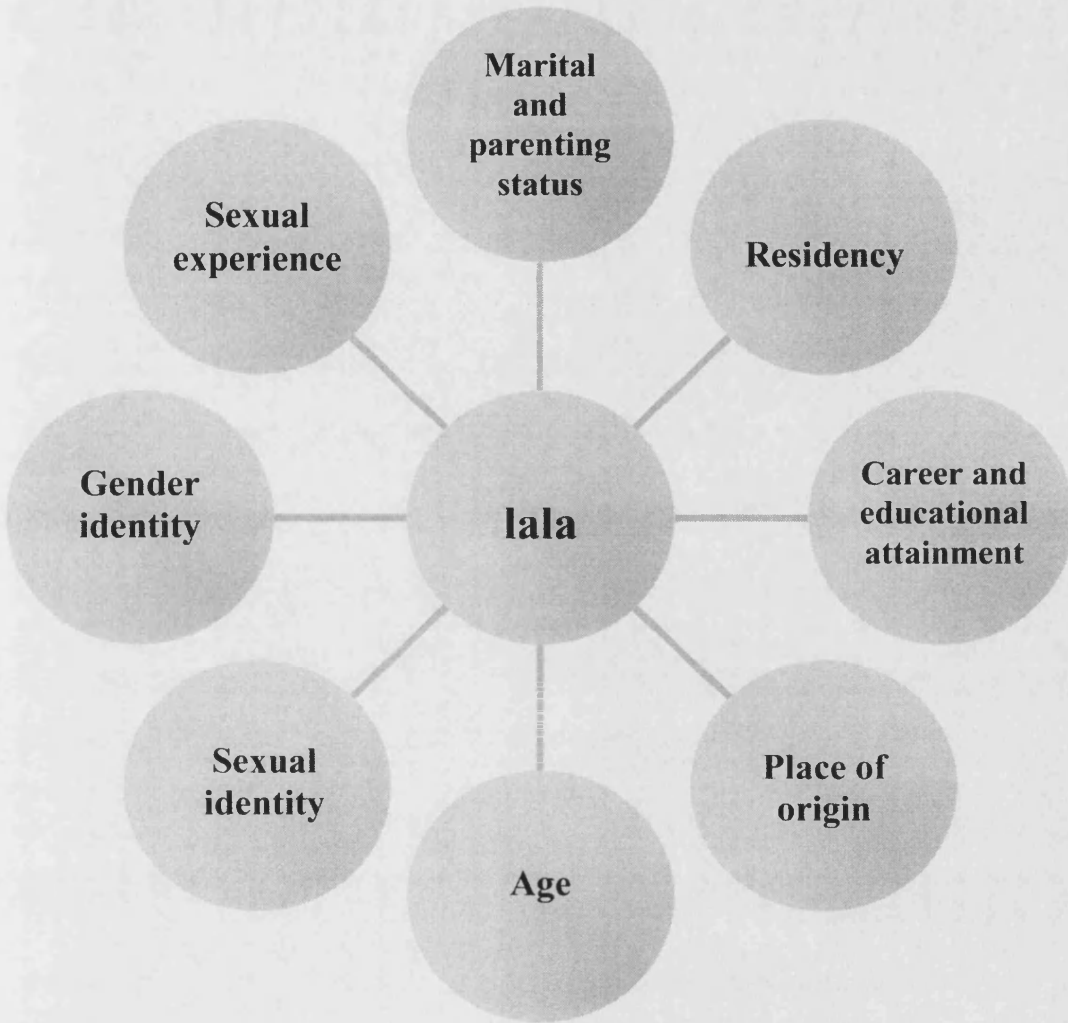
⁵⁸ *fazhan*/develop, and *jinbu*/progress were often used in this context. In contrast, 'being behind' would typically be termed *bu fazhan*/not developed, or *luohou*/backwards. These terms, as already discussed, were also generic terms in nationalist official discourse on modernization and reform.

by lack of subjective agency or by structural domination by family, state, or tradition. Conforming to gendered social norms was in many ways considered desirable, and what women wanted. Yet, given that such conformity conflicted deeply with lesbian life ways, 'normal life' was experienced as difficult and an undesirable duty in this respect.

This chapter presents ethno-biographical context to the diversity of individual circumstances that I experienced. I demonstrate a range of sociological variables and how they generated patterned differences in women's contemporary strategies to cope with normative expectations and personal desires. I show that the ability to strategize with regards to fundamental markers of conformity, such as marriage, hinges on the degree of independence from natal kin - especially in terms of the geographical distance guaranteed by living apart, even if already married - and the financial independence generated through educational and employment aspirations or attainment. I am not advocating the deterministic argument that women who achieve a degree of independence in these matters are freer from constraints and filial duties as a consequence. This fundamental attainment of autonomy enabled women to deploy a wider range of coping strategies and gave them more room to manoeuvre structural norms compared with women who did not achieve this sense of independence.

Social geographies in this context show us that reaching a comprehensive ethnography-based understanding of lala culture requires a willingness to de-naturalize the primacy of sexuality as a basis for individual identity - both desired (imagined) and practiced versions. It also requires us to recognize the pervasive, yet shifting importance of cultural ideologies like filial obedience, despite, as discussed in chapter one, the increasing modification of its meaning. By foregrounding patterns in the experiences of lives lived in past, present, and future, this approach seeks to reconcile the perennial problem in much identity scholarship of over-emphasizing either symbolic or materialist analytical perspectives.

Figure 1 below shows a schematic overview of the constituent variables of what I call a lala social geography. Note, however, that in this chapter I consider primarily the circumstantial social factors of marital and parenting status, age, educational and career attainment, residency, and place of origin. In chapter four I consider sexual and gender identification, sexual experience, and practice.



further echoes the anthropological critique of developmental and progressive narratives of modernization, i.e. that temporality itself somehow determines progress, as discussed in the two first chapters. Some of the most lesbian-affirming and self-assured women I met had been or were still married, or at least they were older, and some had children. In turn, some of the most reluctant and judgmental women were young urbanites with little life experience, limited incentive to seek out knowledge, support, and peers, and whose lesbianism was mainly 'lived' online.

This chapter presents ethnographic narratives to complement the discussion of social variables, and to give a sense of how this is lived amongst women themselves. Therefore, young age alone seems inappropriate for structuring relational patterns of social experience. In this context, Salon manager Amei once commented during a discussion about salon participation, that it was not age but *sixiang*/attitude that determined whether women would seek out the lesbian community (and see, chapter seven). Furthermore, *sixiang* tended to be divided into *luohou*/backwards, *chuantong*/traditional, or *kaifang*/open, as we shall see in narratives presented in later chapters. This *sixiang* was often discussed quite explicitly in debates about future life and, in particular, marriage and parents: the ways in which women tried to evade, or collaborated with, heterosexual marriage and dealt with parents' pressure in this regard, were in large part to do with one's *sixiang*.

Marriage - including pre-wedding pressure and coping strategies herein, and post-wedding lives including child birth and divorce - constituted a 'critical event' (cf. Jean-Klein, 2000) in a woman's life cycle in terms of the significance of its consequences and the constituents of its meaning and practice in individual cases. Taking marital circumstances as the primary variable implies the extent to which, and how, women negotiated various social markers that enabled autonomy - in particular: spatial autonomy by living away from natal family, and financial autonomy by providing for their own income and subsistence. I argue, therefore, that we can discern the possibility for independence and autonomy together with their constraints, first by looking at marital status, then comparing this with other significant variables, especially residency.

Residential patterns, the second major differentiating category, are broadly divided into 'in-residency', which means that one lives with natal family, and 'out-residency', which means that one lives away from natal family, often in a different city or province altogether. Most of my informants, for example, were not originally

from Beijing. Out-residency can further be divided into: living alone, living with husband (and child), a female partner, friends, or in institutions such as university dormitories or *danwei*/work unit dorms. By emphasizing residential patterns as a mode of, or towards, autonomy, we can unpack further the premise for and circumstances of overall autonomy from normative expectations, and pursue ‘kin-distance’ as a fundamental principle for establishing different lives.

In the following I discuss, first, the categories that most women belonged to: unmarried, out-resident, aged between 20 and 35, well-educated, upwardly socially mobile, and various sub-categories therein. I then consider marriage experience, older age, residency variations, and socio-economic circumstances. Following on from that, I provide ethnographic narratives and analyses of various social and intimate relationships, and how social biographies interconnect to produce forms of socialization and participation.

3.1. Variables in lala social geography explained

The core group of informants numbered 95 women, aged between 20 and 54, and more than half (n=52) were aged between 26 and 35. Most came from outside Beijing, lived away from natal families, and were typically well-educated university graduates, and now, professional urbanites.

In the following I divide ‘age’ into ‘young’ and ‘old’ at 35 (see fig. 3). Dividing age cohorts at 35 is significant and useful for two reasons. Firstly, younger women up to age 35 would have been born just around, or after, the national implementation of the OCP. Hence, they grew up in an era of significant demographic and socio-economic transition, and most were an only child. This provides an interesting comparison with women who grew up with siblings, and with a generation of parents who themselves had come of age during High Socialism or immediately after. Secondly, by the age of 35, women were likely to have ‘resolved’ the marriage pressure they experienced: either by getting married (incl. divorcing), resisting successfully (i.e. pressure ceased), perhaps even establishing a lesbian relationship. They were also likely to have steady jobs and an independent income, unless provided for by significant other/s (husband, female partner, or natal family). In urban China, the age of getting married is comparatively higher for women (and

men) than in rural areas; many women are likely to resist until past the age of 30, although according to what both lesbian and straight women told me, social pressure escalate dramatically between the late-twenties and early-thirties.

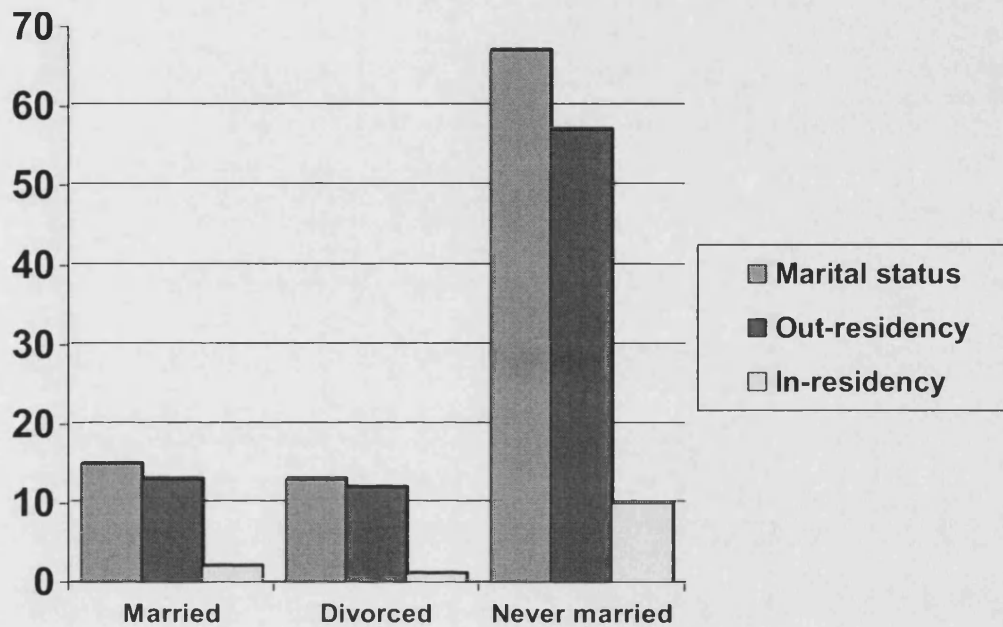


Figure 2: Marriage status tested against in/out residency (N=95).

Figure 2 above shows the correlation between marital status and residency as distributed among my 95 core participants. The three clusters illustrate and compare

...for status and place of residency with (...) of
away from ('out') natal kin. Cluster one 'married' shows that 15 women were

lived with natal kin; her parents had moved with her and her husband to Beijing after the birth of her son (see, 5.3.1.).

Cluster two illustrates the status of 'divorced'. It shows that 13 of the 95 women were divorced at the time of my research. This number distributed quite evenly between the two main age cohorts: eight in the 35-54 group, with three of these having children; and five in the younger group, with two being mothers. Of the 13 divorced women, 12 lived away from kin, one with kin (see, 5.3.1.). As I discuss in a later section, several of these women were in long-term relationships with other women.

Cluster three, 'never married', is the largest category by far, with 67 women never having married. In terms of age cohorts, six were of the older cohort, and 61 of the younger. Overall, 57 lived away from kin, while 10 lived with kin.

The chart seems to suggest that patterns of residency follow marital status: unmarried women are very likely to live away from their natal families; they are also likely to be of the younger generations. Of a total of 95 women, regardless of marital status, only 13 women (12%) lived with their natal families. However, we must consider further variable - including age and place of origin - in order to extract a more meaningful analysis.

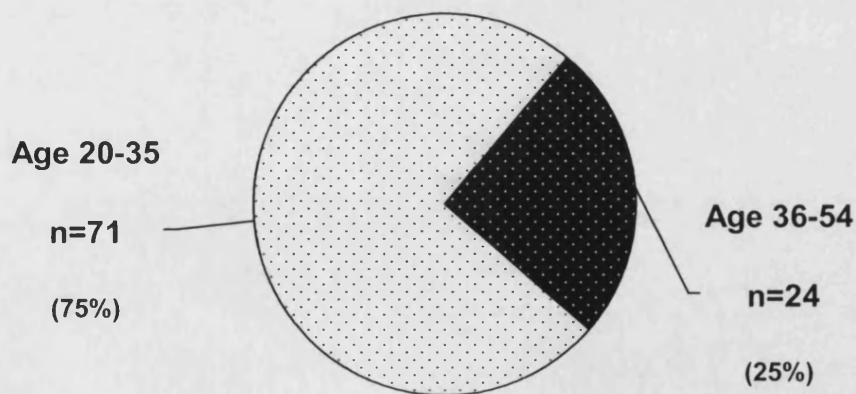


Figure 3: Diagram of total age distribution. N=95.

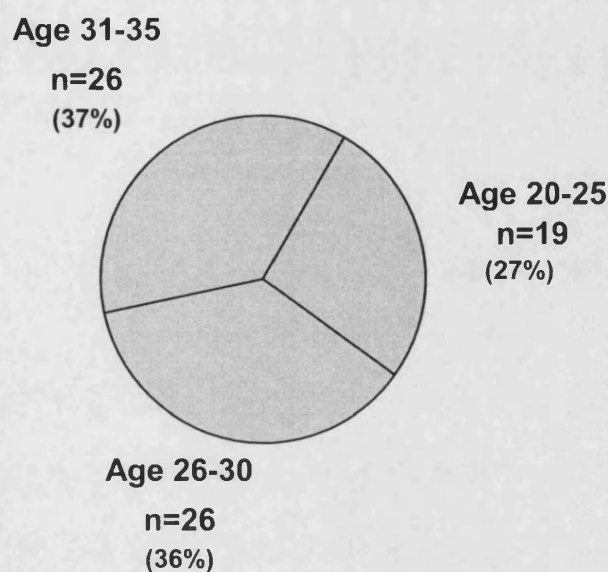
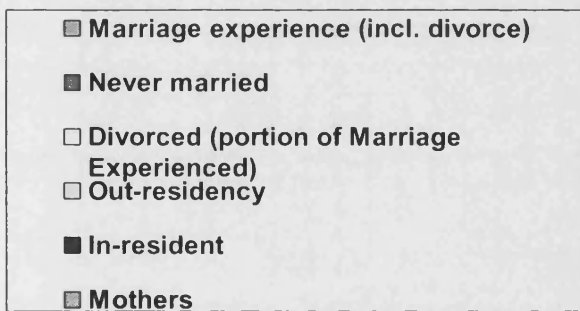
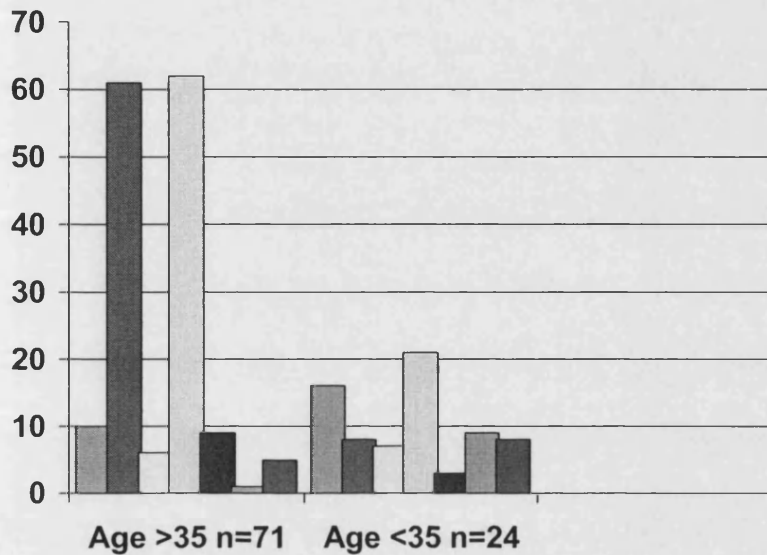


Figure 4: Diagram of age distribution within younger age-group; n=71.

Figure 3 shows that the overwhelming majority of women are in the younger age group (20-35 years old). The internal age distribution in the younger group (fig. 4) further shows that the largest number of women are aged between 26 and 35 (n=52), and it numbers 26 for each sub-group for ages 26-30 and 31-35. There are 19 women in the 20-25 age cohort. The overall cohort of older women, aged between 36 and 54, numbered 24. They were further divided into age cohorts of: 16 women aged 36-40, six women aged 41-50, and three women aged 51-54. These age-group distributions parallel my overall impression of the lala community, although very young women in the 20-25 cohort and teenagers were coming to the weekend bars in ever-increasing numbers throughout my fieldwork.

Although the diagrams demonstrate that younger women were more likely to participate in lala community, we must ask what it is about 'being young' that facilitates such participation. Or, to put it slightly differently: what is it about belonging to this generational cohort that makes it relatively desirable to partake in this newly emerging community, at least compared with older women? Furthermore, the concept of participation is itself problematic. Numbers based on presence or non-presence do not convey modes of and attitudes to being there and to socializing. The

anthropological narratives and analysis in following chapters demonstrate, amongst other things, the different modes of participation and how the various social criteria presented in this chapter interact in order to produce lala experience and discourse.



	Age >35 n=71	Age <35 n=24
Marriage experience (incl. divorce)	10	16
Never married	61	8
Divorced (portion of Marriage Experience)	6	7
Out-residency	62	21
In-residency	9	3
Mothers	1	9
Beijingers	5	8

Figure 5: Residency, marital and parenting patterns tested against age (N=95).

The patterns illustrated in figure 5 above confirm the impressions gained in the previous tables. It builds on the patterns presented in Figure 2, but it focuses comparatively on the two major age cohorts, and includes motherhood and Beijing origin, in addition to marital experience and residency. It emerges that for the younger cohort (ages 20-35) the most striking characteristics are the high numbers of the 'never married' status and out-residency. For the older cohort (ages 36-54), there is a high degree, too, of un-married status, although several women have marriage experience but are now divorced. The older age cohort also reports a high proportion of out-residency. Overall, the most prevalent sociological characteristics are shown to be those of: younger age (n=71), never married (n=61), and living independently from natal kin (n=62). Figure 5 also confirms the low number of women originating from Beijing (n=13, or: 12%), which clearly relates to the out-residential pattern, i.e. living away from natal kin. I will demonstrate this crucial link in the following ethnographic narratives. Divorce rates are similar for both age cohorts (total of 13: 6 in the younger cohort, 7 in the older), whilst more women in the higher age-group are mothers (n=9), compared with the younger cohort (n=1). Only one mother lived with natal kin, and all women who were mothers had marriage experience.

The older age cohort, which roughly counts a third of the younger cohort (n=24), is characterized by a higher degree of marriage experience, as expected for this generation of women (n=16), although almost half (n=7) were divorced at the time of my research. Interestingly, none of the women in this age group, even in long-term relationships with another woman had married their partner or were in a contract marriage with a gay man. Further, most women (n=21) lived away from natal kin, usually with a same-sex partner, alone, or with a husband (and child).

The patterns generated through these tables demonstrate that there are important connections between age/generation, patterns of residency, and marital experience, yet their changing modes and meanings in women's everyday life and through time, must be further probed via the ethnographies that structure the remainder of this, and the following, chapters.

In the following, I seek to demonstrate these connections further in ethnographic narratives built around the two principal age cohorts. This 'thick description' of the outlined numbers and charts, aims to add to the data on residential patterns, marital status, educational and career attainment, and same-sex relationships. I will first

discuss social geographies pertaining to the younger group, including personal narratives, to demonstrate how these factors play out in everyday lives. I then discuss older women in a similar vein, and compare the two groups. In so doing, I show the fundamental ways in which patterns of difference and belonging, social and intimate sensibilities, and community participation shape women's lives and, conversely, are shaped by them.

3.2. Facets of lala lives 1: Younger women's circumstances

Let me first discuss the circumstances of two Beijing women from very similar backgrounds, but whose respective lives were becoming increasingly different. Their life prospects also seemed on the verge of departing in opposite directions during my time in Beijing. Both Qing Zhao and Xiao Zhi were born and brought up in Beijing, although Xiao Zhi's family home was situated near the west fifth ring road. Qing Zhao's family lived inside the east second ring road. They were both 27 years old, only-daughters, identified as T, were single, and were university educated. Neither of them was 'out' to their families or to work colleagues. Qing Zhao, who worked for a transnational technology corporation, previously spent two years in a European city, where she completed a postgraduate degree programme. While abroad, she started exploring her sexuality, and had her first relationships with women. During my fieldwork, she was living alone in a flat in a modern apartment compound that was owned by a business friend of her now retired parents.

Xiao Zhi, on the other hand, had lived at home all her life, and was now working in the retail industry. Like Qing Zhao, she was well-educated, had settled into a good job with promising career prospects, and financially independent. On the surface they were both cosmopolitan urbanites; both wore Western fashion clothes and had well-groomed spiky hair styles that made them appear more androgynous than masculine, the preferred style of younger Ts in Beijing.

They had met in one of the weekend lala bars, and struck up a friendship, which in my view was fuelled both by their similar interests and T identity, but also their similar backgrounds. Over time, Qing Zhao also started to take a romantic interest in Xiao Zhi, something quite unusual for a T to admit to, given that *TT lian*, or, relationships between Ts (lit. "TT love"), is generally considered *bu*

zhengchang/abnormal, as I will discuss in the next chapter. However, they remained friends, and spent time together at the weekends, and sometimes in Qing Zhao's flat, where Xiao Zhi slept on the sofa after a night out to avoid furious parents and a long journey back home. However, Xiao Zhi did not go out very often, compared with Qing Zhao who lived for the weekends and the promise of a big night out in a lala bar.

Some time into their friendship, a different side to Xiao Zhi's life was becoming increasingly apparent, and it was mainly to do with their differing ways of handling normative pressures. Although they both experienced marriage pressure from parents and unsuspecting colleagues, Qing Zhao was unwilling to accommodate these expectations. She once told me that: "[marriage] pressure only comes from your mind, just don't listen is ok, otherwise I would always feel terrible. If they don't accept that, I will run away to another city or country." Xiao Zhi's approach, on the other hand, was very different: *wo meiyou banfa*/I have no other option, she said repeatedly. Formally, she had had a boyfriend for almost a year, but she rarely saw him since he was a student abroad. Having sex with him was no problem, she once said, as *shenme ganjue dou meiyou*/I have no feelings for him/it. And marrying him would enable her to move away from her parents, and most likely to move with him to Europe, where he was expecting to find work after graduation.

Marriage became an increasingly pressing problem as the very different strategies to resist it were tearing at their assumed commonality which had once brought them together. This was clearly expressed in relation to the issue of residency and, the proximity to natal family in fundamental ways, as mentioned above. For example, Xiao Zhi had problems in justifying staying out with friends after work and going out at the weekends to her parents. She regularly received furious phone calls from her mother demanding her to come home or at least to know where she was and who she was with. Qing Zhao was unimpressed with Xiao Zhi's passive acceptance of parental authority, boyfriend, and marriage expectations. Qing Zhao usually visited her parents (and other relatives) on Sunday afternoons for a few hours, but would soon excuse herself under the pretence that she had to prepare work for the week ahead. Back home, many times visibly deflated, she complained about her parents, their expectations that she should visit every week, and other relatives' nagging questions about marriage (her own parents had given up asking, she explained). Although Qing Zhao maintained some distance, both physical and

psychological, to her parents and their normative expectations by living on her own, the short distance meant - as opposed to women from other provinces - that she would face her parents on a weekly basis.

Both Qing Zhao and I were somewhat puzzled that Xiao Zhi seemed so reluctant to escape marriage and her parental home, especially given her frequent complaining about and evident unhappiness with the status quo. I suspected that Qing Zhao's frustrations were partially to do with the loss of a potential romantic relationship with Xiao Zhi, or at least, a friendship. It seemed that the differences between them were less to do with types of problems than with scales of shared problems. Qing Zhao explained the main difference between them as resulting from Xiao Zhi's *baoshou*/conservative *sixiang*/attitude, exemplified by the *meiyou banfa* statement, and her implied agreement to marry her boyfriend.⁶⁰ Qing Zhao talked about how she had already lived abroad and away from her parents, and experienced other ways of life. In this way she had been exposed to external impressions and knowledge away from the gaze of her parents at home. She mentioned once that before she went abroad she studied all the time, and never explored or thought about different possibilities, whether it be life style in general or matters of love and sexuality. She characterized her parents as *kaiyangde*/open-minded and *xianandai*/modern, given that they allowed her to study abroad, and now to live alone and provide for herself. Xiao Zhi's parents on the other hand, she commented, were clearly *luohou*/backwards, in trying to keep their daughter at home all the time. She suggested that Xiao Zhi's parents were too preoccupied with a traditional version of *mianzi*/face or respectability, whereby good moral conduct was demonstrated by adhering to traditional norms. Xiao Zhi, in turn, according to Qing Zhao's analysis, was too afraid to cross these normative expectations and stand up for herself, in other words: reject marriage, and risk making her parents *shengqi*/angry, unlike Qing Zhao. Qing Zhao clearly strategized her parents' approval by providing gifts, restaurant dinners, and promise of holidays abroad that she would pay for. Also, her enhanced status due to her education and employment was clearly a source of pride for them, something I experienced first-hand when we once dined together.

⁶⁰ I am grateful to Stephan Feuchtwang and Charles Stafford for pushing me to consider differing semantic interpretations of this concept. It seems clear that *meiyou banfa* alludes to the possibility that there could in fact be other options available, but that they are experienced to be out of reach for the person in question.

This comparative look at two women's social biographies shows that despite sharing age, natal home, educational and career attainment, and T identification, their lives and life prospects differed in fundamental ways. This was in large part due to matters of residency and prospective marital status, which, as I have argued already, constitute the main indicators of overall autonomy. Importantly, *sixiang*/attitude emerges as a co-constitutive differentiating factor, which is modified by overall circumstances of distance to or separation from parents, both physically and psychologically. In many ways Qing Zhao and Xiao Zhi exemplify common characteristics of women's lives between the ages of 20 and 35. Specific circumstances related to residency and kin-autonomy seem to provide the enabling factors towards overall independence and lala life possibilities. In the following, I consider experiences of residency, education and career attainment, relationships, and marital status, in order to expand on the sociological patterns I have outlined.

3.2.1. Living with kin in Beijing

A look at the in-resident category, the least common factor, highlights social circumstances, from the perspective of what was in many ways the least advantaged position. Only nine women lived with parent/s or grandparent in Beijing and were aged 20 to 32, with seven above age 25. Xiao Zhi was of course one of these women, and her circumstances illustrate the problems related to lack of autonomy. My impression was, that for various reasons, the relative ability of these women (or perhaps desire or both) to lead independent lives away from their families by living away from them, impacted on the drive to partake in relatively high-earning jobs and contemporary markers of material status such as rented property and leisure activities. This tendency was, in my view, likely to be linked to relationship status. Five of the nine women were and had been single for quite a long time (at least for one year), while two were in fact living with their girlfriends in their parents' homes, but presenting her as a *putong pengyou*/regular friend. Yet, apart from two of the singles, aged 20 and 30, none of the nine were open about their preferences for women to their families. The two 'out' lalas self-presented as enjoying a resolved and good relationship with their parents, and that being lala was unproblematic. Compared with the general tendency of the out-residency group, the women living

with close kin participated in lala sociality much less regularly and were likely to prefer the Internet instead of attending bars, sports and other social events. They retained considerable scepticism towards other women and what they perceived to be a minimal probability to meet a girlfriend.

Several women in this group asserted that they would prefer to live apart from their family, partially so that they could conduct intimate relationships and participate in lala sociality without being held accountable by their over-protective parents. However, they also complained that their parents resisted them leaving the family home to live independently in Beijing. There was no justifiable reason, many argued, to move out unless they got married. They talked of mothers hysterically phoning if they did not return directly from work, or parents forbidding them to go out with friends at the weekend. Yet they would also commonly comment that they 'had no option' but to comply. The underlying issues at hand here seemed to be based on concerns regarding material conditions and kin relations. For example, living at home meant reduced expenditures on rent and food which made it possible to save for future life such as a mortgage, travel, or other means of consumption. My impression, however, was that this strategy was perhaps more about putting off dramatic life changes than realistic strategic planning per se.

As in other contexts, such as whether or not one should come out to parents, some of these in-resident women argued that the most important thing was to maintain *wending*/stable home and kin relations. Moving out of the parental home, the time of marriage aside, would cause face-loss and upset the careful balancing act of proper social relations and status-ascribed behaviour. Moving ahead despite potentially causing such upset was commonly described as "selfish" and "bad", which of course was derided. However, Salon manager Amei argued on several occasions that far too many women, even though they were adults with jobs and their own income, still behaved like mischievous children in family relationships. She blamed many conflict-ridden lala relationships and family-concerned agony - especially in the clashing context of marriage pressure and love lives - on the women's lack of overall social maturity (adj. *chengshu*) in dealing with their lives.

The family, on the other hand, benefited from a daughter-at-home by remaining in overall social control, and probably profiting somewhat financially from her employment. One should also remember that a 'good' daughter was a considerable face-maintaining asset in neighbourhood gossiping, and as mentioned

above, the only point at which the daughter could legitimately leave the parental home. Ageing parents benefited from the security and help provided by a single daughter living at home in their daily lives. These concerns naturally featured in women's lives across all age groups, as I will discuss.

It thus appears that residency was crucial in the sense that those who still lived with their parents as adults seemed to possess much less pronounced incentive for and overall aspirations towards an independent life and participation in lala sociality, than those commonly found among the women already living away from their natal home and kin at this age or earlier. Yet there were modifications to this overall picture: the two couples living in natal homes, both in their mid-to-late twenties, were vocal about the need to save money so that they could eventually buy their own flat, and they seemed relatively up-beat with regards to planning their futures. However, I kept wondering whether the parents would be equally positive about their daughters' self-reliant and marriage-excluding life aspirations, despite at least one of them claiming that the parents would of course support this. They supported his claim by pointing out that parents only want the best for their children, and for them to be happy. In addition to the 'no other options' mantra, this was probably the second most prevalent phrase I heard during fieldwork. All in all, I found significantly less incentive towards financial and residential independence, and perhaps more of a *laissez-faire* attitude - what I consider to be the *meiyou banfa* approach - among the singles still living with their parents. Perhaps this explains why relatively few Beijing natives were regularly attending lala events, and hence, participated in my study.

Only five of the out-resident women were originally from Beijing, including Qing Zhao, whereas the nine in-residents had registered Beijing residency (*hukou*) by having grown up there and living with parents.⁶¹ Most of the women I knew came from all over China to Beijing in pursuit of an independent life, which on surface level was about career and education aspirations. It was also clear that many sought

⁶¹ In contemporary urban China the resident/household registration (*hukou*) system is complex, to say the least. In the case of the one living with her grandmother, her parental home was in a southern province where she had also grown up. My understanding was that their family was originally from Beijing. As was the case with so many families of the women I met, that given the tumultuous decades of earlier Communism (e.g. mandatory migration and periodic uprooting and resettling, fractured family bonds across generations, etc), her parents' generation were likely to have been permanently settled elsewhere. Her grandmother was somehow able to remain/return to Beijing.

separation from and considerable geographical distance to their natal family and place of origin also for personal reasons. This came across in conversations about family, love life and overall future life aspirations, but often indirectly and thus did not give the impression of a consciously designed strategy per se. Many women reasoned that it was somehow better to be living away from family. The sense of what exactly was better, and better than what, is brought out by the ethnography presented in this chapter. However, I will discuss it more thoroughly in the next three chapters, and especially in chapters five and six which concern marriage, lala and familial relationships.

A further important factor for consideration in relation to residency practices and related beliefs is that very few women were *gongkai*/open to their families about 'being lala' or about the true nature of the relationship with their 'friend'. Just about everyone felt that it was 'better' left as a conveniently non-verbalized detail to ensure the all-important filial *hexie*/harmonious and *wending*/stable kin relations.

3.2.2. Marital status and marriage experience

Ten women had experienced marriage, but six had already divorced by the time of my fieldwork. None of them lived with their parents, and three of the divorced women now lived with a female partner in long-term relationships. Five women remained married, although three were contract marriages with gay men. Neither of them lived with their gay spouse. In fact, they were both in long-term and co-resident relationships with another woman (see, chapter six on marital strategies).⁶² The divorced women (across both age cohorts) were generally very reluctant to talk about their past marriages because they seem to have been experienced as traumatic. At least, this is what I made of the fragments of stories told to me - either by the women themselves when they relaxed over dinner or with drinks, or by their more chatty girlfriends or their friends who wanted me to understand the severe consequences of marriage pressure. My impression was that, in the case of those women who were now divorced, they had married at a time when they had had no particular awareness about preferring women. In fact, the onset of

⁶² The respective gay spouses were also in long-term relationships with a male partner.

married life - with its social and sexual consequences - seemed in some cases, across all age groups, to have spurred the growing awareness of such a subjective and substantive difference that would eventually come to be termed lala (see, chapter four). Only one of these women, as far as I could gather, had explicitly told her family the reason for her divorce and subsequently introduced her girlfriend to them as her partner. This was a highly uncommon occurrence amongst the women I met during fieldwork.

The women who were still married had already reached an awareness of their preference for women by the time of marriage. In their case, entering married life in their case could perhaps be understood in light of the example of Xiao Zhi: namely as a versatile coping strategy amidst family and social pressure to marry. One woman aged 33, who married 'conventionally', had done so due to extreme pressure from her mother after she had found out about her daughter's lesbian relationship. The mother arranged a marriage with a suitable business man, and they then moved to Beijing in order to escape her 'bad influences', as her mother had put it.

The three women who married a gay man definitely displayed more bargaining potential: well-educated and with independent and strong-willed attitudes, and in high-paid media jobs, they were assertive and creative in dealing with complex requirements to satisfy family and other normative marriage expectations (see, discussion in chapter six). At the same time, they saw this as giving them some degree of breathing space, quite literally, to pursue their own lives, both in terms of employment and their same-sex intimate relationships. This does not mean that their solution was problem free: one of them broke down in tears once when discussing her post-wedding life at a dinner (see, 6.3.3.). A crucial point here is that these women's families - and their husbands' - lived relatively far away from Beijing. Thus, there were few occasions that required the display of happy married domestic life together. Again, we see how autonomy on many levels comes together to frame strategic and imaginative possibilities for same-sex lives. Either way, those with a relatively resolved marital situation were likely to partake in lala sociality. In comparison, those struggling and had less overall leeway, such as Xiao Zhi who was living at home, were much less likely to participate. As suggested, material concerns and status co-structure these patterns, and I now give an overview related to the primary marker of socio-economic status, namely educational and career attainment.

3.2.3. Education level and career attainment

A look into employment and educational background shows that the overwhelming majority of women had attended or were presently studying at university with, or working towards, undergraduate level qualifications. A number of them were pursuing postgraduate degrees, typically MBAs or IT-related degrees, but also – though a lot less frequently - in the social sciences and humanities. This suggests that the desire for economic independence in terms of attaining education qualifications which could immediately be converted into well-earning and potentially status-enhancing, urban employment was a source of motivation for many women.⁶³ This also supports the general impression of a strong correlation between economic independence, kin-autonomy, and positive attitude to and participation in lala sociality and same-sex intimacy.

Several women were or had been studying at the most prestigious universities in China such as Beijing University, Qinghua University, or the Beijing Foreign Languages University. Three women had overseas postgraduate university degrees (from the USA, the UK, and Ireland; all in technology or business related fields). A few of the younger ones were preparing to study for a postgraduate degree abroad (Canada, France, the UK, the US).⁶⁴

Many women spoke good English although they were generally too shy to practice it, even when I repeatedly organized English corners in the Salon on popular demand. Others were medical doctors specializing in women's illnesses (*fuke*) and gynaecology, for example. Another common field of higher education qualification and present job occupation was in advertising and the media, such as journalism, Web and graphic design. Exceptionally, one woman was a postgraduate research student-soldier at the PLA (People's Liberation Army) Academy. Apart from this PLA recruit, only one other woman, to my knowledge, was a member of the Communist Party, and both had been members since early adolescence or childhood when their academic attainment made them stand out, and Party membership was an official acknowledgement of their outstanding merit and future potential. The

⁶³ Annual average income in Beijing for 2005 was 29,674 rmb (*renminbi*, ca. 1,932 GBP; national average for 2004: 16,024 rmb. Source: National Bureau of Statistics 2005, 5:25)

⁶⁴ I also knew others who prepared for postgraduate studies in France, Poland and New Zealand. In chapters 5 and 6 I present ethnographic material on the topic of migration to countries that recognise same-sex marriage for the purpose of marrying a girlfriend, or to find a (foreign) girlfriend there and marry with intent to settle.

political association seemed irrelevant to them, and they even joked about having to write annual reports in the form of self reflection and self criticism for the Party.

It is clear, then, that the span of educational attainment was diverse and - on a national level - impressive. A common feature was to be educated with the probable or already secured ability to get a well-paid job in the capital (or abroad), typically in high-skilled office, business, or specialist employment. To some extent, these women were, or were aspiring towards, a particular cosmopolitan elite status. In turn, this attainment was highly likely to support a prolonged time of living away from a family-based economy and the universal scrutiny of kin. The implication is of course that marriage as a primary means of financial provision became an obsolete strategic argument, whether for the women themselves, their peers and colleagues, or their kin. During my time in Beijing I experienced that quite a few women changed, or planned on changing, their employer. In this way they were strategizing towards obtaining positions with larger - sometimes international and regional - companies, or at least employers with better terms, employee rights, and salaries.⁶⁵

Hardly any women within this younger age group – I estimate less than five - did not have or plan higher education beyond upper middle school (*gaozhong*). To my knowledge, all my informants across all age-groups had obtained an education qualification up to at least *gaozhong* level. Only four women among the under-35s did not hold stable full-time and longer-term employment during my time in Beijing. One twenty year-old usually preferred drinking beer and flirting with the Ps in the bars at the weekends, lived at home with her parents in Beijing and seemed unconcerned with finding a job: *wan'er*/having fun was her main preoccupation, she stated cockily with a big grin when I asked her about her everyday life. Two others, aged 28 and 32, both in long-term relationships, were out of jobs for most of the time

⁶⁵ Western companies tended to be highly valued because employee rights and personal freedom were highly regarded, and also because of the potential of a business trip to company head quarter abroad. Other East Asian companies such as Japanese and Korean ones were derided by several informants with experience working for them, citing rampant sexism, sexual harassment, lack of rights and personal freedom, and overall very traditional norms with regards to women's status and position such as regulations for work wear and gender interaction. Chinese companies were generally regarded as more modern and Western in terms of women's status and relative harassment, but the overall lack of rights and freedom left many disgruntled, especially in the run-up to national holidays when workers were expected to work, literally, around the clock, usually without any compensation for overtime work.

I knew them and were on the whole financially sustained by their partners, although they were reluctant to admit this or even talk about it indirectly. This was probably related to their T role in the lala community, a social role that emphasized, and thus echoed filial gender norms, one's duty to take responsibility – financial or other, and for oneself as well as for one's P partner. Another woman, in her early twenties, T-appearing but with a very gentle demeanour, was in and out of the various jobs that well-meaning lala friends set her up with. However, she seemed set on a destructive pattern of physical self-harm and was habitually disrupting possible ways out of financial and educational troubles. These experiences and realities were not very common at all. On the whole, most women were highly educated, career-driven, and hard-working.

The specific socio-economic characteristics appearing on the basis of education and employment attainment do in important ways relate to the modes of participation in lala sociality, same-sex romantic bonds, and gendered sexual subjectivity. Access to means towards material wealth, socio-economic mobility, and social status enabled by education and employment, opens for the possibility to strategise pressures and norms in ways that were closed for the women with little education and who experienced little or no kin-autonomy. A key indexer is the ability for and attitude towards conducting intimate relationships with other women.

3.2.4. Relationship patterns

In the out-residency group, 28 women were in relationships lasting one year or longer during my stay. Eight couples made up my key informants in this category, including one couple where one woman was aged over 35, and one couple where one was divorced. Almost all of the couples in long-term relationships lived together. They lived in rented accommodation in central Beijing, or shared a flat with friends.⁶⁶ Most women were having affairs or changing girlfriend at least once during

⁶⁶ I did not conduct any specific survey regarding place of residency per se, but it appeared that most informants lived outside the second ring road/zones, where accommodation was significantly cheaper than the two inner zones (where most lala events took place). Many argued that many lalas lived by the south Beijing's second and third zones (*naner/sanhuan*) in particular. This was increasingly my

my fieldwork period, and only a handful were not, to my knowledge, involved in affairs or relationships at all.

Only one of the women who conducted relationships with other women in this group, long-term or shorter term, had formally introduced her partner to her family. It was a common practice to paint a picture of a friendly, financially functional house-share with a *hao pengyou*/good friend or *jiejie, meimei*/big, younger sister, thus leaving it up to others to infer the nature of the relationship. For example, the one woman who told me she was 'open', a research student in her mid-twenties, explained that she addressed her girlfriend as her *laogong*/husband in her parents' presence, and she therefore expected them to know the nature of their relationship. This masculine-feminine TP pairing (see, chapter four) evokes heterosexuality, and further cemented the statement of the true nature of the relationship, in her view. She had, however, never told her parents or other family outright. Still, her family *hui jieshou*/accepted the girlfriend, and as a consequence, to her mind at least, they accepted her being a lala.

It seems clear, from a look at the factors of residency, kin proximity, socio-economic circumstances, education and employment attainment, marriage experience, and patterns in lala sociality and same-sex intimate relationships, that those, who regularly participated in the Salon and other extra-bar events, seemed more socially fulfilled in terms of having some kind of lala-based social networks and friends. They also enjoyed considerable material or financial independence and kin autonomy. For example, university students tended to have travelled from a different natal province and thus enjoyed a degree of independence and which easily superseded that experienced by the in-resident/non-marriage cohort of informants. They were more likely to sustain longer-term love relationships or take action - i.e. look beyond the Internet and visit real-life lala spaces - to actually have them in the first place. Also, they had lala friends with whom they socialized in everyday life, and with whom they talked about family and other problems. In sum, they seemed

impression as well, as I was increasingly invited to privately hosted dinners, meetings and parties, although I am not sure as to how representative this would be on a bigger scale. Students, of whom there were many, tended to live in dorms on campus (most universities are situated in central north-west Beijing, just outside second ring road) but some student couples, taking advantage of the recent general relaxation of housing regulations, moved to private housing outside their university, usually they were located in campus vicinity.

more able to successfully integrate their sense - acceptance, even - of themselves and their same-sex relationships and consciousness with their overall lives and wider social and familial commitments.

It appears, therefore, that access to material means and consumer products (such as in things and experiences or life styles) to support relative personal freedom in the city were crucial to certain degree in terms of the ability to remain independent over time and strategize towards social mobility. Still, a more fundamental condition is the ability to seek separation from natal kin and home, and negotiate a subjective position vis-à-vis parents on adult terms. This suggestion is supported when also considering those who had marriage experience and thereby achieved socially recognised gender-normative maturity as wives and sometimes mothers. In my opinion they were far more likely to have attained an overall resolved relationship both with natal kin but also with themselves as adult women. This was strikingly less often experienced with the in-resident and non-married women, who constituted the group with the least ability and pronounced incentive to redefine their lives and relationships with kin, and integrate this with their lala subjectivity. Thus, they were more likely to resort to the mantra of 'having no other option' (*meiyou banfa*). The next chapter interrogates this sense of subjective consciousness in detail by offering retrospective narratives of lala (or similar) self-recognition as well as narratives of adult identity and life style choices. For now, I turn to a discussion of the women in the 35+ age-cohort.

3.3. Facets of lala lives II: Older women's experiences

The weekly Saturday afternoon Salon was still a new fixture on Beijing's lala circuit by the time I was acquainted with the couple Sumei and Lei, two women in their mid-to-late-thirties in a long-term relationship who were living together with Sumei's eleven year-old son from her previous marriage. Not only was the salon a new event, but I was also a new face in the lala crowd, and my evident foreignness certainly invited much attention and opportunities for being introduced to a great variety of women. I also had the opportunity to introduce my research project, invite

women to participate further, and listen to, often eagerly narrated, views and stories. Therefore, on this particular Saturday afternoon, when the Salon manager Amei came over to the table where I was chatting with a small group of younger chain-smoking women, and quietly said that a new couple by the door wanted to speak to me, I quickly gathered my things and walked over with Amei for the audition.

Sumei and Lei had not been to the Salon previously, but had once visited the Sunday lala/gay badminton group and seen me there. They were now eager to know more about what this *laowai*/foreigner was doing spending time with the Beijing lalas. Somehow it seemed easier for them, as for many others, to take the initiative to talk to me, a Western foreigner, than to initiate contact with other Chinese women in these venues. We ended up sitting together for the remainder of the afternoon, talking about lesbian lives in different countries, and they patiently answered my questions about their own lives. They had little time to come to events like the Salon or the bars, given their child-care responsibilities and full-time jobs. They usually preferred private socializing with other women of their own age and in similar life circumstances outside the bar venues. That same evening they invited me to join them for such a dinner, and I went on to meet and spend several entertaining and educational hours that night with about twenty other women in the private back-room of a restaurant. Most of the women in attendance were in their late thirties and forties, and many had known each other for years. Moreover, several had a *jiating*, they told me, meaning “family” or “household”, whereby they remained married, and usually also had a child. Still, many of these women were or had been in long-term relationships with other women in addition to maintaining their *jiating* and relationships therein.

Since this dinner took place relatively early into fieldwork, these sorts of narratives still surprised me, and I asked how they managed this ‘split’ life, which to me seemed so far apart in their logics and practicability, and why did they not divorce. A short-haired T-looking woman aged 46 who was sitting next to me, explained that when she was younger there was absolutely ‘no other option’ (*meiyou banfa*) but to get married. Several others nodded at this: this was true for the women of their generation, they agreed. Such circumstances in turn made them prioritize socialising with women who were likely to share similar experiences, hence being roughly of the same age. Moreover, they found that the domination of younger women unlikely to share their experiences in the now fast-emerging lala community

rendered such socialising irrelevant and boring. Sumei, who sat by my other side during dinner and had mostly been concerned with making sure there was a constant pile of food on my plate as she did not fully trust my chopsticks skills, chimed into the discussion at this stage and provided a further sociological context: A broader social shift developed in China from the mid-1970s onwards, when the *gaige kaifang* (“opening and reform”) policies were introduced post-Mao and post-Cultural Revolution. She and the other women argued, as we spoke together this evening, that I would need to consider this in my research as these changes were paramount to understanding the emergence of lala communities today and the differences between various generations of women now participating in lala sociality.

True to Sumei’s dinner-table analysis, the opening and reform policies have held considerable potential for changes with regards to such matters as individual freedom, gender roles and women’s overall opportunities, as I have discussed. This chapter’s detailed social biographies aim to further demonstrate this connection. For those born before the mid-1970s, and who constituted the majority of my informants, life opportunities and attitudes were indeed quite different from those available to women born later, particularly due to the specific political circumstances and turmoil of the former era compared with the quick pace of recent modernizing developments. Major shifts were caused by the inauguration of modernizing policies in the form of *sige xiandaihua*/The four modernizations,⁶⁷ the break with Maoism as the Cultural Revolution came to an end in 1976 and Mao himself died, with Deng Xiaoping taking over power in 1978. The implementation of the OCP in 1979 entailed transformations to current family and household composition and dynamics, and the modifications to gender norms and Confucian family ideals (see, chapter one).

⁶⁷ This reform policy, first introduced in 1975, and formally implemented by 1979, focussed on the areas of agriculture, industry, science and technology, and the military to nurture national self-reliance.

3.3.1. Marriage experience

The 24 women aged between 35 and 54 in my core group of informants included 16 below 40 years old, and three aged 50-54.⁶⁸ Sixteen of these women had experienced conventional marriage, with nine still married, seven now divorced. Nine of the thirteen were also mothers with a child in the age-range of 7 and 21 (five of them confirmed as boys). These women had all married in their mid-to-late twenties, as far as I could discern. While no one said they were forced to marry, several women commented, that getting married was something you just had to do “back then”. They argued that, when they were younger there were not the same kinds of possibilities to evade, postpone or even refuse marriage as was increasingly becoming an option for younger women now.

We have seen that in the case for the younger women, individual independence from home-life seemed crucially related to the level of education and employment attainment, either as already achieved, or in the case of students or early-career workers as future aspiration. However, for married older women, individual independence was fundamentally linked with the marital situation in primarily two aspects: first, whether the marriage had produced a child and, if so, the age of the child, hence the relative necessity for the mother to provide childcare; second is the degree of freedom and space achieved from marital sexual relations as well as general living arrangements. Well-earning jobs per se thereby did not appear crucial in the sense that they did for the very establishment of independent life; materially or as a coping strategy with marriage pressure for the women of younger generations. Employment and the possibility for independent financial income did, however, play a crucial role in a strictly material sense, and certainly built confidence on a deeper level in cases where the marriage ended.

⁶⁸ In general, it was considerably more difficult to entice women in this age-group to tell me about their lives and background. Compared with the younger women without marriage experience I had to rely much more on fragmented and interrupted conversations. Although they spoke relatively freely in general social situations such as in the salon or at dinners in each others' homes, their narratives and sharing of family and marriage experiences as wives, mothers and daughters, and also their participation overall, were at best sporadic and implied, rather than carefully and repeatedly talked about as was more often the case with the younger women. The methodology chapter will consider these circumstances in detail.

Of the nine married women, the two whose children were now at university and leading relatively independent lives away from the parental home, seemed far more able to negotiate participation in lala sociality on their own terms than those with younger children. One woman in her mid-fifties was integral to the lala community where she lived (she was not permanently living in Beijing) and had convened social activities for many years. The other woman, in her early forties, had quite recently found the lala community online and started participating while I was there. She soon tired of the semi-public lala events put on mostly for *xiao haizi*/the kids, she complained. Instead, aided by the convenience of her husband working abroad, she started inviting selected friends to her home for dinner, drinks and conversation. The women whose children were still living at home - and this was also the case for the two divorced women with custody of younger children - seemed to have less time to participate in these kinds of events as they were tied to daily schedules tailored to the various needs of the child: meals, school run, homework, and overall child and home care. On a couple of occasions some women spoke about their hopes that, when the child had grown up and started university, they would be able to change their lives, perhaps even divorce. No one expressed any particular desire to divorce at present, either because they had arrived at satisfactory arrangements with their husbands, or because they believed that staying together was better for their child. I also suspected that this was due to financial circumstances, although this was not explicitly mentioned. One woman told me she would reconsider her marriage and perhaps file for divorce if she met a woman she wanted to have a long-term relationship with. Until then, there was no point in breaking up a stable status quo that benefited everyone, she argued.

Two of the married women were open to their husbands about their preferences for women. One, in her mid-thirties and with a ten-year old son, had explicitly told him some time into their marriage, as a means to make him understand her reluctance to have sex with him. Another woman had been found out after she had had relationships with women. Their husbands had gradually accepted this and had remained married since, mainly for the sake of their children and as an overall face-preserving strategy towards both sides' kin, who in turn did not know. My overall impression was that, as long as relations within the marriage and household remained stable (*wending*) and appeared harmonious (*hexie*), coming out or being found out did not necessarily have negative consequences. Lesbianism per se, then,

was in practice inconsequential unless normative life style was disrupted or, as experienced by many younger women, resisted outright.

The married women varied considerably in terms of living arrangements. In three cases, the husband lived away from the wife and child on a permanent basis, officially due to his employment arrangement, as far as I could understand. One of these women, a teacher aged 39, had recently moved back to her elderly and frail mother's house to take care of her, and seemed to have no intention of moving back in with the husband again in the future. They also had no children, which undoubtedly facilitated this *ipso facto* separation. She was integral to running the Salon and spent considerable time planning and organizing its events and networking. The two other women remained in the marital home, and the husbands - one of whom worked permanently in a European capital city, the other worked in a different province - would visit during holidays. In the case of the Europe-based husband, the woman and their college daughter would occasionally visit him there and go travelling; their home was full of souvenirs that documented their trips to many different countries. One woman had a daughter who was studying at university but often returned home for the weekends, while the other one had a ten-year old son whom she was caring for. Both maintained that they did occasionally engage in sex with the husband, on his initiative, and that it was understandable and acceptable given that, he was, after all, their husband. They themselves *meiyou ganjue*/got nothing out of this, good or bad.

As for the three women who lived with their husbands on a day-to-day basis, the active lala organiser in her fifties who was open to her husband, lived, in her own words, a fulfilling life with him and with the rest of the family. The two other women's situations seemed less resolved: one was in her early forties, with a teenage child, and in a long-term relationship with a woman who worked abroad most of the year. When her girlfriend was away she did not attend lala events at all. The other was a 39-year old career woman, highly educated, and appeared to come from a wealthy background, who experienced her emerging lala awareness - aided by her recent access to the Internet via her teenage son's computer - as traumatic and hard to reconcile with her overall life. One winter evening I met her along with some friends, and we had drinks and meals together. It was the first time she socialized with other lalas offline, and she was distraught and ended up sobbing at the restaurant table after

drinking several glasses of hot liquor. These three married women who were residing with their husbands, and who also had children still living with them, had little ability to negotiate personal freedom, space, and movement.

Unsurprisingly, while some women considered breaking out of the marriage and ease the immediate difficulties and multiple allegiances, they worried in particular about the welfare of their child should they divorce. Furthermore, many women were worried about being found out afterwards and the consequences this could have for their own and also their families' 'face', especially their child. It is probably safe to argue that the overall safety, stability and socially condoned family life they had already achieved weighed heavily in favour of not breaking out of this for a life much less predictable and stable.

Among the seven divorced women, of whom four were also mothers to children aged between six and twenty, residency and current relationships patterns varied, but what they shared was having been divorced for at least three years in the case of those still in their thirties, while the older women in their mid-forties and older had divorced long ago. It was difficult to get these women to talk about their marriage experiences and get a sense as to why and how they came to seek divorce in the first place⁶⁹, as it was clear this was a sensitive topic for all of them. Only one spoke fairly effortlessly about this, telling me that three years into her marriage (now eleven years ago) she *shoubuliaole*, or: "I couldn't take it anymore". By then she had given birth to her daughter. She decided to leave her husband, for whom she *meiyou shenme ganjue*/harboured no emotions (whatsoever). She had started to realize that her emotional and sexual desires were directed towards women, although it took her some time to come to terms with this. Four of the divorced women were now in long-term relationships with other women. One had returned to the natal home and conducted casual relationships with women, while the other women lived alone.

Compared with the still-married women, those now divorced were more likely to be financially independent and in jobs with secure and stable incomes, and had not returned to living in the natal home on a permanent basis. However, some had

⁶⁹ My overall impression from the roundabout ways a past married life was talked about, or not - i.e. the narrative silences regarding such pasts -, was that it was the women, not the husbands, who had initiated divorce proceedings; however, I have no firm evidence as such for this. One exception is mentioned above.

arranged child-care assistance with their kin, such as their mother or a sister, to aid time-management while juggling full-time jobs. Of course, this arrangement also helped maintain romantic relationships and participating in lala social events from time to time. The overall exception here was the one woman who had moved back to the parental home. She relied financially on her parents although she periodically had short-term jobs negotiated through personal connections. This situation in turn was exacerbated by her limited educational attainment (she had dropped out of university, without qualifications), and her past mental health difficulties. In fact, in the eighties she had been committed to a mental hospital for *gao tongxinglian*/engaging in homosexuality, given that ‘homosexuality’ was at that time classified as a mental illness (see, 5.3.1.). My impression was that her own family had since provided for her, although she only rarely spoke about her past and home life.

From a comparative look at the circumstances of the women with marriage experience, it seems that ability to negotiate time away, either in the permanent form of a divorce, or with an away-working husband or grown-up child, emerged as a core factor that structured lala sociality and intimacy. In turn, this relative ability effected a degree of positive integration of same-sex sexual subjectivity into one’s overall sense of self. However, this does not necessarily mean a corresponding incorporation of same-sex sexual identity. As I will demonstrate in the chapters on subject formation (chapter four) and community life (chapter seven), those women who were still married and living in home settings that offered little possibility for freedom from child care or marital duties, were unlikely to participate regularly in real life lala events, and were more likely to remain primarily online users of lala space. As we have seen, the positioning in terms of the social thresholds which define appropriate womanhood (wives and mothers), was related to generational differences, as well as the degree to which the women had some sort of outside employment and thus contributed financially to the household and towards their own financial autonomy.

3.3.2. Unmarried women in lesbian relationships

The eight never-married women were aged between 35 and early forties. Their biographical patterns resemble those of the younger age-group in that residency and proximity to kin were crucial in determining individual freedom and a successfully negotiated and socially recognised adult self. Here I distinguish those who were living independent lives beyond natal home or work unit, from those who still resided at home with their parents, or in employer's dormitories. There were four women in this latter category. Two of them lived with their parents and were office workers; one lived in a gated community (*shequ*) of her (government-run) company, and one lived in the quarters of her performance troupe. None of them were in a stable long-term relationship with another woman, although two were seeing or pursuing someone at some point while I was there. All the remaining four women were in long-term same-sex relationships and lived with their partner away from kin.

One of these couples, Baozhai and Meijie, aged 39 and 42, had been together for sixteen years at the time of my research. They originally met as co-workers in the same company and soon started a relationship, which they described as *tonglù*'walking the same path'. They lived in a flat in a traditional neighbourhood downtown, and neither had ever married. However, at some point, Baozhai had apparently left Meijie to marry, before breaking off the engagement and going back to Meijie. One Sunday afternoon, a Fudan University lecturer convening a course on homosexuality gave a talk in the busy Bar, also attended by Baozhai and Meijie. During the question-and-answer session, Baozhai, the more talkative of the two, spoke passionately about their wish to have a child but how it seemed impossible for two women in current China. She expressed hope that increased knowledge about same-sex relationships and families would generate such opportunities in China in the future.

When I spoke with the two of them at length afterwards, they told me in detail about their life together and their views on the emerging lala culture. Baozhai, for example, complained that she felt alienated from the concerns voiced by other, younger women in the conversation that had just taken place; everyone else was just concerned with 'being lala' and demanding societal acceptance (*jieshou*) in an instant, she muttered unhappily. Her and Meijie's approach was different by

comparison. Baozhai asked me rhetorically: “What makes a person (*ren*)?”; “how do you become a person in society and contribute to others’ lives?” She continued to offer the answers in a long philosophical monologue that reminded me of Confucian ethics, where she emphasized the requirement to conduct social relationships according to customary norms. She gave examples of how they had always made sure to be on good terms with neighbours, work colleagues, friends and respective family. They took pride in being there for others in time of need. For example, together they had nursed Meijie’s ill and frail parents for five years. Baozhai commended her partner’s outstanding *xiao shun*/filial disposition in this respect, and was adamant that she herself should dutifully support Meijie. Both of them believed that their families and neighbours knew about the true nature of their relationship. Yet they reckoned that they were respected and accepted all the same because they fulfilled their social responsibilities to others. Being lala per se was not important to conducting fulfilling and stable social relationships, and preserving good relations with kin, they argued (see also, 5.3.2. for a longer discussion).

The situation was quite different and much less resolved in the case of 37 year-old Grace and 35 year-old Lingmei. Grace was independent-minded and career focussed, and worked for a government company in Beijing. I met her in the Salon although she was a very irregular participant and seemed socially inexperienced. She was the youngest of three siblings (all married with children) from a well-to-do family in a southern coastal and quite affluent province. For many months I did not see her again until she suddenly appeared after the woman she had been seeing had broken up with her. Her friend, Lingmei, a very shy and petite woman, was an only child who lived at home with her parents and an elderly grandmother, whom she cared for in her spare time. She worked for a Beijing-based medical company and was educated to postgraduate university-level. Lingmei did not like socializing, and certainly did not like the *bu wending*/unstable and *luan*/chaotic lala environment, although she had only visited the Salon once. She had never had a male partner, but had had a T girlfriend for five years, with whom she had also stayed with on an irregular basis. Still, her parents had introduced her to over twenty men, all whom she had refused, she told me.

Grace and Lingmei met online and conducted a relationship for about six months, but Lingmei ultimately decided she needed time to think. For the time being,

she wanted to be *putong pengyou*/general friends only. This was clearly frustrating for Grace, who wanted a quick resolution and settle down with Lingmei, ideally in their own independent household, or *jiating*. Lingmei however, was unsure whether they were compatible for a life-long relationship due their different attitudes about relationships. She also felt that social pressure discouraged such a relationship, and that she should consider heterosexual marriage more seriously than she had done previously. Grace's personality also unsettled Lingmei, and she mentioned that Grace had physically attacked someone who had harassed them in a park. Thus Lingmei worried about Grace's temper and whether she could trust her in a relationship. Grace, on the other hand, insisted that it was a one-off incident. Grace felt that Lingmei's parents, whom she seemed to consult in all matters however personal, had used this incident to discourage the relationship. Lingmei said that her parents only wanted the best for her, that she be happy in life. Her parents would not oppose her if she chose to be with Grace and live with her, Lingmei told me. But at the same time she talked about how her parents were exposed to marriage pressure from other kin. She also feared pressure and discrimination at work.

A further worry, or justification, was her parents' and grandmother's old age and their care and safety if she left home to live with a partner. In addition, her parents worried about what the neighbours would say, and how it would affect her work life. In this respect, Lingmei's views mirrored her parents', and I gathered that the difficulty was probably fundamentally one of parental separation and the consequences of forming an independent household with another woman. On the parents' part, keeping Lingmei at home ensured social security and maintained the family 'face' and her continued filiality. However, Lingmei experienced considerable pressure from Grace in terms of her impatient demands for a resolution, as Grace had suggested she could move in with Lingmei and her parents, and help take care of them. Lingmei herself did not speak too much about marriage pressure, and I did not have the impression that this was the main reason for her changed heart. While Grace appeared rather pressed to find a girlfriend and settle down, and lived a very independent life far away from natal kin, Lingmei's situation was quite the opposite. Given that she had grown accustomed to a life within the parental home and taken on the role of a carer, she had reached acceptable social maturity in some ways. While this was not ideal, it was better than running off with another woman, at least as far as her parents were concerned.

A comparison of the relationship dynamics of Baozhai and Meijie with those of Grace and Lingmei, illustrates the intricate fabrics of family constellations and relationships, in similar ways to the example of Qing Zhao and Xiao Zhi in the previous section. This points to the particular roles that residency and kin-autonomy play in interrelationship with financial independence, and in negotiating and living same-sex relationships. They also point to the directions adult womanhood can take beyond that based on entering marriage. Through careful negotiation, Baozhai and Meijie had achieved fulfilling social and family lives that were recognized by their significant others, as well as a long-term intimate relationship with each other that drew admiration and respect from the lala community. Their situation is comparable to some extent with that of Sumei and Lei set out in the introductory part of this section. They too seemed to have achieved a workable degree of independence and recognition based on strategising their social relationships and presentation of their romantic relationship. For example, Su Mei's son called Lei 'auntie', and to the outside world Lei was Su Mei's 'friend'.⁷⁰ Their participation in lala sociality showed these fundamental allegiances quite markedly in that they did not buy as readily into the emerging lala discourse and ideology about identity as most other younger women would do, in different ways, and as I will discuss in a later chapter.

Grace, in a completely different way, had devoted her adult life to her career, with self-proclaimed little previous interest in personal relationships of any kind and of incorporating her intimate life into real life plans and practices. She lived conveniently far away from her family, although her *danwei*/dorm residency rendered her actual scope for independence and freedom limited - unless married, employees were expected to live in these dorms. Lingmei, at 35, had resisted marriage and had now become the live-in carer for her parents and grandparent. She seemed highly reluctant to upset this careful balancing act by realistically considering the potential for an alternative in the shape of a relationship with Grace.

⁷⁰ Dining in their home one evening, and in the son's presence, I unwittingly mentioned the taboo word "lala" during conversation. Lei, who came across as the house authority, brusquely cut me off, and an embarrassing silence followed. It was pretty clear to me, however, that the son must have known about the nature of their relationship. After dinner he was playing with his computer in his room close to the living room where both Sumei and Lei loudly chatted about all matters lala.

3.4. Conclusion

This chapter has presented the social geographies of the ninety-five women whose lives this thesis is concerned with. Examining personal lives and their circumstances through known sociological markers and wider social circumstances and backgrounds, confirms the earlier suggestion that a fundamental differentiating idiom of lala experience has to do with autonomy. Whilst pressure to conform, especially by getting married, was experienced as very strong by all women regardless of other factors, the ways in which they strategized and juggled these expectations to suit personal desires - such as having or living with a girlfriend, or even 'be lala' - were markedly dependent on their ability to negotiate autonomy from natal kin. From the examples I have presented, it seems that the crucial period in a woman's life cycle to establish these strategies, is the late-20s and early 30s when marriage pressure is at its strongest. Access to means for upward mobility, including education and employment, and, hence, economic independence, emerge as crucial diversifying factors that situate women vis-à-vis lala community participation and intimate relationships. However, material and social factors and the relative manipulation of their premise for future betterment hinged on a sense of *sixiang*/attitude, which went beyond, and often countered, an outright traditional upbringing, or lower socio-economic circumstances. Moreover, *sixiang* was not necessarily age-dependent. Young age and openness to lala subjectivity and sociality did not follow from each other. Based on this chapter's discussion, I suggest that the concepts and relational experiences of autonomy and attitude structure lala subjectivity in fundamental ways.

As discussed with regards to ethno-historical literature on emerging lesbian communities in the modern US, the formation of lesbian communities and sexual subjectivities from the 1920s onwards was fundamentally linked to large-scale socio-economic transformations, including economic recession and pre- and post-war demographic shifts. Particular factors included: the intensified urbanization and changing employment patterns, including (labour) migration, women's enhanced opportunities for upward personal, social, and financial mobility, and movement beyond the domestic sphere - including changing gender norms - and, finally, an eroticization of public life "through the development of a consumer society", where

personal pleasure, pursuit of sexual interests, and sex separated from reproduction, were major ingredients (Faderman, 1991; Giddens, 1992; Kennedy & Davis, 1993: 9; Newton, 1972, 1995). As demonstrated in chapter one, these circumstances were present in reform-era urban China as well, and in the following chapters I will continue to probe this cross-cultural comparison.

In order to identify and analyse the contents and meanings of these idioms, I have applied a socio-geographical approach here that shows patterns and links in complex yet illuminating ways. The following chapter considers sexuality and gender identification, by tracking personal narratives and life histories regarding same-sex sexual and erotic identification, and the fundamental importance of gendered subjectivity in this respect. Taken together, this chapter and the next provide a comprehensive introduction to lala as a social and subjective category and phenomenon.

CHAPTER FOUR

Women, gender, and sexuality:

The makings of lala subjectivity

Talking about and sharing past and present experiences of same-sex intimacy and sensibilities, was a frequent conversational theme when socializing in bars, at dinners, and on other occasions: When did you first know? Are you T or P? Do you have a girlfriend? What kind of women do you like? and so on. I frequently observed how women, young and old, alone and in couples, or with a friend or two, entered a bar or the Salon for example, and came face-to-face with others 'like them', often for the first time in their lives. Some turned in the doorway and left, or they left quietly, alone, after a short time, visibly nervous and unable to relax. Some sat alone at a table in a corner, chain smoking and fiddling with a mobile phone, until someone came over and invited them to join a group. The efforts made by managers, organizers, and regulars already confident in their own social networks, to include fresh faces and to make everyone feel welcome were consistent and genuine.

What brought these women together was, in many ways, a search for 'a lesbian community'. Depending on which lala spaces women partook in, community could mean simply having fun and spending time with other women who desired women and perhaps find a girlfriend or lover. Others were interested in debates and conversations, often with an activist agenda to further public knowledge, recognition, and understanding (see, chapter seven). Discursive identifiers like 'lala' and the TP roles identified events and spaces as women-only, and with a lesbian focus. However, it became increasingly clear to me that lala similitude was a highly contentious quality, an aspiration more than experiential reality. What we might presume to be a fundamental and straightforward concern with sexual preference, was continually cross-cut by other, intersecting concerns and subject positions that went far beyond an exclusively sexual domain. In the previous chapter I presented a socio-geographical analysis of women's biographical circumstances, and demonstrated patterns of a range of social variables. I also showed how these

differences contributed strongly to structure and often restrict the potential for alternative lala identification and sociality, including intimate relationships. This chapter is devoted to the three remaining lala variables: sexual and gender identification, and sexual experiences.

I present life narratives, discourses, and field observations in order to demonstrate this processual quality of lala subjectivity as sets of intersectional practices and ideologies, and I argue the fundamental importance of gender *and* sexuality herein. I focus on three aspects. The first is the narrative presentation of lala subject categories within lala social context, and the ways in which certain narrative trajectories of memory, initial awareness, self recognition, and TP identification emerge as dominant, and whereby other trajectories and moments are deemed less important, undesirable, or less morally appropriate. Which features of lala narrative and identity achieve recognition? What aspects of lala experiences are subjugated, or even erased, by the (over)emphasis on being able to verbally assert and reassert one's life story?

The data presented is a result of weaving direct speech acts and story telling with my observations of non-verbal - embodied and spatial - performances that accompanied them. I thereby emphasize not just verbal discourse but also the equally important "non-verbal dimensions of culture" (Leach, 1976: 10; cf. Moore, 1996: 3 [1986]). As Foucault has argued, these embodied and discursive acts, or self presentations, are political and ideological (1991[1978]; 1980). Whilst they open up to alternative meanings and interpretations, they are at the same time firmly embedded within normatively gendered citizenship. Contemporary queer and gender theories on the politics of subject formation have largely embraced Butler's notion of performativity which argues the productivity of the speech act, or verbal reiteration, and against essentialist theories of fixed, biology-based identity (1990, 1993).

My thesis builds on this perspective. However, I take issue with the continued interpretive over-reliance on verbalized self-presentation, whereby such self-presentation in effect appears severed from social context and temporal shifts. The 'I' is presented as distinct from its continual reiteration, as a fixed focal point against the backdrop of a blurred socio-spatial context. This reminds us of Ewing's theories on multiple subjectivities and the illusory experiences of selfhood (see, chapter two). Ewing argues for the incorporation of partial subject positions that is subjectively experienced as a coherent unified identity, although others may be experiencing

one's self-presentation as fragmented, contradictory, and fluid. This illusory experience of a stable self enables the subject to integrate contextually different subject positions and, hence, social life into a coherent experience of individual subjectivity (1990). This approach pays keen attention to the cultural texture of social dynamics that the inevitable dissonance and discrepancies between ideology and lived practice present.

The second aspect concerns the gendered TP subject categories. I question the oft-made presumption that sexual desire and preference provide the fundamental constituent of sexual subjectivity, and offer ethnographic material that demonstrates the interrelationship between gender and sexuality in lala subject formation. In so doing, I critique comparable studies on lesbian gender categories in South-East and East Asia which over-emphasize discursive presentations that hinge on ideological representations of gender dichotomies, at the expense of their temporal shifts and non-verbal acts that demonstrate their instability (e.g. Blackwood, 1998, 2007; Chou, 2000; Lai, 2007; Sinnott, 2004, 2007; Wang, 2001). TP categories are largely prescriptive, not descriptive, and they do not transparently depict lived experience. Whilst such gendered ordering of lesbian experience is well-known and described in literature from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Thailand and Indonesia, the TP discourse emerged in the PRC only at the turn of the millennium, and thus presents a distinctively new discursive ordering of lesbian experience according to gender, and is different from the previously used *tongzhi/comrade* and *tongxinglian(zhe)* /homosexual(ity).

The third aspect is sexual desire, activity, and pleasure. By discussing narratives that focus on women's sexual experiences, this section builds on the sexuality and gender analysis of lala subjectivity and practice in the preceding sections. Whilst the gendered TP discourse prescribes certain sexual practices as desirable and appropriate, it appears that, when it comes to sexual practice, actual sex, forms of sexual desires, and lala meanings of sexed bodies, cross-cut TP-gendered prescriptive roles and practices. The topic of sexual practice and desire amongst lala women of different age groups demonstrate the proliferating and shifting subject positions that produce same-sex subject categories.

I approach these three key aspects of lala subject formation as critical events in order to highlight the cross-subjective quality of these processes. In other words, how

fundamentally is 'being lala' constituted in the meeting with other-influences as mentioned above, and how these processes are highly collaborative practices that produce a particular self knowledge and in this process marginalize alternative qualities of subjectivity. In particular, I enquire into how subjectivity, defined in terms of sexuality, as sexual identity even, has come to such prominence in recent years. As the issues that make up these events were common topics of conversation in lala social space across variables of age, education, socio-economic background, and relative adherence to heteronormative gender roles, the ethnographic material shows great variety in approaches to and beliefs about female normative gender, family expectation, married life, and sexuality. For example, and as I will discuss in the next section, Salon discussions frequently focussed on 'coming of age' stories, and the convenors encouraged newcomers to share their lala narratives. This contributed to creating commonality and facilitated the easing of a nervous lala into the group. I will argue in a later section that this practice produced and reiterated a particular lala narrative, where certain elements were emphasised against others, and thereby generated a sense of desirable lala identity and ways of thinking around related concerns. Hence, dominant and limiting knowledge is not produced solely outside, by the state, and then imposed upon lala community, but is partially constructed within the lala community, in the process of producing and reproducing lala identity.

4.1. "A special self": Being different and becoming lala

As mentioned above, telling one's life story, or parts of it, and pointing to moments of lala self recognition, is a common aspect of lala social interaction. It provides a mechanism for creating a sense of commonality (if not community), however momentary, and the conversational style in the form of mutual exchanges of information, leads to enhanced self understanding. Many, especially younger, women possessed limited knowledge about same-sex sexuality, beyond the official tongxinglian discourse, and craved an alternative framework that validated their sentiments. In the following I suggest that an important effect of these narrative

practices was precisely to produce positive and validating knowledge about same-sex sexuality and intimacy, conceptualized as lala.

The narrative structure usually took a decidedly before/after format, divided by the moment of 'Knowing', of self recognition, or knowing oneself to be lala, or similar. Beyond this rough structure, individual stories took very different trajectories. Conceptually, I seek to explore the notion of difference, since, invariably, everyone anchored lala subjectivity in relation to a sense of 'being different', even if they were maintaining that they were 'like everybody else' and 'normal'. Belonging to different age cohorts presents an important division amongst my informants in this regard, as access to public discourse on sex in the reform period has enabled younger generations to access sexual knowledge to an extent that was not available previously. Younger women were invariably aware of discourses on homosexuality, mainly the official tongxinglian one, from an early age. This contributed to a relatively early awareness of same-sex possibilities, and reflexive considerations about themselves and their preferences. They were more likely to have had early experiences they now considered 'homosexual', or lala. Older women, however, tended to display little early sexual awareness and knowledge. Often same-sex sexual intimacy or consciously desiring it, did not occur until after marriage.

I am concerned with how this sense of difference was experienced, how it was manifested in narratives, and at which point this kind of sensibility was distinctively felt as making a difference in social relationships, often in the form of being shameful and problematic. To this end the following two sections consider the process whereby sexuality comes to take narrative centre stage, through comparing the official tongxinglian discourse with the emerging lala discourse, and for different age cohorts.

4.1.1. "Ah, this is me!" Younger women coming to awareness of being different

The weekly Saturday Salon in the back section of a central Beijing shopping mall restaurant, often hosted debates which were attended by anything from fifteen to fifty

women to talk identity, love, relationships, and other issues of concern. One Saturday the topic *wode gushi*/my story attracted a particularly large turn-out. The convenor was Biyu, a teacher in her early thirties. Biyu introduced the discussion thus:

So today's topic is about one's own story; by this I don't mean that people should talk about their lives since birth ... the important question is: how to be lala? There are many different kinds of lala here today, many single, many couples and so on ... In my experience, a lot of young lala really want to know how to walk down the lala path in life ... So the first question really is: how do you know you are a lala? This is not easy to define or answer, I think. On my part, when I was a child I never thought of myself as a lala ... at the time when I didn't know this...when I still didn't know about the different genders, I just liked being around other girls, and in my heart I knew that I liked them [not the boys] ... It was years later when I heard about terms like 'lala' and 'tongxinglian' [homosexual/ity] that I finally knew: "Ah, this is about me, this is me!"

Biyu's account points to commonly experienced features of initial same-sex attraction among many women. For one, there is talking of childhood – or early life, pre-adulthood – in terms of 'not knowing this', meaning 'being lala'. Biyu sensed a difference in herself from other girls, that focussed on affection, and orientation of interest, but at the time she did not comprehend what exactly this difference involved. Biyu's retrospective narrative points to this period as a time when she did not know about gender differences, which indicates the fundamental gendered understanding of lala.

Xin, another participant, was a shaven-headed, androgynous media professional in her late twenties who periodically worked and lived abroad. She reiterated Biyu's sense of realizing one's experiences of same-sex orientation as setting oneself apart from peers, but not having the words or knowledge to put this in context at the time:

Biyu: So, at what point did you realise you were a lala ... I mean: When did you become aware that you *xihuan nüren*/prefer (lit. 'like') women?

Xin: When I was really young ... I didn't understand then that this wasn't ok ...

BY: Did you first like one particular girl, before you realised [this], or...did you first know ... this thing that you like women?

Xin: Of course, I first liked one particular girl ...

BY: And then what?

Xin: I didn't understand what was going on with me [laughing] ... later on, I realized what this thing was...

Biyu asked Xin how she reacted when she realised she was lala, whether she felt pressured by her surroundings to change and become 'normal'. Xin replied:

I thought it's a pretty normal thing ... well, perhaps not exactly 'normal' ... but I think it's a pretty basic thing, it shouldn't be for others to decide [what I should be] ... perhaps it's just that everyone has a *teshude ziji*/special self ... I don't experience any pressure, but in the beginning I couldn't understand where my preference for women originated, I thought it was very strange: other women preferred men while I preferred women, I didn't understand why; but after I realised [I am lala] I didn't feel any pressure [to change] at all.

Nuying, a bufen/P-identified media professional in her mid-twenties and in a long-term relationship with an older T, later talked to me about her retrospective awareness in a slightly different way:

When I was younger I liked boys too, so I don't think I am a *tianshengde lala*/natural lala. I have never thought of myself as tongxinglian. But I never had a 'real' boyfriend, we would just *wanr*/play, like everyone else, girls and boys together. My first girlfriend was a girl at my school and we knew each other at 16; but we did not *zai yiqi*/get together until the last year of high school. We were together for 4 years, all through university, but we were in different universities so we only saw each other during the holidays when we spent all our time together. Once my mother asked me: *ni gen ta shibushi gao tongxinglian ma?*/Are the two of you engaging in homosexuality? I was shocked, and just replied by denying it: how can you say such a thing?

I fell for her because she was different from anyone I had ever met, it was not because she was a woman. I thought she would be the only woman I would ever be with [laughing and glancing over at her current girlfriend sitting at another table with friends]. She pursued me all through high school. She would wait for me after painting class, and walk me home, walk me to class, help me with home work, that kind of thing, like anyone would do when they pursue someone ... She was very *xixin*/caring, and attentive ... *ta dui wo tebie hao*/she was really good to me. I think I am attracted to *xingge*/personality, not *xingbie*/gender, really ...

These narratives of emerging same-sex attraction and consciousness illustrate common patterns among women of younger generations. The period that precedes awareness of tongxinglian discourse is marked in current retrospective narrative by an experience of being different. Gender emerges as a crucial differentiating marker here. Both Xin and Biyu - women who identified as lala, with a distinctively more T appearance than Nuying, and older than her by some years - talked about their initial feeling of difference structured by a realization that other girls were attracted to boys in the ways that they were attracted to girls, and this contributed to their feeling of difference at the time. Importantly, as much as the difference consisted of a same-sex object in desiring intimacy, this sense of difference was probably also produced by the disinterest they harboured for the opposite sex. Women who had experienced childhood or early adolescent same-sex attraction rarely talked about explicit or active dislike for men or boys. It was rather that they expressed an absence of interest in them. Nuying's narrative, however, expresses no particular gender preference or sense of difference. In fact, she stresses her disinterest in gender: it is *xingge*/personality she is attracted to. I will discuss Nuying's experiences further with regards to sexual practice later, in order to illuminate this gender-sexuality dynamic. It seems that the process of awareness concerns the progressive sense of such difference being problematic and of establishing one's position vis-à-vis desirable feminine behaviour and desire. This is fundamentally linked with the official discourse on sex in general, and on tongxinglian in particular (see, chapter one).

The gradual awareness of the official tongxinglian discourse induced a sense of shame and fear for initial same-sex sensibilities, as displayed in Biyu, Xin, and Nuying's narratives. Later, Biyu talked about how she had tried to become *zhengchang*/normal while at university by having a boyfriend and thereby fit in with peers as well as please her parents. Whilst not explicitly talking about sexual experience, her story, along with many others giving similar accounts of trying to become 'normal' by having relationships with men, found men's sexual advances or actual sexual intercourse deeply traumatic and, contrary to its intention, helped consolidate their pre-existing preference for women. As I discuss later, sex was a sensitive topic of conversation, regardless of same-sex or opposite-sex focus, and few women spoke about heterosexual experience in any sustained way (section 4.3).

Nevertheless, Biyu's persistent feeling of being different and the inability to grasp its nature eventually prompted her to search psychology books in the library. She found 'tongxinglian' defined in typical official propaganda terminology as a mental illness and a Western-originating deviance. She later found lala Internet sites by using Google-like Chinese search engines and typing in 'tongxinglian'. Eventually, Biyu and her girlfriend of three years became regular participants in the Salon.

Apart from Biyu and Xin, I encountered several other women who had heard about 'tongxinglian' at school or somewhere else while growing up and who had vaguely linked it to themselves. Typically, they felt different from peers who engaged in opposite-sex dating or play, and thus their own preference for girls or women, reinforced by official tongxinglian knowledge, emerged as problematic. Since knowledge of tongxinglian was necessarily linked with 'illness', 'abnormality', and 'the West', this awareness reinforced a sense of shame and necessity to keep such feelings or relationships secret.

Shen Shen, for example, a bar manager in her mid-thirties and active in the lala community, expressed such sentiments when recounting the first time she heard about tongxinglian:

In upper middle school most other girls were starting to have boyfriends, but I was always more interested in being with girls. I had started questioning myself privately, but at that time in China there were no resources on this issue; back then there was no Internet, phones weren't that common either ... I remember once I was walking down the street with my girlfriend, and at the roadside was an advertisement poster where there was written something about AIDS in the West, and also something on 'tongxinglian' ... those exact characters ... That was the first time I knew. Afterwards, my girlfriend asked me if we were like that, but I replied that we couldn't possibly be as it was a Western thing; but inside I actually felt very afraid and I thought a lot about it following this incident.

Shen Shen's experience of fear was undeniably linked to the official connection between illness, death (AIDS), and 'tongxinglian'. The effects of such negative official discourse was experienced as very powerful among most of the women I met, and it was a common view of 'being *lala*' that it was something *bu zhengchang*/abnormal and ideally to be overcome. Xueman, a T-identified woman in her early twenties, once told me she had seen a psychologist weekly for over one

year to try to overcome her same-sex sexual and romantic preference. For example, she was shown sexually explicit films and images to induce ‘healthy’ heterosexual desire, but after one year she remained frustrated, and even more convinced that she was lala. Jiayi, another young T and a university student, whose parents forced her into therapy upon finding out, told a similar story. She saw a therapist for a long time, but she remained lala. Now she avoided contact with her family, and ignored her father’s enquiries about boyfriends and marriage.

Two competing discourses on female same-sex desire emerge in these narratives, which I consider to be representative of the general views and experiences expressed by most women. On the one hand, there is the official and dominant tongxinglian discourse with its focus on illness, deviance, and abnormality. This is the knowledge accessed by parents and the general public. This helps us understand the prevailing difficulty for daughters to be open or ‘out’. On the other hand, there is the emerging and largely positive, lala discourse, within lala community, which is being appropriated by more and more women, at least partially. Due to the overwhelming power of normative society of framing individual agency and life possibilities, the dominant tongxinglian discourse and the later, alternative lala one are inextricably linked, though hardly the same.

Narratives of initial relationships often displayed secrecy and fear of being found out. The boundaries between friendship and intimate relationships seemed blurred, and the relationship was rarely if ever explicitly defined as anything beyond the common *pengyou*/friendship.

Consider Wei, a *bufen*-identified graduate student in her mid-twenties, and her narrative about when she realized she *xihuan nühaizi*/preferred women:

I reckon it was pretty early ... around when I was 12-13 years old. I wrote a letter to a good friend, a very good classmate ... at that time I had recently graduated from primary school and had just started middle school. I wrote “I have discovered I have homosexual tendencies/*tongxinglian qingxiang*, what should I do?” I was around ten years old when I knew this word [i.e. ‘tongxinglian’], but at that time I didn’t know ... later, in the last year of primary school, I liked a girl. But at that time I didn’t know either ... then I started middle school, and the one to whom I gave the letter was the one I liked. Afterwards, she said to me: “*zhezong xihuan*/this kind of attraction may just be *pengyou zhijiande xihuan*/a friendly form of attraction, it doesn’t matter, don’t worry.” She also said it was not *qingxiang*/an orientation, but

rather a “trend”⁷¹ and that it *bushi zhende*/was not real. Since it wasn’t real then it didn’t matter either. We’re in the same university now, but she is not [a lesbian; *ta bushi*]. Almost all the women I have been attracted to were classmates or co-students but none of them were [lesbian].

When I realised [that I am a lesbian], I didn’t really understand what it was or what it meant. Other girls liked boys, but I wasn’t like them, it was hard to *rentong*/accept. In high school, everyone started growing up, and some girls had boyfriends, lovers or [experience] other things.

I had a relationship with someone at the time, a classmate. But I couldn’t talk to her about this thing. At some point she said “don’t you think that now we shouldn’t do this?” that is, that we should not be with other girls ... she was not [lala]. We were together for two years. I later graduated from higher middle school, and then went to Beijing to go to university. But she stayed in our home town ... so I felt *feichang tongku*/very sad.

Wei’s narrative presents another context for the emerging incompatibility between intimate relationships and normative expectations when adulthood approaches, including establishing gendered norms for opposite-sex dating, which is the precursor to marriage. However, the wider meanings of ‘having a girlfriend’ and ‘being in a relationship’ are further probed through Yanlin’s narrative.

Yanlin, an office worker in her early thirties who was unmarried, single, and living with her elderly parents in the outskirts of Beijing, had a similar experience to Wei. Her first girlfriend had eventually ended their relationship after four years - the length of their university degree, and the break-up coincided more or less with their graduation - because she expected to get married. Yanlin came from what she explained was a *chuantong*/conservative and *rujia*/Confucian family, and so she had lead a *danchunde shenghuo*/simple life during childhood and adolescence, when she was ignorant of *meiyou zhezhong sixiang*/this kind of awareness or attitude, meaning: tongxinglian or lala knowledge. She had known from an early age that she liked girls, and had always been totally disinterested in boys, but had thought nothing more of it at the time. At university, she met the woman who became her girlfriend and they shared a dorm room with other students, but they kept their relationship a secret.

I asked her once what made their relationship different from general friendships. The most important feature was the feeling of *lianggeren zaiyiqi*/being

⁷¹ Wei specifically used the English word here.

together (lit. “two people together”). This involved the *xinli fangmian*/emotional aspects of sharing everyday life and daily chores, such as cooking, going for walks, doing homework, and eating together. “This makes a relationship special”, she clarified. They enjoyed physical intimacy during weekends when their room-mates went home to stay with their families. Yanlin explained, however, that they *budong xingshi*/did not understand sexual matters at the time and felt that, while physical intimacy was important, the sexual aspects were not essential for the relationship. It was clearly the companionship that resulted from being together that she had valued the most. Yanlin had thought of herself more as a boy when younger because of her preference for the company of girls and feeling fundamentally different to other girls around her because of this. She reasoned that due to this attraction, it was better to think of herself more like a man than a woman. Her girlfriend at university was feminine, she told me, not like herself at all, and she was certainly not a lala. Because of this, Yanlin never felt their relationship had a future and knew they would eventually part given the girlfriend was ‘normal’ and would marry upon graduation.

Few women talked explicitly about sex, as I have mentioned, but my impression was that many *qinmide guanxi*/intimate relationships were similar to that of Yanlin’s narrative, whereby emotional intimacy was emphasized over sexual intimacy. Physical intimacy was typically alluded to by sharing a bed, but genital sexual contact seemed rarely to have been the focal point of a relationship. Here, I do acknowledge the realistic possibility that it was too embarrassing to discuss, as was the case of current sexual practices for many (see, 4.3).

Nuying, whom I have already mentioned and knew very well, spoke openly about her sexual experiences in her first relationship. She explained that their sexual relationship was very *jiandan*/simple, yet *qinmide*/intimate, and mutual as they did *peng*/touch⁷² each other, genitally and otherwise. Still, they did not know exactly *zenme zuo*/what to do, and Nuying did not experience *gaochao*/orgasm (lit. “big wave”) until her current relationship. When telling me this, she held up her hands, laughing, showing off her newly painted, long finger-nails, and smiling: “You know, I didn’t use to have these kinds of nails back then!” Nuying was alluding to her

⁷² *peng* refers to touching, usually of the genital area but it can also refer to touching of breasts although *mo*/stroke is more commonly applied then. It can also refer to vaginal penetration with fingers (or other object). See, 4.3.

current T partner who did not allow herself to be touched, and whereby Nuying was in effect becoming a relatively passive partner.

The ambiguity of these intimate relationships, if not apparent to the women themselves but certainly in the eyes of people around them, enabled some sense of privacy and continuum, away from the discursive gaze of tongxinglian that would have explicitly branded such intimacy as 'deviant', 'wrong', and 'illness'. Biyu, whom I mentioned earlier and who worked as a teacher, narrated stories of school girls who displayed too much affection in contemporary Beijing, and were put into different classes, or their parents were alerted to their 'misbehaviour'. Clearly, the threat of being exposed ensured that such intimacy remained hidden in everyday life. It is by way of the retrospective narratives, accounted in the presence of other women likely to have shared or be sympathetic to their experiences, whereby this same-sex intimacy takes on an unambiguous lala sensibility. Still, it was clear, regardless of labelling, that initial intimate relationships structured a woman's sense of self, and sexual and romantic preferences for women in fundamental ways. Women recounted stories about their first girlfriend with considerable detail, many times with deep emotion, and despite the stress, fear, and stigma, these relationships and mutual care or the longing for it, seemed to have nourished women through high school, university, and provided security, happiness, and companionship during often turbulent early adulthood.

From these narratives, we understand that initial same-sex relationships tended to be conducted prior to knowledge about 'homosexuality' as such. There seemed to be a strong sense of keeping relationships a secret, for fear of exposure. This indicates that, despite an absence of explicit discourse on this taboo topic at the time, even young people were thoroughly aware of the dominant social morals regarding not so much homosexuality perhaps, but public exposure of intimate affection. Yet, despite the secrecy and taboo, many women told of feeling that these relationships were unfolding *hen zirande*/naturally, they 'just happened', and were not anything they considered wrong or bad. At some point, however, usually during upper middle school or after graduation (late teens to early twenties), gendered norms regarding opposite-sex dating and marriage seemed to have created a climate for those without special investments in the same-sex relationships to break away and seek normative opposite-sex relationships.

Wei and Nuying, being almost one generation younger than Biyu, Xin, and Yanlin, knew the official tongxinglian discourse at a much earlier age than their older peers. Thus the time span between starting to feel different in terms of same-sex sensibilities and experiencing such intimacy with the emerging knowledge of the official discourse was minimal, and they seemed to more or less overlap in Wei's case. The way Wei was telling a friend about her feelings seemed to express a deep concern and a medico-scientific impression of tongxinglian. Interestingly, her friend's response indicates that same-sex attraction in this age group may be quite common and overlap with intimate friendship more than the sexualized and transgressive emphasis of adult tongxinglian. Many women in the lala community did indeed make this argument, and would when talking about past girlfriends not being lala, in the same fashion as Wei emphasize that such relationships did not mean that you definitely were a tongxinglian or lala. Many experienced same-sex intimacy as existing within the realms of friendship (*pengyou*), and thus the boundaries were indeed blurred. Yet the feeling of being different accounted for retrospectively by lala-identified women, such as that of Yanlin, Wei, Xin and Biyu, as discussed above, was definitely something that set them apart from their friends who would gradually move on, have boyfriends, and distance themselves from same-sex intimacy as a definite marker of identity that opposed normative expectations for hetero-marital femininity.

The kinds of experiences discussed thus far involved women in their twenties and early thirties who grew up during the later reform period. I now turn to a consideration of women in the older age group.

4.1.2. Older women's experiences

The experiences of women in their mid-to-late-thirties, forties and fifties, were not necessarily fundamentally different per se, but several women of this generation had not known about 'homosexuality' or similar while growing up, even up until marriage. Intimate relationships with other girls or women were thus unlikely to be contextualised in the same ways that we have seen to be the case among younger women. At the same time, there was a less prominent desire to establish a

progressive, retrospective lala narrative anchored in pre-adult life amongst these women. To illustrate, I discuss three women's narratives in the following.

Suyin was a charismatic and chatty woman in her late thirties, originally from a rural region. She had been married for about ten years, and had a ten-year old son. I met her quite late into my fieldwork when she came to the Salon, and we soon became friendly as she was interested in getting to know foreigners. As was the case with several women of her generation, I only got to know her story in short bits and pieces. She was clearly not comfortable with telling everybody everything at once as was the case among the younger women, perhaps because 'everything' in her case certainly was of more substance and consequence. It took many months before she whispered to me that the reason she had to leave for a few hours in the evening before returning to the bar later was that she had to cook dinner for her son and put him to bed, not just the vague "have dinner with relatives" she had previously told me.

Suyin and her husband had been living apart for many years by the time I got to know her. She told me she had always enjoyed the company of other women but had never thought that two women being together in a relationship beyond friendship was possible. At university she always socialized with other women, not men, although she emphasised that men and women mixed freely in social activities. I asked her, thinking retrospectively, did she know about other women 'like her' while she was at university, and she replied she knew two other women who slept together in the same bunk bed, and she wondered about it, as did others. The two women drew the curtains before the bed and slept together at night. No one mentioned the possibility that they could be 'homosexual'; it was a non-issue entirely.

While at university, 'homosexuality' was never explicitly mentioned, but as she was talking about this part of her life now, Suyin said she felt that 'it' was something negative. She had not considered that 'homosexuality' could have anything to do with her, it was literally unthinkable. It was also unimaginable for her not to marry upon graduation. At the time there was no other option, and no possibility to delay it. She started dating a man introduced to her by her family immediately after graduation, and they married six months later. She never enjoyed sex with her husband, but she *jieshou*/accepted it as his 'right'. Because she often rejected him sexually they had a lot of conflicts, and he accused her of not being a

proper or normal woman because of this. As regards having a child, she had no other option but to comply with her family and husband's expectations. Her husband had apparently made this a precondition for the marriage. Some time into their marriage, Suyin told him that she preferred women, which he had difficulties to *jieshou*/accept in the beginning. Gradually, though, he did. She explained that since it was other women she liked, not men, he could accept it. If she had found another man it would have been very different. She was not considering a divorce. He was nice to her and could accept her, and therefore she thought she might as well stay married to him. My impression was also that she was not financially independent, which undoubtedly influenced her outlook.

While Suyin experienced no intimate same-sex relationships during or after university, she mentioned a 'special' friend she had had for several years, someone who was 'very T' yet *zhengchangde*/normal, or 'not lala'. Her friend was opposed to 'homosexuality', but knew Suyin's sentiments and considered her family. However, on other occasions Suyin mentioned that she had longed for more than their platonic friendship, and that when sharing a bed at night she had desired sexual intimacy with her friend. It appears, therefore, that their relationship was both a source of pain and happiness to her.

Suyin's narrative was quite typical for the sentiments expressed by middle-aged women, whose lives were framed to a large degree by marriage and motherhood. While divorce is now a much more realistic possibility and is carrying lesser stigma than previously, many women were still tied to marriages due to either economic dependency, or concerns for the welfare of their child, and probably also because of the overall social security provided by marriage and family. Suyin and others like her, who started participating in lala social life quite recently, had a son or daughter who was old enough by now to spend time on weekend activities, classes, or in the care of other relatives. Thus, these women could enjoy leisure time on weekend afternoons or evenings.

Shui Jie, in her mid-forties and with a teenage daughter, divorced over ten years ago when that was still quite unusual. She attended the Salon on a few occasions during my fieldwork, and we engaged in several discussions as she learned of my research and was concerned that I 'get it right'. Shui Jie had her first *qinmide guanxi*/intimate

relationship with another woman at sixteen although it did not involve genital sex. However, in terms of emotions, she explained that it differed from a 'normal' friendship for her, which is reminiscent of Yanlin's narrative in the previous section. At university, she was sexually involved with another woman for the first time. She was reluctant to discuss this further, but my impression was that this had been an important life event. Back then, however, she had no knowledge of 'homosexuality'; she was generally disinterested in men and marriage, yet she did not reflect more deeply on this at the time. Upon graduation she got married almost immediately despite not wanting to, and she had even told her husband that she did not like him. After she gave birth to her daughter three years into the marriage, she felt too unhappy in the marriage, and subsequently filed for divorce. By then she had started to recognise her preference for women as a more fundamental aspect of herself than she had considered previously, but instead of pursuing this into a relationship with another woman she found another male partner, before she finally *rentong ziji*/accepted herself and her feelings for women. She described this as an attempt at "running back" instead of recognizing herself and, eventually, facing up to 'who she was'. As was the case for several others, her fragmented knowledge of the official discourse of 'tongxinglian' discouraged her from seeing same-sex desire and relationships in a positive light and as a realistic lifestyle possibility.

When I met her, she had been with her current partner for ten years, although they knew each other four years before they became a couple, as their families were neighbours. She described the beginning of their relationship as one of mutual support. Shui Jie used to help out her friend when she faced problems with her family, and the friend supported Shui Jie when she went through problems - she explicitly pointed out that she had attempted suicide. She could not name a particular moment when their relationship changed from a general friendship to a love relationship; rather, it was a gradual process. They had no established definitions of themselves within their relationship; neither was particularly feminine or masculine, and she thought her partner was quite like herself.

Renxiang, a divorced business woman in her fifties with a son at university, had similar experiences to Suyin and Shui Jie. She was uncomfortable talking about herself, yet concerned I should know her story and wanted to add her generation's experiences to my data pool. She therefore invited me along to visit her long-time

close female friend, Liling, the daughter of prominent Party cadres, who lived with her European husband and young son in a downtown residential compound. In fact, it had been Liling who some months previously had urged Renxiang to search online for lala friends and community, which led her to the Salon where we met. Liling had long suspected that Renxiang preferred women, and after the divorce she was concerned for Renxiang's wellbeing and future life alone, especially into old age. As a young woman, Renxiang had had many intimate friendships with women; Liling also pointed this out this when we talked. The intimacy she felt with these women was of a social, not sexual, nature, Renxiang explained, yet they were not simply *yibande pengyou/average* friendships, due to the depth of emotional intimacy she experienced with them. Renxiang had married at 28, and for the first years she was happy with her husband, a scholar she spoke highly of. Prior to marriage, she was totally ignorant about sex, be that straight or same-sex. She discovered sexual pleasure with her husband, noting that *wo juede ... tinghaode/I thought it was ... pretty good*. Gradually, it seemed that her previous intimate relationships and desire for intimacy with women took on an unequivocal sexual dimension. Eventually her marriage broke down, although I did have the impression that the reasons were manifold and went beyond her emergent lesbianism. Renxiang, however, was very reluctant to talk about this. Until recently, she had believed that same-sex sexuality and relationships were *buhao/bad*, and admitted to still struggling with the social stigma against it (see also, chapter seven).

Suyin, Shui Jie, and Renxiang's experiences, and of many others of their generation, differed from those of the younger in two major ways. First, although Suyin, Renxiang, and Shui Jie all experienced pre-marriage intimacy with female friends or desire for it, such sentiments did not produce a subsequent feeling of being different to the extent that it impacted irrevocably on their lives, as it tended to do for the younger women. Biyu, for example, could point to a past moment of self recognition: 'that's me!' This kind of narrative emphasis was never presented by women whose conscious same-sex subjectivity emerged after marriage. Whilst this may be partially about the absence of knowledge on sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular at the time when they were coming of age, a more plausible explanation lies in the wider context of different possibilities for women's alternative life courses according to different generations. As such, these relationships or sensibilities,

compared with younger women who were coming of age when gender norms were diversifying, did not produce a sense of sexual subjectivity anchored in same-sex desire. These women still married and devoted themselves to household and child. There were no alternative discourses on *tongxinglian*, or other options; and women's life possibilities were severely limited. As noted by Chou, "Women's sexuality has been buried in marriage and domestic responsibility" (2000: 120). Remember also that these women were mostly well-off who went to university and were already marrying later than the national average. Yet despite student life with intimate friends away from their natal home, conventional marriage and motherhood were unavoidable. Suyin, for example, pointed out on several occasions that anything else than marrying upon graduation was unthinkable, that she had no other option at the time. She did have, compared with the older Renxiang, some awareness of a stigma against same-sex sexuality, and that it was a bad thing. Renxiang also felt this, but noted also that she had never experienced sexual desire prior to marriage.

However, I also want to emphasize a somewhat different perspective in order to understand the differences in narrative patterns between women with and without marriage experience. This considers the emerging dominance of a particular type of retrospective narrative in the lala community. This narrative trajectory highlights memories of feeling different and intimate relationships, and the process of coming to lala awareness that is reminiscent of a progressive developmental sequence.

The narratives convey the complex production of sexual subjectivity in a cultural setting and at a time where the dominant discourse on 'homosexuality' created a powerful sense of fear in women who realized that they may be of a *tongxing*/same-sex disposition, or believed their relationships or sentiments were sure signs of them being *tongxinglian*. The fear of being *tongxinglian* and hence 'deviant', as we have seen in preceding chapters (esp. chapter one), extends far beyond the domain of private intimacy and sexuality behind curtains and closed doors. Sexual normativity, especially hetero-marital femininity, was instituted as the premise for the modernizing socialist nation itself.

A prominent characteristic of lala retrospective narrative focussed on gender difference, and was framed by heterogendered masculine/feminine dynamics, now increasingly conceptualized as TP roles. The degree to which one's sense of sexual subjectivity was experienced as differing from or corresponding with normative

femininity, structured contemporary lala subject categories in fundamental ways. It is this gendered practice and categorization I will turn to now.

4.2. The gender of lala: TP subject categories

As mentioned above, the gendered TP sexual subject categories that inform post-millennial lala cultures in the PRC, are decidedly new phenomena. Comparable lesbian gender categories have been discussed for the United States (Faderman, 1991; Halberstam, 1998; Kennedy & Davis, 1993), African societies (Morgan & Wieringa, 2005; Lorway, 2008), Indonesia (Blackwood, 1998, 2007; Davies, 2007), Thailand (Sinnott, 2004, 2007; Wilson, 2004), and Hong Kong and Taiwan (Chao, 2001; Chou, 2000; Lai, 2007; Wang P., 2001). They demonstrate long-standing systems of gender dichotomization in lesbian intimate and social relationships, along a masculine/feminine grid based on heteronormative gender understandings. However, the TP system in the PRC has emerged only very recently, and the tongzhi and tongxinglian discourse preceding it did not differentiate according to gender. In contrast, lala discourse and culture - the framework for the TP system in many ways - is unequivocally gendered. This startling difference between the PRC and Taiwan and Hong Kong is due to the unique socio-political circumstances in the PRC, according to Taiwanese feminist-lesbian activist Wang Ping (2001). In the following excerpt she discusses a talk given by the leader of the Beijing Sisters at the 1999 *Huaren Tongzhi Dahui*/Chinese Tongzhi Conference, in Hong Kong. When discussing lesbian gender identity she notes that:

A lesbian from Beijing shocked us with her comment: 'Actually I don't know what you're talking about'. She said that in Beijing there is no distinction between 'T' and 'Puo' [P]. 'Can you tell I am a 'T'?' She asked ... Then she started to explain the unique circumstances in Beijing. The Cultural Revolution in Mainland China had disrupted the traditional gender roles, giving birth to a set of gender relations that radically differed from what we have in Taiwan ... 'our gender identification is different' ... the Beijing speaker said, if we thought that she was a 'T', she would say that every woman in Mainland China is a 'T', since they are all quite boyish. During the Cultural Revolution ... everyone had to act like a man. In fact, everyone looked similar, you would not be able to tell the difference and detect the femininity of a woman (2001: 127-128)

This is reminiscent of a Beijing woman in her thirties, interviewed by Chou (2000: 119-120), who said she had grown up with “Women hold up half the sky”, the famous propaganda slogan of Maoist China proclaiming gender equality and a universal effort to modernize China. In any case, the PRC’s gender systems have been considerably different from those in other societies, even Hong Kong and Taiwan, due to this recent political history. This is probably also why the TP system is developing now, in the post-millennial age of Internet and globalizing cultures, although I must emphasize that it is not simply a mainland version of the lesbian gender roles elsewhere.

The lala and TP subject categories emerged at the time of general access to the Internet. Wang argues, similarly to many women I knew in Beijing, that lala originated in Taiwan, was used by online bloggers and chatters, and travelled (mainly) electronically to the PRC in the late 1990s, when the Internet started to proliferate there. Women, in particular, appropriated this alternative sphere of cyberspace as a safe and anonymous haven for finding friends, lovers, and support (2004: 36-41).

A typical process of finding out about lala and its meanings through the Internet, is presented by Qing Zhao (introduced in chapter three):

When I was studying abroad, and I was beginning to find out about myself, I once did a Google search of “nütongxinglian” (‘female homosexual/ity’). I found various Chinese ‘lesbian’ web sites including “lalaclub.com” ... In the chat rooms and blogs I found out about TP, and the word ‘lala’ ... what they meant. I then decided I had to be a T ... it is about *xingge*/personality but includes *xing xingwei*/sexual orientation. If your personality is *nanxing*/male, you are T; if *nüxing*/female, you are P ... T is [sexually] active, P is passive...

Qing Zhao’s statement also displays a digested version of the common prescriptive components of the TP roles. In the following, I consider the qualities and expression of lala gendered subjectivity in terms of the TP roles, and I discuss what TP is seen to illuminate - and restrict - in terms of expressing individual subjectivity, as outlined in Qing Zhao’s narrative above. By presenting ethnographic material on TP subject positioning and practices, I enquire whether the masculine T and feminine P primarily represent the complementary feminine-masculine pairing of idealized heterosexual gender norms. I enquire into the relationship between gender and

sexuality as expressed by the TP categories in order to demonstrate how these categories and their representation are crucially related to wider socio-cultural influences. I am interested in exploring how self knowledge as identity category works for the women involved, and the extent to which narrating and thus presenting lala subjectivity via TP roles corresponds with everyday social subjectivities, and how lala ideology and everyday practice differ. In this respect, I enquire into women's relative investment into TP subjectivity and what is at stake in terms of coming to and demonstrating such subjectivity, the degree of acceptance of the difference that same-sex subjectivity is considered to have.

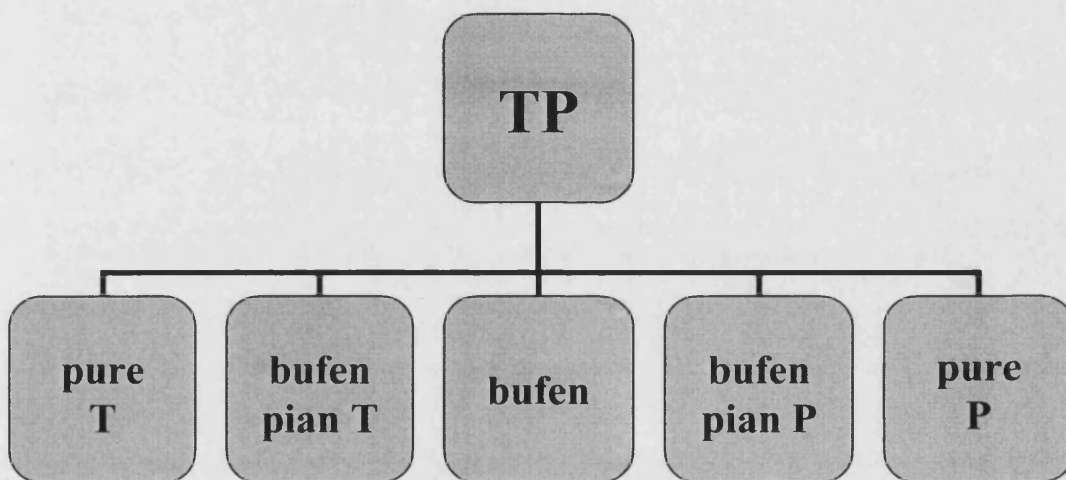


Figure 6: Diagram of TP roles.

The dominant TP subject categories distinguish between the gender-normative feminine P (*po*, or “wife”, similar to ‘femme’), and the non-normative T, short for ‘tomboy’ – the masculine or androgynous lesbian (‘butch’) (see fig. 6). TP categories operate on a sliding scale, like “the coordinates of two extremes”,⁷³ with *chun*-T (pure-T; ‘stone butch’) on the one end, and *chun*-P (pure-P; or ‘lipstick lesbian’) on the other. Those rejecting the TP system outright, or who felt that they embodied both TP qualities in (relatively) equal measures, often applied the term *bufen*, meaning “versatile” (lit. “not divide/separate” or “irrespective [of]”). This was sometimes used as a verb when replying to the mandatory question whether one identified as T or P: *wo bufen*/I don’t differentiate, rather than: *wo shi(yi)ge bufen*/I

⁷³ *lala* zine *Les+* editorial, 2006.

am (a) *bufen*. TP roles, on the contrary, were never used as verbs.⁷⁴ In some ways *bufen* occupied the middle ground of the TP scale. In between *bufen* and TP respectively, the roles of *bufen-pian*-T/P (meaning versatile but tilting towards T/P) provided further modifications to the T/P identificatory roles. These TP-based gendered factors determined lala subjectivity in complex ways. I will go on to discuss TP gendered sexuality in detail, starting with the T role which was by far the most commonly ascribed-to role in Beijing.

4.2.1. Female masculinities: The T role

Tengshen, an IT professional in her late twenties, talked about being T, in the lala zine *Les+* entitled *shenshide, youxiude/gentlemanly, yet graceful*:

I knew I liked girls since childhood, but I was born in the 1970s, at a time when homosexuality (*tongxinglian*) was invisible, nobody understood what this was then, or thought about the possibility that two women could be together. It was only in the late 1990s, when information started to flourish, and I found a lot of information online, that I realised that there are a lot of people like me in this world. In 1999 I had my first relationship with a woman, this experience caused previous doubts about my sexuality to vanish; I was now convinced that I was *tongxinglian*. Also, *wode Txing jiu zirande zhankaichulaile/my T character emerged naturally*.

This T character consists of a strong sense of *zhaogu ren/caring* for and protecting others, being *hen titie/very sympathetic*, and having a *shuaiqi/very handsome* appearance.

The interviewer asked Tengshen whether ‘being handsome’ was about imitating men, or hoping to become a man:

No, no, I never wanted to be a man, because first and foremost I *chengren ziji shi nüren/accept myself as a woman* ... I don’t have any desire to make my appearance masculine; in fact, I believe in my heart that T must include feminine merits like being exquisite, gentle, tidy, which I also believe are seen as the dignified epitome of masculinity; this is the kind of T I want to be.

⁷⁴ However, it was often used as an adjective, e.g. to comment on a piece of clothing or someone’s appearance or behaviour: *ni/ta tai T/P le!* (“You/she/it are/is too T/P”).

Why would a P love a T is she careless and mean-spirited? It could not compare to being with a man.

P is when a woman is *beigandong*/emotionally moved by a T, and as a result changes. I hope that the positive image of 'les' will improve further, so that general society won't just see Ts as fighting, swearing, depressed, or degenerates. I hope we can show society that we are well-mannered, with the adequate disposition and conversation skills; that we are simply outstanding.⁷⁵

The four gendered themes in Tengshen's narrative are widespread and important referents for T subjectivity, and I will discuss them briefly here. This included, for one, the T role as 'being like a man', wanting to be one, or considering yourself to actually be one; second, T as a natural and given essence of self; third, gendered qualities of independence, mental strength, social responsibility, and sexual behaviour, including appropriate conduct towards a partner in relationships; and finally, a *shuai*/handsome physical appearance. T subjectivity and heterogendered norms of masculinity interrelate in important ways in contemporary Beijing, as is the case in other literature on lesbian gender categories.

Many women expressed a similar view to that of Tengshen: whether you accept yourself as a woman who loves women makes an important, and also moral, difference in T categorization. For instance, identifying as woman or man in the first place provides the crucial basis for differing between T and *yixingpi*/'trans', i.e. someone who identifies essentially as a man. Hence, *yixingpi* would involve those who displayed views and beliefs about their gender and sexuality seen to be at the chun-T end of the TP scale. While I did not meet anyone who personally identified as *yixingpi*, it was not uncommon to hear women talk openly about others who displayed particularly negative traits that were considered typical masculine characteristics and thus as being *yixingpi* - for instance, those who were thought to be *chou*/ugly, who drank too much and were rowdy, and who treated girlfriends badly. In conversations about sexual practices, those who refused to undress or be touched intimately (*peng*, or *mo*) were also frequently referred to as *yixingpi*. Their refusal to receive sex was accordingly considered to originate in the 'fact' that they did not accept their female bodies and genitals. Undressing and being sexually intimate on

⁷⁵ *Les+* issue 2, 2006.

mutual terms with another woman would of course unequivocally establish a sense of sexual and embodied sameness, and thus erase the TP ideology's emphasis on dichotomous heterogendered compatibility (see, section 4.3). However, the boundaries between *yixingpi* and pure-T were quite blurred in this respect, since I was aware of several Ts who were considered by others to be 'pure' (*chun*) and whose views on sexual practice and their own sexuality could at least tentatively be seen to overlap with *yixingpi* characteristics.

Zhao defined herself as a *chun*-T, and was in her early thirties, with an MBA from a US university. She wore unisex clothes and a short hair-cut, but she did not strike me as particularly masculine in appearance or manners. Ever since childhood she had *xiang nanren*/felt like a man in terms of her tomboy personality and appearance, and attraction to feminine women. Zhao said she hated wearing typical feminine clothes, such as dresses or skirts, and that if she could choose she would prefer to be a man. However, when I asked her if she thought of herself more as 'a man' than *lala*, Zhao replied "lala". I asked if she had considered surgery to change her body, and whether she felt more *yixingpi* than *lala*, but she made it clear that this was not an option. She was going to live with her fate, however incompatible her body appeared to be with her T-ness. She spoke of her role in past relationships as being the financial provider for *piaoliang*/beautiful women, entertaining their affections with gifts and gentlemanly attention. Zhao took an exclusively active role in sex, which involved not undressing or allowing the partner to touch her intimately.

Zhao's attitude was not uncommon, yet the categorical terms that were typically applied differed vastly, from *yixingpi* to *chun*-T and 'just T', or simply *lala*. My general impression, based on numerous conversations and observations, was that the issue was not fundamentally one about a mismatch between psychological gender and the gendered physical body, but rather about discomfort with and lack of accepting oneself as an alternative kind of woman in a society where it is still the prerogative of conservative heterogendered norms to define acceptable femininity and female behaviour. Consider, for example, Yanlin who identified as *chun*-T, whose narrative I presented in the previous section. She thought of herself as male-like, given the way she felt about other women. In this respect, being *lala* or T was frequently perceived as a natural essence innate to the person from birth. It was thus unchangeable, natural, and, as a logical consequence, just as acceptable and morally

'right' as being straight or *zhengchangde*/normal. This is also reflected in several narratives detailing coming out to parents where, in effect, the phrase "I would change if I could", was used as an argument to effect acceptance by family members.

Same-sex attraction among women or girls, like in Zhao's account, was most likely sensitized as opposite-gender attraction, and the TP categories both reflected and reiterated this ideological division. Acceptance of gendered subjectivity as woman *and* T – and by extension the acceptance of same-sex subjectivity in terms of love, desire, and intimacy, as lala – was commonly backed up by definitive ideas about desired T qualities which were fundamentally based on the heterogendered masculine-feminine binary that the homo-sexual lala subjectivity seems to counter. This questions the determinist link between sexual and gendered identity. An examination of the hierarchical representations and ideas about appropriate female masculinity, where a kind of 'machismo' occupies one extreme and the resolved, self-accepting T lala occupies the other, further questions this sexuality-gender conflation.

'Machismo' (*danzhizhuyi*; lit. "big-man-ism") was attributed its own lala term in Beijing: *daTzhuyi* (lit. "big-T-ism"). It denoted the exaggerated displays of stereotypical masculine behaviour and attitudes which received such general dismissal in *lala* social life. In my understanding, *daTzhuyi* is about behaviour and personal qualities, while *yixingpi* relates to an experience of (an ideal) bodily and spiritual maleness; however, the boundaries were un-clear. What both concepts shared was a common judgement in that they were at the negative end of the T continuum, and a poor representative of lala culture. The emerging ideal T image was rather of the kind displayed in Tengshen's narrative.

This *daTzhuyi* generally involves perceived exaggerated masculine features of mental strength and power, which, to a certain extent, were celebrated as the presence of independence and courage (to diverge from heterogendered norms) as argued by Tengshen. However, if it was exaggerated it was seen as a display of negative stereotypical masculine traits of sexist and misogynistic attitude, termed *daTzhuyi*. Typical behaviour in this respect was controlling a P partner's personal freedom to an excessive degree - such as refusing her to attend lala venues alone, and a general attitude to women and relationships that bordered on male-chauvinism. Resolving problems in social and romantic relationships with violence was another

recognized key trait of T 'machismo'. This was witnessed in some of the lala bars during the busy weekends, and was debated in lengthy postings and debates in Internet lala spaces and bbs domains.⁷⁶ However, whether this was a discursive tendency that served to sustain the prescriptive TP dichotomy for 'good' lala subjectivity, or a reflection based on experiences is not quite clear.

Mental strength in the form of personal qualities, then, operated on a T-scale. The right balance between perceived positive features of masculinity and self-acceptance as a woman ensured socially recognised T subjectivity, while an exaggerated stereotypical masculinity and sexism were condemned as *daTzhuyi*, an ill-informed parody of masculinity. Individual women were rarely categorically labelled this way. Rather, certain aspects of behaviour might result in such judgements. For example, a T who was known to refuse her long-term P partner to participate in lala events when she worked away from Beijing, and was said to be *daTzhuyi* for this reason, was at the same time widely respected for her work ethics and successful business career.

Similarly, masculine or butch physical appearance seemed to be admired when backed by a fundamental acceptance of oneself as woman, while the exaggerated masculine exterior together with rowdy and 'bad' behaviour was socially condemned. Just like Tengshen emphasised that looking handsome was key to being a good T, displaying commonly accepted T physical characteristics - such as an androgynous and urban dress sense and hair styled in the spiky-punk fashion of the pop star Li Yuchun - were central to this T recognition.

Moral concern with T subjectivity and practice was considerable, to the extent that the Salon hosted a series of chaired discussions during spring 2006, to debate *T zhilü*/'the T path'.⁷⁷ It was introduced thus on the salon website:

We will discuss T *ziwo rentong*/ self-acceptance, *ziwo jili*/self-encouragement and development, and to debate a series of related issues such as *zizhi*/self-knowledge, *zhaiye*/career choice, *zhai'ou*/partner selection, *jiankang*/ [psychological and sexual] health, and how to establish a *hexie jiating*/harmonious home and family. Even if you do not endorse the social gender position of "T", we are all part of the same world and share *gongtongde ai*/the same type of love and [experiences] ...

⁷⁶ such as the *yilütongxing* section on *Tianya*, and the *luntan* section (forum) on lalabar.com.

⁷⁷ I will write about these debates in a paper on female masculinities in China.

Issues such as those presented above were considered in detail, and 'representative' Ts with careers and stable relationships offered their experiences. The primary aim was to provide positive role models and referents for the younger Ts coming onto the scene in ever increasing numbers, and who were described by the Salon manager Amei as the most *keliande*/disadvantaged amongst lalas owing to what many considered to be, ill-informed 'machismo'-like ideas about the meaning of T identity and behaviour.

4.2.2. Same difference: The P role

The limitations of such lala ideology of a shared 'same world' and 'same love' come to light when examining P narratives of same-sex experiences and awareness, since they convey far less continuity between P and lala categories than was generally the case for T and lala, or even tongxinglian. This suggests that there is no straightforward relationship between the T and P category as equivalent or similar to heteronormative ideals of the complementarity between men and women, male and female. In other words, P does not necessarily relate to T as female relates to male in heteronormative gendered ideology of opposite sex pairing and sex/uality. In fact, several Ps stressed that they did not see themselves as lala, lesbian or tongxinglian, and emphasized, rather, that they simply fell in love with a person who happened to be T. The T's female embodied sex was entirely unimportant. After all, based on the way in which TP categories and ideology work, the male/female: masculine/feminine ideal makes perfect sense: the gender non-conforming T takes the gender conforming P as her sexual and romantic object choice.

Mei Li, a P in her late twenties and in a four-year relationship with Yang, a T her own age, told me how she had been engaged to her university boyfriend of four years when she met Yang. With her well-maintained permed long hair, careful make up and: inch-long nails with dark-red nail polish, the sure-sign of P-ness, Mei Li struck a distinctive P figure and persona. She had never thought about herself as lala, but enjoyed the attention and gifts Yang showered her with, which seemed to have won her over initially. She described her feelings of being with Yang as *gaoxing*/happy,

shufu/comfortable, and *kaixin*/elated', emotions she had rarely felt with her boyfriend. She explicitly described the sexual relationship with Yang as a source of pleasure and characterised it as *wenruan*/soft or gentle, whereas she had been totally disinterested in sex with her boyfriend, and had always ignored his advances. Although she knew about 'homosexuality' from school and university, she said she had never felt that it was in any way related to her. However, as she put it in one of our conversations, when her feelings for Yang grew, she gradually came to realize that she was *zheyangde ren*/this kind of person. Simultaneously, she found the relationship with her boyfriend difficult and unhappy. She enjoyed being taken out by him and his attentions, but was uncomfortable with being pressured towards having sex. She also felt increasingly unhappy about the prospect of marriage, something her family was pressuring her about after she had graduated and started working as a teacher. In the end, she broke off the engagement and started a relationship with Yang. Soon after, they left their home city in a northern province to start a new life together in Beijing.

Now, a few years on, Mei Li was increasingly using the Internet to make T friends and stay updated of lala events online and frequently told me about lala friends she had made all over China. I was impressed by her considerable knowledge about lala events and trends, given she and her girlfriend rarely participated in any such events. Yang was shy and introverted, and clearly uncomfortable with socializing in lala venues, while the talkative and social Mei Li enjoyed chatting to and meeting others at badminton events, bar nights or the Salon on the few occasions they attended. It seemed clear that Yang felt a need to control Mei Li, and worried that her girlfriend's attractiveness was receiving attention from others.

While Mei Li's choice to leave her boyfriend for Yang was related to an awareness and recognition of Yang as a woman, or at least as non-male, her experience struck me as not so much about a specifically growing awareness of 'lesbian' subjectivity, as about seeking an escape from marriage pressure and discomfort with a mature heterosexual relationship by choosing a different and newly available solution: a relationship with a T. This option involved the ability to leave her oppressive home town and the increasing scrutiny and control of her family as she was approaching marriageable age. The relative shift in subjectivity in this respect was minimal, given the absence of evident gender transgression, which was the case for butch Ts. This may have provided immediate relief and independence,

but it became clear that social imperatives to achieve normative womanhood through marriage were catching up with her as she was nearing the age of thirty, and her sister at home had already been married for several years. Her family asked her relentlessly why she did not do the same.

When I met them a short while before I left Beijing, they both pondered whether to break up. Mei Li had started spending time with a younger T, who tried to make Mei Li leave Yang and move in with her. Mei Li on the other hand, was reluctant to make any abrupt decisions despite her discontent with the status quo. She told me that you cannot just forget a four-year relationship and move on that easily, and that she found the younger T too naïve about ‘real life’. Mei Li and Yang no longer slept in the same bed, did not have sex, or harboured much *ganjue*/feelings for each other, and both agreed that life together at present was merely about *guo rizi*/passing time. Mei Li had left her boyfriend to be with Yang because she had been *dui wo henhao*/good to [her], while now she was not anymore. Yang sat motionless and silent as Mei Li spoke. Dusheng, a younger T who was sitting with us, asked whether Mei Li would consider finding a boyfriend again. Mei Li responded that she did not think of herself as lala and that perhaps it would be more convenient to be with a man rather than a woman. She suggested she might be *shuang*/bisexual (lit. ‘double’), but seemed disinterested in pinning a particular label onto her self.

Mei Li’s narrative, which is similar to many other P stories, shows that P subjectivity can only partially be understood in relation to ‘homosexuality’ or ‘being lala’. Although Mei Li frequently visited online lala sites, she did not personally identify with the term. At some point she had realized she was “that kind of person”. This suggests the links between her shift in affection (from boyfriend to Yang) and available categories to denote same-sex intimacy as subjectivity were not as vital as I often experienced in the case of Ts. Contrary to typical T narrative, Mei Li and other Ps such as Nuying, did not experience earlier life in terms of gender non-conformity, quite the contrary: Mei Li clearly enjoyed flirting and appreciated affirmation of her feminine attractiveness. Creating a narrative continuity between earlier and present life of same-sex intimacy as lala subjectivity did not appear crucial. Surfing lala web sites and being online friends with Ts, were not indicators of a progressive recognition of lala identity as such, simply because she did not consider herself to be

one. She preferred the company and intimacy of women, but her understandings of the relationship with Yang did not develop from earlier feeling of difference, and she prided herself on adhering to conventional feminine gender norms.

What I have described above was a common appropriation of the P category among younger women, typically in their early-to-mid twenties, who had encountered little or moderate pressure to marry. As pressure to conform would escalate in line with getting older, obtaining a university degree and starting their first proper job, these women usually also started questioning - and terminating, most likely - their relationships with Ts, as I showed in Wei and Yanlin's case. Temporality figures as key feature of P subjectivity in two crucial ways. For one, P subjectivity and presence in lala space seemed to hinge on heterogendered feminine qualities that did not require adherence to lala sexual subjectivity over time, and validated by retrospective self-narration that pointed to a past of gendered and sometimes sexual difference, such as the general T narrative and subjectivity.

Furthermore, it was a common attitude that P, certainly the chun-P, were "not really lala", perhaps bisexual at best. This was because they were seen to have a fundamental ability to have sex with both men and women, and were likely to choose heteronormative married life. Thus, many Ts were negative about the possibility of long-term love-relationships with their ideal P partner. Stereotypical heteronormative ideas about a gendered personal essence contributed to such an outlook. As Tengshen explained, a T should be strong-willed, courageous, and independent in life. That a P should allow herself to marry a man was because she lacked such qualities. Dusheng, the T, said this about TP:

My girlfriend loves being spoiled, but I think there are few men who would be able to spoil her like me ... she is very gentle and *wenrou*/soft; in terms of home life it's very good, she'll make a good *laopo*/wife ... I am very *yonggan*/courageous, but she is not like that, she is like a kitten, a child ... it's to do with *rende xingge*/individual character. A T is usually brave, and has outgoing temper ... but P don't have the same nerve to be this way ... they have a fundamental potential to accept being with men, so therefore P don't have to struggle to the same degree as T do ... This is life, right, people don't want to exhaust themselves. So although P may prefer neither a man nor a T; they can easily accept being with a man, and then they will choose to live their life that way [i.e. get married] ... the choice of love and life style is not necessarily overlapping...

Women with marriage experience and (often) children, such as Suyin and Shui Jie described above, were usually reluctant to categorize themselves according to definitive TP terms, but would still emphasise ‘being P’ in specific circumstances such as being passive sexually, and in their normatively feminine appearance and behaviour. Suyin, for example, described herself as a bisexual (*shuang*) P lala: ‘bisexual’ because she could *jieshou*/manage to have sexual intercourse with her husband. She was P because she preferred the more passive role during sex – she argued once that being sexually active exhausted her (*lei*). Furthermore, she was lala because she was attracted to women, not men, as shown in her retrospective narrative. She told me about her previous and younger T girlfriend who had initially refused a mutual sexual relationship. After an evening out with one beer too many, however, she had been happy to let Suyin undress and have sex with her. Since then, the T had never again argued that a T should not be touched. Suyin occasionally repeated this experience in conversations with younger lala who were generally quick to make categorical claims about how and what TP should be and do. Suyin believed that these *xiao haizi*/kids simply had too little sexual and life experience, and that they would become aware of these things as they grew older.

Shui Jie, while P in appearance by wearing skirts, make up, and a feminine hair style, did not consider the TP categories important in order for her to *chengren ziji*/accept herself. She and her partner were quite similar, she argued, and did not consider their relationship in need of such gendered differentiation. Shui Jie and I sat together during one of the “T path” discussions where a 48-year old businesswoman, Johnny, talked at length about her life, work, and relationships. Shui Jie expressed incomprehension towards Johnny’s attitude to sex, who argued - like many Ts - that she received complete pleasure and satisfaction from performing sex on her partner, and did not want to be physically pleased. Shui Jie shook her head upon hearing Johnny’s words, and whispered to me that people with such a distorted view *you wenti*/have problems. In similar ways to Tengshen in the *Les+* zine, she argued that self-acceptance as woman is fundamental to becoming a ‘good’ lala, and in turn be able to conduct ‘healthy’ and ‘good’ relationships, regardless of TP subjectivity. Shui Jie confided she did not like chun-Ts such as Johnny, as she felt they were trying too hard to be men, and she could not see the point in that since they were, after all, women. This point reiterates many views with regards to the discourse and anxiety about *daTzhuyi*, or ‘machismo’, as I have mentioned.

I have discussed narratives of TP subjectivity as the current prominent subject categories in lala sociality, and highlighted how ideologies on heteronormative gender stereotypes structure dynamics of TP discourses and behaviour. At the same time, a comprehensive mixture of socio-geographical factors contributes to modify practices and establish lala subjectivity. In this respect, we have seen that age and marital experience in particular, emerge to structure and modify lala subject formation in gendered terms. In the next section I focus on sexuality in discourse and practice in order to further probe sexuality and gender in establishing 'lala difference'.

4.3. Erotic equations: Sexual ideology and practice

By discussing sexual practices I here offer additional insight to the complex interrelationship between gender and sexuality in constituting lala subjectivity. For instance, Valentine, as I have argued in chapter two, argues for the value of re-examining the conceptual split between gender and sexuality in scholarship, given they "are both separate *and* connected categories and experiences" (2007: 239-240). This connection is apparent when we now turn to look at discourses and social interaction regarding sexual practices. In the following, I discuss and compare material gathered in two quite different settings: one is from a day-trip organized by the weekend bars management, to Miyun, a scenic area outside Beijing, with a large group of women. There, I participated in a lengthy and eventful truth-or-dare card game concerning sexual play and pleasure. The other is the weekly lala salon where two discussions titled *lala shuo xing*/lala talking sex, took place in autumn 2005.

These events illuminate major lala perspectives on sexual discourse and ongoing efforts to define and contain meanings of 'good sex' between women. By using the term 'good' I want to highlight pleasure, desire, as well as moral aspects - official and alternative - regarding sexual practice. By extension, the socio-spatial formation of lala subjectivity, through the conceptual mainstays of gender and sexuality discussed here, presents the "terrain of social transformation, the location of intense struggles over power, symbols, meanings, values and resources" (Moore, 2007: 207).

In short, struggles over desirable meanings and practices regarding TP, lala, and sexual subject formations are shown to integrate relatively straightforward concerns for

sexuality and gender with wider symbolic aspects of subject formation, as discussed in detail in chapter three.

4.3.1. 'Truth or dare' – Playing sexual games in Miyun

Although sex was usually a topic which yielded little in terms of information, due to the universal reticence to talk about it and divulge information, truth-or-dare card games were occasions when sex was encouraged as the focal point of conversation and interaction.⁷⁸ I often observed such games in the bars at weekends, and sometimes versions of truth-or-dare play started during lengthy dinners in restaurant private rooms. The playful tone, accentuated by the safe, relaxing context of a bar or other lala social space, and the standard accessories of cigarettes, tea, soft drinks, sometimes (but not necessarily) alcohol, and snacks, seemed to ease shyness and enhance underlying desires to talk, flirt, and make new friends and more. The games were also performances of sorts, especially as the dares often involved kissing or approaching someone sitting at another table, as well as elaborate dancing or moving through the venue for public 'ridicule'.

On the Miyun trip, I ended up playing this card game with five other women in the little village restaurant where we spent an afternoon away from the sun. We initially met when sharing a mini bus on the outward journey, and went on to spend the day together. Apart from Qing Zhao (introduced in the previous chapter) whom I knew already, there was Wenling, who was 35, single and divorced, a design professional and entrepreneur. She identified as T, previously 'pure' but now *bijiao*/rather *bufen*. Third was Tingxia, a 23-year old chun-T, with an unspecified job. She was initially very quiet and shy, but became gradually more forthcoming and chatty as the day proceeded. Then there was the TP couple Xifeng (T) and Meixiang (P), in their mid-twenties.

This game involves distributing a number of cards amongst the participants - the exact regulations on numbers and meanings tend to vary - and the person with the highest score wins the right to choose truth (tell a truth) or dare (act any situation) on the part of the person with the lowest score, or any member/s of the participating group.

⁷⁸ An exception to this general reticence are the extensive online postings on sex in lala chat rooms and web chat rooms. However, due to the decontextualized nature of these exchanges I am not including this aspect.

Oftentimes, the questions or dares would remain relatively innocent and superficial, but on this occasion they became very personal and sexually explicit. The questions included: favourite sexual positions, erotic body areas and favourite means of stimulation, use of toys and how; condom use, masturbatory practices, heterosexual experience compared with same-sex experience, as well as questions about how to find a partner and make relationships work. The 'loser' was asked to detail her preferences and experiences, yet it developed into discussions amongst all of us, to establish differences in practices or opinions. For example, genital touching (*peng*) was extensively debated in relation to favourite sexual practice and masturbation. Someone asked how many fingers participants preferred, and it seemed that one and two were the average, while three was frowned upon as 'too much'. In response to my question, everyone confirmed that *peng* means penetrative practice, not simply 'touching' or *mo*/stroking.

There was far less clarity on the relationship between *peng* and clitoral stimulation, which also came to light in the discussion on masturbation. In general, few women were willing to discuss masturbation; my impression was that it – together with oral sex - remains by and large a taboo topic. For example, one younger T I knew well once said that masturbation was *meiyou yiyi*/'meaningless', that sex was for two people to enjoy, not alone. When the masturbation question came up here, only two others volunteered to have experienced this. Meixiang laughed while telling us that she did it, using her fingers, before she got together with Xifeng. Now, there was no need, she argued, laughing. Wenling also nodded in confirmation to this question, but did not volunteer any more details. During our drawn-out card game, this was probably the only topic that created general reserve and silence, thus clouding our interaction.

The question about heterosexual experience also expanded into a discussion. In response to Wenling's question, Meixiang recounted that she had had a boyfriend when she was 18. Sex with him was too *zhong*/serious and she had no *ganjue*/feelings. Sex with a woman in comparison was *wenruan*/soft. Wenling volunteered information about her marital experience, which was somewhat similar to older women's narratives already set out. Before she married she did not realize that she preferred women. She married a man she enjoyed playing table tennis with when she was 27. Sex with him gave her *meiyou shenme ganjue*/no pleasure, and gradually she realized her preference for women, told her husband (not her parents), and filed for divorce despite her husband and parents' opposition.

The dares included three occasions of simulating sexual positions in an adjacent bedroom. The first pair was Meixiang, summoned as T, and myself as the P. Meixiang, reluctant and unwilling to enact a ‘top’ role – which was ordered by the group, not simply the winner – had to be pushed by her T girlfriend, who was visibly enjoying Meixiang’s transgression, to lie on top of the ‘passive P’. Meixiang immediately apologized profusely to me, although I assured her it was perfectly fine. The second pair was Meixiang and Xifeng, the TP couple, ordered to enact their preferred sexual position. This turned out to be a top-bottom, active-passive, TP based scenario. Again, Meixiang appeared embarrassed and reticent, but was still enjoying the game. Obediently and with a serious expression, Xifeng lay down on top of her chuckling girlfriend, until the watching group applauded and laughed; then all returned back to the table for the next round. The third pair was the two young Ts, the single Tingxia, and Xifeng, and it was Meixiang who summoned them with great delight, to enact the stereotype TP scenario, with Tingxia as the P. However, they were so embarrassed that they were unable to complete the task, despite efforts by the others to push them into place. After a few moments wrestling back and forth, they simply embraced briefly while sitting at the edge of the bed; then all agreed to call it off and return to the table.

These truth-or-dare card games can be seen to provide a socially acceptable setting for divulging and obtaining information on sex, rarely debated socially otherwise unless online. Usually, these games were popular amongst the younger women and in the bar, so the Miyun event was unusual in that respect. This particular game was also considerably more detailed than I had experienced elsewhere. I now turn to a comparative look at another social event where sex was elaborately discussed, the Salon.

4.3.2. “Lala talking sex” – Debating good sex in the Salon

During autumn 2005 the Salon hosted two discussions on sex, which were in large part due to ‘popular demand’, according to manager Amei. She was frequently approached about women’s concerns, online and via the lala telephone hotline operated by the Salon and Tongyu jointly. These two events largely developed as a talk presented by a young T woman, Ehuang, who was one of the few willing to discuss this topic publicly, and who also confessed to being “very interested in sex since I was 14”.

Thematically, both these events centred on hygiene, the technicalities of sex, and TP-based sexual roles. There was little input from the audience apart from manager Amei, and a few others, including the anthropologist. *Jiankang*/hygiene was the first topic of debate. It was also something women readily expressed opinions about in informal conversations, as opposed to experiences of pleasure and practice. Ehuang's suggestions of washing your hands before sex, paying particular attention to cleanliness during menstruation, and when practicing oral sex, was similar to women's talk elsewhere. It also echoed, I suggest, the overall discursive emphasis on same-sex sexuality as existing within a public health perspective in contemporary China. For example, the Tongyu network's first research project: *A research report on Beijing female homosexuals' health* (Tongyu, 2005), focussed mainly on lesbianism in the context of mental and sexual health and hygiene. This framework defines good sex in moral terms, as it extends from naturalized ideologies of reproductive sex, health and hygiene. By extension, it links same-sex intimacy with modern nation-building (see, chapter one).

The technicalities of sex were brought up by Amei, who argued that many women were too shy to ask *zenme zuo ai*/how to have sex (lit. "how to do love"). Ehuang noted that sexual pleasure is experienced very differently by different people and suggested the importance of ongoing communication between lovers to ensure consent and limit risk, as well as non-genital foreplay. She then picked up an empty glass and a straw which she used to demonstrate how to perform penetrative sex and reach particular spots within a vagina. She explained how to find the g spot, how to approach a *chunü*/virgin, and the potential pain of penetrative sex. Breaking up an atmosphere in which many women were clearly uncomfortable - some looked away or to the floor - Ehuang smiled and joked, and occasionally a friend came to her rescue by wiping her sweaty forehead with a napkin with dramatic gestures to create comic relief.

The topic soon turned to TP-based sexual roles. Perhaps in an attempt to personalize the talk and encourage an informal atmosphere and participant questions, Ehuang offered an account of her own transitional development from pure T to 'T-looking bu fen'. When she first realized she was lala, she recounted, she did not bufen/differentiate between masculine and feminine roles. She learned about TP online and decided she was a chun-T. This was mainly due to her masculine appearance, but also because she did not want to be touched sexually by someone else at this point. Lala friends taught her that being pure T meant not undressing during sex, not allowing others

to 'peng' you, and binding your breasts to make your body male-like. However, in her current relationship, the girlfriend insisted on mutual sex. Therefore, she had gradually been able to 'bufen', to enjoy *shuangfangde*/mutual sex. At this point I asked Ehuang how chun-Ts experience sexual pleasure. She explained that most chun-Ts do not accept themselves as women who like other women. Hence, they imagine themselves as male-like or *yixingpi* ('trans'). This is also why they *kongbu*/fear exposing their female body with a lover, because they do not feel *anquangan*/safe. Another woman asked how chun-Ts achieve orgasm. Ehuang explained the difference between so-called *xinlishandde*/psychological and *shentishangde*/physical *gaochao*/orgasm. A chun-T achieves psychological orgasm - a *ganjue*/feeling in your mind - from performing sex on her lover and from knowing she achieves pleasure and (physical) orgasm. I asked Ehuang which type of orgasm she prefers, and she responded: "of course, I prefer a physical orgasm!" She then launched into a detailed explanation of different types of physical orgasms, including the clitoral and vaginal, with more glass-holding explanations of where and how to.

A forthright, young P-identified student challenged Ehuang's focus on examples with TP roles only: why did she not discuss different combinations such as TT or PP, she demanded. Ehuang responded that she primarily spoke from her own experiences, and hence was utilizing the TP paradigm. She looked around hesitantly, and my impression was that she would have been more than happy had other attendees offered input and narratives to complement her own presentational focus. When chatting with Ehuang later in the evening, I commended her for being courageous and for attempting to establish a discussion. She responded that she found it difficult because, although she was well aware of the universal interest in the topic, the pervasive silence and non-participation made it impossible to focus the discussion towards particular interests and concerns.

It seems that the salon sex discussions were in many ways emerging as prescriptive and dominant sites of production of lala identity and sociality. The sex discussions were structured so as to explicitly convey desirable understandings of 'good sex'. Conveners were chosen who were considered likely to convey this message in the desired way and yet also to promote a sense of community and belonging. The substantial silence and non-participation, and lack of volunteering personal perspectives on sex in these sessions, had the (unintended) effect that a dominant discursive approach, the one

instigated by the organizers, developed relatively uninterrupted. However, the critical questions voiced about the TP-structured sexual discourse demonstrate that different approaches were indeed being debated. Moreover, Ehuang's self-narrative of gradual development of a rounded sexual identity less rigidly informed by TP dichotomy, exemplifies an emerging normative approach to sexual subjectivity. In this view, rigid TP roles were negative referents that mimicked heterosexual, traditional gender roles in an unhelpful way and with a particularly negative effect for Ts. Increasingly, as we also have seen in the previous section on TP roles, fluid TP roles, marked by attention to pleasure and communication rather than static roles were increasingly being advocated.

This alternative and less structured approach to lala sexual practice and pleasure is very noticeable in the example from the Miyun trip. First of all, the context was very relaxed and mutually participatory; it included both talk and action. The group of people playing the game was diverse in age, TP identification, socio-economic background, and general life experience; most did not know each other beforehand. The interaction, questions, and topics focussed on what women actually did or wanted to do, and that they did or wanted it because of pleasure and enjoyment. Hygiene and health were hardly mentioned. Furthermore, the communication was by and large descriptive, not prescriptive. No one participant in particular assumed discursive authority. The atmosphere did not instigate or propagate moralizing discourses on good/bad sex or sexual topics, but encouraged participants to share their experiences and thoughts about what they actually enjoyed and had experienced. The informal atmosphere encouraged play and jokes, and forged a momentary sense of togetherness that enabled women to let down their guards and share lives in a way that did not often happen in settings like the salon or even the bars, where the framework was of a different nature.

4.4. Conclusion

This chapter has followed on from chapter three's discussion of lala subject formation, but here with a specific focus on narratives and experiences of gendered and sexual difference. I focussed on three intertwined aspects, namely narrative trajectories of subject formation, TP subject categories, and the field of sexual activity and pleasure. By discussing various retrospective narratives of coming to an awareness of being

different and being lala, I demonstrated the complex composition of lala subjectivity, and particularly in relation to age cohort and gendered subjectivity. 'Being different' was often manifested as gender deviance at first instance, and intimate relationships were often considered as forms of friendships. By including considerations of the TP roles and sexual practice here, it appears that women adhering to the T subjectivity have experienced or still experience this difference more profoundly than P-identified women, who often emphasized the absence of difference. An important marker of sexual knowledge was access to official discourse on tongxinglian, which I showed to structure women's initial self-understanding of same-sex sexuality.

Sexual identity itself seems somewhat less prominent to lala subject formation. The TP structure clearly derives from hetero-gendered norms, but intense discursive struggles contribute to lala TP genders being continuously questioned and re-defined. This was particularly clear with regards to the proper limits to the butch T role. The P role, in turn, bordered the limits for what was same-sex sexuality by their implied gender conformity. It seems that T more than P relates to sexual and gender difference, and more often than P it translates into categorical sexual identity over time. TP, in short, questions and challenges heteronormative structures of homo/hetero and masculine/feminine.

The interplay of gender and sexuality are further shaped and shape other markers of subjectivity, which were thoroughly examined in chapter three. This chapter consequently has made the argument that gendered and sexual difference produce lala subjectivity in specific ways, but the ethnography presented here also lends itself to the framework of social geographies I presented previously.

Taken together, these two chapters have convincingly argued lala subjectivity as sets of intersecting practices and ideologies that reach far beyond the domain of sexual desire and sensibility itself. Gender and sexuality are shown to fundamentally constitute each other and also lala experience, thus heeding Valentine's argument of their conceptual split and conflation (2007). The narrative and embodied production of TP, lala life stories, and sexual practice frame same-sex sexual subjectivity within the contemporary moral and cultural terrain of defining what makes a 'good' Chinese citizen. The field of marriage has emerged as a structuring factor in lala life projects, and the next two chapters discuss marital aspects of lala subjectivity in detail.

CHAPTER FIVE

How the marital field shapes lala relationships

[My mother] would be devastated if I were to remain unmarried ... You know, she is also pressured by her environment: neighbours, other, and older family members, and so on. I should understand her ... I said to her that I know she wants me to be happy, but happiness for me is not about being married ...

Peijing, 29 years old

5.1. Introduction

This chapter is the first of two that explores the relationship between the domain of marriage and lala subjectivity and relationships. I have demonstrated in the preceding chapters that marriage constitutes a critical site where women negotiate their same-sex subjectivity. The marital field is so important because it brings together expectations of familial duties and ideologies, including filial obligations (*xiao*), with state-sponsored political projects of modernization and national progress. This is typically conveyed in a language of belonging and citizenship that relies on the trope of familial intimacy: notions of stability, normality, quality, and harmony are invoked to create and reproduce ‘good’ and desirable standards for national/ist participation and the appropriate standards for cultural membership - or Chineseness. Undesirable alternatives, including public or open homosexuality - whether it is gay sex in the parks, or ‘confrontational’ activist rhetoric (see chapter seven) – disturb the social harmony and the ‘normal’ equilibrium that the dominant ideological project of modern society and progressive governance requires.

Most of the women in my study ascribed to marital and familial notions of ‘good’ citizenship, and they wanted, at least in part, the kinds of life styles and social status that invoked these official, desirable notions of belonging. In this respect, I have applied the notion of ‘desirable duty’ to illustrate this simultaneous desire for, and

sense of being pressured towards, such heteronormative female-gendered adulthood. Lala relationship strategies thereby involve a range of creative - and sometimes, but not always, subversive - appropriations of dominant marriage-related norms, which cannot simply be explained as agency-less reproduction of oppressive normalcy. In other words, engaging with a social structure that in many ways reified dominant and homophobic ways of life and family relationships, did at the same time provide a positive source of self esteem and enabled the conditions for autonomy and independence that made lala subjectivity and sociality possible.

What makes these two chapters on marriage differ from - and complement - each other, is the shifting emphasis I apply on lala negotiation of the marriage domain. The ethnographic examples in this chapter illustrate the structural framework for what is possible in lala relationships, and the social conditions for lala strategizing, vis-à-vis family and other normative relationships. To a more direct extent than the following chapter, the discussion here conveys lala familial relationships, and how they are conditioned by the marital domain. Chapter six goes on to consider instances where women were directly engaging marital strategies, and how they attempted to facilitate autonomy and independence from normative hetero-feminine adulthood. They thereby sought a normative appearance (or 'face') that could, in turn, facilitate private intimate lives that differed from the values that marital status was considered to entail. I will suggest that the approach towards the marital field from both perspectives demonstrates the overall argument on sexual difference that my thesis puts forwards: namely, that same-sex subjectivity is not inherently and exclusively about sexual desire but is conditioned by a range of factors, and that such subjectivity is not always and already lived in disruptive opposition to normative lives.

In the following section I will briefly discuss conjugal ideals in the Chinese and Euro-American contexts, in order to situate the importance of and connection between marital status and same-sex, or queer, intimate relationships in the scholarship that influences my work (Berlant, 1997; Berlant & Warner, 1998; Chauncey, 2004; Lewin, 1998; Povinelli, 2006; Warner, 1999; Weston, 1991). I do this also to bring out the Chinese cultural specificity of the particular practices that I observed, but also to appreciate the cross-cultural similarities in queer life strategies. I suggest that contemporary queer efforts to achieve recognition and equality through gay marriage and family projects have a lot in common with contemporary same-sex relationship

strategies in the PRC. I contend that the constant downplaying of lala difference by emphasizing qualities of normalcy, everyday life, 'like everyone else', is similar to many aspects of mainstream queer rights advocacy in Euro-American contexts.⁷⁹ The importance of the marital domain is what connects these otherwise very different locations. Lewin's work on same-sex marriages and commitment ceremonies in the contemporary United States (1998), show the powerful logic of marriage in enforcing normative forms of familial belonging and a desire for mainstream recognition in same-sex life projects (see 2.3.2). I suggest therefore that lala intimacy and sexuality are irrevocably intertwined with normalizing state projects in similar ways to queer activist campaigns for recognition and equality in other parts of the world. Whilst it is beyond the remit of this thesis to cross-culturally compare same-sex strategies and the marital field between the PRC and the US as such, it is useful to note some nodes of discursive similarities across these cultural locations.

5.2. 'Normal' troubles: Marital ideology in China and conjugal queer debates in the United States

Kinship, sexuality, and marriage formations have been discussed in much recent queer and sexuality literature, as I have outlined in chapter two. What studies on gay kinship (Weston, 1991), same-sex wedding rituals (Lewin, 1998), and lesbian and gay community formations (Faderman, 1991; Kennedy & Davis, 1993; Newton, 1995), demonstrate is a complex terrain whereby the negotiation of difference takes place both within *and* beyond socially recognized propriety and legal frameworks. I have already argued, and will further demonstrate in chapter seven, that Chinese queers consider stability and normalcy as fundamental to their overall lives, and that direct, explicit, and confrontational 'coming out' and rights campaigning are, on the whole, considered inappropriate and undesirable. Part of my ambition is to enquire into the

⁷⁹ An important question to ask is: what is happening to actual sex and sexuality here, and how does their discursive erasure, as I see it, influence the project of culturally theorizing sexuality at this particular time in history? This is, however, a substantive topic and therefore one that I will pursue in my future work. I am particularly interested in the Chinese versus Western similitude that emerges in terms of the seeming propensity to utilize normalizing ideologies and strategies, and what these sets of logics do to the contemporary and future possibilities for queer life ways (e.g. Butler, 2004, 2008; Fassin, 2007).

meanings of concepts such as 'being normal' and 'stability' in order to come to an understanding of their values beyond simply an adherence ('subjection') to heteronormative styles of life. Here I want to discuss these concepts and values in some detail, and then, proceed to relate these structures to queer formations in Euro-American scholarship. In contention with my reading of McNay (2000), Yan (2003), and Jean-Klein (2000) in particular, and my argument on the process of subjectification (esp. 2.4.), I suggest that normalizing discourses and practices, whilst creating the appearance of collaboration with dominant familial and kin models, at the same time carry the potential to generate forms of agency and life trajectories that enable differential modes of life and love. The realization of such potential and actual modes of this realization, hinge on the specific constellations of socio-geographical factors that I discussed in chapters three and four: age and generational cohort, educational and career attainment, sexual and gendered subject positions, marital status, place of origin (rural/urban, Beijing/non-Beijing), and current residency.

The concept of stability remains a defining aspect of Chinese culture, politics, history and social organization. Its omnipresent significance circumscribes any level of social life, from the intimacy of two lovers, to state government and global politics. Furthermore, its relevance spans centuries of Chinese government, cultural cosmology in areas such as architecture, art, conversational and meditative practices, and military strategies. Its opposite - *luan* and *dongdang*/chaos and disorder - have regularly figured as normative value statements in Chinese official discourse, and across status and class, and geographic regions. Ancient and modern Chinese cosmology, based predominantly on Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist moral philosophy and religious spirituality, emphasizes the flows (often conceptualized as cycles) of matching, oppositional forces (*yin-yang*) that structure life - earthly and spiritual, current, future and the past - and the necessity to keep them in balance, in order to achieve and maintain *wending*/stability and *hexie*/harmony.

In the PRC, these long-standing values and norms have merged with socialist political philosophy and propaganda, and have developed to explicitly concern sexuality, family life, the Party state, and their interrelationship in a language different from previous eras. The moral emphasis on hetero-marital kinship forms and reproductive sex to build a prosperous socialist nation-state portray different forms of sexuality and intimacy as undesirable in pervasive ways (see, chapter one).

Homosexuality, in the form of sodomy - usually in the context of male rape and prostitution - emerged as a legal concern in Late Imperial China, and early modern Republican China (after 1911). At this time, European and Japanese medico-scientific scholarship and literature took hold amongst radical intellectuals who were concerned with establishing a modern, powerful China against the backdrop of the imploded Empire (e.g. Dikötter, 1995; Engebretsen, 1997, 1998; Hinsch, 1990; Sommer, 2000). As I have argued in chapter one, the discursive category of ‘the homosexual [person]’ (*tongxinglian*) and categorical ‘homosexuality’ (*tongxinglian*) emerged in binary opposition to the normal citizen. Classified as a sexual deviance, homosexuality challenged marital harmony - i.e. conjugal sexuality and domestic love - alongside for example prostitution and the corrupted bourgeoisie.

Marriage as a practice to consolidate the value of conjugal family and reproductive norms, has been cemented as fundamental for social and (hence) regime stability. In this respect, it has been argued that the “[f]amily is the metonym for belonging, not simply to the nation-state but to Chinese culture writ-large”, and the “ongoing discursive productions of family are indispensable sites for establishing one’s humanness as well as one’s social subjectivity” (Rofel, 2007: 100).

As I have argued in chapter one, there exists a strong valuation of kin and lineage throughout Chinese history. The filial imperative (*xiao*) provides a moral and cultural regulator of cross-generational, cross-status relationships, although of course the contents of this imperative are being constantly modified according to changing socio-historical transformations (see 1.2.2.1.1.). Marriage practices remain at the core of prevailing normative kin relationships. They are in many ways the most crucial structural referents that ensure a continuation of stable families and social identity, and hence, cultural citizenship - or: desirable Chineseness.

State-sponsored campaigns in the 1990s introduced a “new vocabulary to evaluate people’s standing in a changing socialist civilizational hierarchy through a language of quality, culture, and civilization” (Friedman, 2006: 230; see also Anagnost, 2004; Rofel, 2007: 103). The state-sponsored official notions of stability, harmony, and normality shaped this vocabulary profoundly, and to an extent that influenced and framed all spheres of social relationships and conduct. These concepts, then, have the effect to designate value and aspiration towards a particular and appropriate cultural citizenship in contemporary China, one that we may call an economy of sex and sociality (Rofel, 2007: 101). It creates, Rofel suggests, distinctive

divisions of class, of urbanity and rurality, and of aspirations to a cosmopolitan modernity (ibid.). Yet they are still recognizable as appropriately Chinese cultural citizenship, and possess links to global discourses of identity and 'gayness'. In turn, it produces certain ways of being gay, lala, or tongxinglian, as being desirable over others. Rofel, for example, shows how the so-called 'money boys'⁸⁰ in Beijing are regarded as low-quality (or quality-less: *meiyou suzhi*),⁸¹ effeminate, rural peasant prostitutes.

Berlant and Warner suggest, in discussing the project of constructing a normative familial model of society in the contemporary United States, that official institutions and ideologies of heteronormative intimacy are promoted as visions for *the* good life (1998). The kind of 'good' life invoked in such normative discourses is of course based on heterosexuality through conjugal procreation, but sex itself is erased from public discourse and view. They argue that "national culture ... depends on a notion of privacy to cloak its sexualisation of national membership" (1998: 547). This renders heterosexuality hegemonic and natural, with "the heterosexual couple ... the referent or the privileged example of sexual culture" (ibid.: 548). They introduce the notion of 'counterintimacy' to describe forms of intimacy that take place outside the normative framework of kinship and marriage. I argue that a similar process is part and parcel of the nationalist modernization campaigns in the PRC. A 'good' life in contemporary China is founded on obedient adherence to familial norms, such as maintaining the OCP aims and marrying at appropriate times - all in the nationalist name of Chinese cultural citizenship. I discussed in chapter one in particular, how reform-era modernization and development have been consistently framed in a political language of family, kinship, and nationalism. I also discussed the state-sponsored project of controlling and prescribing procreative sex and producing desirable and modern citizens through, for example, the OCP.

Although the socio-cultural and political recent histories of the US and the PRC are, in many ways, vastly different, especially due to the completely different economic foundation of society and progress, I believe that Berlant and Warner's argument about how procreative, hence acceptable and heteronormative forms of, sex

⁸⁰ 'Money boys' is a colloquial term which denotes men who sell sex to other men.

⁸¹ The many women I knew who talked about 'quality' would always use the term *meiyou (shenme) suzhi* ("have no quality") when invoking the concept of quality in its negative (as they would also say *meiyou wenhua* ("have no culture"). Moreover, these two judgements often appeared together).

are being naturalized through the marriage institution, is also valid in the PRC. Heterosexuality is in both locations continually established as hegemonic and natural, by being discursively anchored in the nation-building project of producing 'good' citizens and reproducing the nation.

On this basis, one might assume that same-sex relationships thereby transgress and subvert these heteronormative mechanisms, but the ethnography suggests that these relationships are rather about appropriating normative strategies than subverting and opposing them. In her discussion of *dui pnua* same-sex relationships among women in south-eastern China, Friedman appropriates Berlant and Warner's concept of counter-intimacies to denote the *dui pnua* bonds (1998). Friedman thereby shows how these bonds are not intrinsically non-normative, and that they do not necessarily subvert normative life course. For example, most women will eventually marry, have children, and then move to the husband's family home. The *dui pnua* bonds will usually continue alongside the emerging conjugal household, and the relationships between women will develop into bonds that support women through life as wives, mothers, and in-laws. Therefore, the counter-intimacy inferred here implies that there are only "certain moments [where] those bonds have been perceived as threatening to a particular social or political order" (2006: 137). The broader issue here concerns a question of scale and temporality (Berlant & Warner, 1998: 283, Friedman, 2006), which connects individual lives and intense personal relationships with the trajectories of the collective, and hence, also with the importance of political and societal recognition of the possibility to live lesbian lives (Butler, 2004; Friedman, 2006: 10; Povinelli, 2006).

The ways in which normative marital ideologies intersect with ideals about same-sex relationships, then, serve to modify an initial impression that same-sex relationships unambiguously transgress normative notions of social identity and familial relationships. Lesbian 'counterintimacy', then, converges with heteronormative marriage ideologies and practices in ways that sometimes but not always subvert and upset normative forms of sociality. By considering marital fields in the following sections and the next chapter, my aim is to demonstrate ethnographically how these multiple relationships, ideologies, and aspirations are played out amongst the women in my study.

5.3. The consequence of counter-intimacy: Marriage as standard for desirable forms of love

The remaining sections of this chapter detail ethnographies of lala relationships and life projects that, depending on individual social status, incorporate conjugal ideals in order to establish relationship endurance, and respect from significant others and society. In different ways, these relationships and strategies circumvent official marital discourse, while at the same time they also collaborate with them. The first example considers the short-term liaison between two women, one divorcee and one married mother, who due to their overall life circumstances, experienced great difficulty in establishing any enduring basis for their relationship. The second example discusses a couple who had been together for over sixteen years at the time of my fieldwork, and who as a consequence enjoyed considerable respect amongst other women. The third example considers a young student couple's engagement, with intent to marry, and suggests that the promise of marriage provided an attempt to establish commonality and fixity in a situation in which they faced insurmountable external pressures. The fourth example, providing a stepping stone to chapter six's consideration of actual marriages, discusses a single woman's deliberations about marrying a gay man in a contract marriage, as a means to cancel out the normalizing pressures that were increasingly taking over her life.

These ethnographic examples demonstrate, on the one hand, the multiple and varied forms of normalizing pressures that women face in adult life, and they reveal the great extent many go to in order to make their own personal desires retain importance in current life and the aspirations for future resolutions, on the other. These narratives moreover spell out the fundamental importance of factors such as overall autonomy, and look ethnographically at various ways in which women aspired to or had successfully negotiated degrees of such autonomy. Socio-economic circumstances, in the connection with age and residency, emerge as particularly important structuring factors for marital conformity, as I have also suggested in chapter three's more general discussion.

5.3.1. The short-lived relationship between divorcee Qiaohui and married mother Zhenzhen

Conversations I had with forty-year old Qiaohui, a divorced *bufen lala* who lived with her parents in west Beijing, and her sometime lover Zhenzhen, a married 35-year-old and mother of a three-year old son who did not consider herself to be *lala*, illustrate common beliefs about ‘homosexuality’, same-sex intimate relationships and sociality, and the importance of marriage. Their experiences and ideas point to the ways in which homosexuality and same-sex relationships were envisaged and conceptualized, both by themselves and by their families.

Qiaohui’s life experience as a lesbian had been directly framed by state intervention, because in the 1980s she had been detained in a mental institution for her ‘homosexuality’ (lit. *gao tongxinglian*, or “engage in homosexuality”). At that time she was already married to a man when she became infatuated with a fellow female worker. When her work unit realized the actual circumstances of this event, she was detained in a mental hospital for several months. During this period, neither her husband nor her parents claimed her (this was the only way she could have been released), and she underwent ‘treatment’ for her *tongxinglian bing*/illness. When at last she was released, her husband sought divorce on the grounds of her ‘illness’, and since that time, she has lived with her elderly parents in the outskirts of Beijing. Having no university qualification or particular career training, she did odd jobs in different places, but my impression was that she was on the whole financially reliant on her family. As I will go on to show, Qiaohui and her lover’s narratives evoke the complex interrelationship between personal intimacy, marital life, and governmental regulation. As such, they reflect both micro and macro-level norms and traditions with regards to sexual difference and everyday life, as well as their limitations. This importantly includes instances where same-sex intimacy transgresses, counters, and threatens the fragile ‘normal’.

One weekday afternoon the three of us chatted in the small office they rented in a residential-cum-work space, or *danwei*-like, compound in west Beijing. They had met some months previously, and according to Qiaohui, it was Zhenzhen who had been the more eager to pursue an intimate relationship, while Qiaohui herself was reluctant.

Qiaohui told me before Zhenzhen arrived, that just after they met the first time: “I thought of her as *yibande pengyou*/just a friend, nothing else ... *ta you jiating*/she has a family, a husband and a child, so *meiyou shenme weilai de*/there is no future for us ...” Nevertheless, Qiaohui enjoyed their time together. They worked together in the tiny office, where Qiaohui helped Zhenzhen with administrative duties, and shared intimate moments in a bed hidden in a corner behind tall filing cabinets. However, due to Zhenzhen’s married life and family situation, Qiaohui was under no illusion that their current affair could last or become anything else over time. It was impossible.

Later, Zhenzhen spoke at length about her views on *tongxinglian*. Prior to knowing Qiaohui she used to think of homosexuality as *naobing*/(brain)illness and *buzhengchang*/abnormal. Zhenzhen reckoned that she ‘knew’ about this from newspapers and general discourse; yet she emphasised repeatedly that she did not really know much about *zheyangde shi*’these things’ back then. In her opinion it was still a *xiqi*, or a minority practice/custom, and not something the majority of people would do or be. This minority/majority and abnormal/normal division was a moral juxtaposition she referred to several times during our conversation that afternoon in their office, and also later in the evening, when we had dinner together in a nearby restaurant. She further linked these binaries to the degree to which physical sex and gender conformity matched. Commenting on Qiaohui’s and my short haircuts, relatively androgynous or masculine appearances, clothing styles and our early awareness of being lesbians, or at least ‘different’, she then pointed to her difference from us: *women buyiyang*/we are very different. My impression was that she was not only referring partially to her different, more conventionally feminine appearance and long hair, but importantly to her married status and motherhood. Zhenzhen had married very reluctantly and quite late; in her early thirties. Prior to getting married, she had experienced considerable and enduring *hunyin yali*/marriage pressure from her parents. Coming from a rural area outside Beijing and now settled in the capital’s outskirts suburbs with her husband, son and her parents - her first venture outside her home village - she gloomily commented that: *wo meiyou banfa*/I had no other options. Enthusiastically talking about her relationship with Qiaohui, she expressed happiness about their affair and stated how it made her feel *ganqing* and *gaoxing* - “emotions” or “affection” [can also mean “love”], and “happiness” - feelings which she explicitly countered to *hunyin*/marriage: “They are two different things” she explained.

In a later conversation, Qiaohui, whom I knew better and spent a great deal of time with, described how Zhenzhen experienced physical pain and fear during sexual intercourse with her husband, and that it had gotten worse after the son's birth. In comparison, Zhenzhen experienced sexual pleasure with Qiaohui. Qiaohui - on one level evidently quite proud to announce such 'proof' of her sexual skills - believed that this, together with the alleviation of everyday marital and household monotony their relationship brought, was the main reason for Zhenzhen wanting an intimate relationship with her, not because she was 'really' lala.

Recently, however, Zhenzhen's mother had discovered the actual nature of their relationship as Zhenzhen had done Qiaohui's laundry in the family's home. The mother queried why she did the laundry for someone outside the family, and asked explicitly whether the two had an *aimeide guanxi*⁸² - a somewhat literary term to denote same-sex intimate relationships. Upon finding out, the mother had burst into tears, and had then made Zhenzhen promise to end the relationship. Some weeks later, after Zhenzhen and Qiaohui apparently kept meeting - they kept in touch by text messaging with their mobile phones - the parents had physically assaulted Zhenzhen as they found out that they had not severed their ties. Qiaohui was very upset about Zhenzhen's ordeal with her parents. Yet, Qiaohui had moved on emotionally and now harboured a (doomed) crush on a recently arrived foreign teacher, something Zhenzhen, in turn, was furious about. Ideally, it seemed as if Zhenzhen both wanted her family and also to pursue her affair with Qiaohui. She did not comprehend, or accept, that for Qiaohui, who had considerable more life experience and probably was under far less illusions about the obstacles that their liaison faced, her married status made their relationship impossible over time, and that Qiaohui therefore did not want to, or did not possess the necessary resources, to pursue it to the degree which Zhenzhen desired at the time.

Zhenzhen's impressions about the lala *shequ*/community were wholly negative, and they were based on experiences that Qiaohui had told her about; not her own. I asked her if she wanted to come to the Saturday salon, but she immediately refused: *wo you jiating*/I have a family. She also made it clear that she was not interested due to her "not being like that". Zhenzhen stated three major misgivings about the lala scene: She argued, firstly, that many women there smoked and drank alcohol, which was a

⁸² the literal translation to *aimeide guanxi* is "loving-beautiful relationship".

morally bad thing. In turn, this contributed to her second impression: that the community was *dongdang*/turbulent and *buwending*/unstable. She clearly did not want to be associated with this, and she also used her married status as an explanation for her reluctance to participate: to her mind, normal life as a married woman and the unstable lala social scene were mutually exclusive. A third argument Zhenzhen brought up was that in her opinion, few lala relationships were long-lasting, and she did not believe that same-sex relationships could last over time or for life, as heteronormative marriages were seen to do. She asked me if I believed that relationships between two women could last, and when I replied in the affirmative, she looked at me with what I thought to be a blank stare, before turning to another topic of conversation altogether.

Qiaohui and Zhenzhen's experiences point to pervasive ideas about same-sex relationships and sensibility, marriage, and their interrelationship that were remarkably common among the women I talked with, both same-sex oriented and straight. Importantly, these ideas are concerned with the perceived fundamental relationship between ideals of what is considered normal and forms of relationships and conduct. For example, Zhenzhen expressed a common conception both among lalas and others, that being lala and participating in lala sociality were in crucial ways demonstrating that you were "abnormal", "unstable", "turbulent" and "chaotic", against the desirable opposites of "normal", "stable", and "harmonious" - just like everyone else (see Chapter Seven on lala community and social activism).

As mentioned, lala women, too, tended to evoke these binary and moralizing characteristics of same-sex identification, relationships and lala social activism. For example, in one Saturday afternoon salon discussion the convener asked the floor their thoughts on why people *fandui*/oppose lesbians. Several women argued that being different in this way attracts others' attention (*bieren kande...*), implying that you stand out [negatively] from the crowd, and moral judgement. Furthermore, society was seen to value *yixing*/opposite-sex, rather than *tongxing*/same-sex relationships (termed: *nanxing nüxing juece*), and they argued for the various positive values conventionally associated with heterosexual relationships: *wending*/stability, *anquan*/ safe/ty or security, *jiankang*/ health/y. Qiaohui, who participated in the salon on this occasion, proceeded to argue that the emergent TP identity structure among lesbians reflected Chinese traditional heterosexual norms. Many other women sitting around the table, or

who were leaning over shoulders of those lucky enough to have a seat, nodded or expressed their agreement with Qiaohui's words. Indeed, as I discussed in chapter four, the logics of the TP system seemed in large part to hinge on evoking the ideal symmetric complementarity of masculine and feminine gender.

Women's views on the relative success of lala relationships seemed to evoke moral values similar to those characterising ideal opposite-sex relationships. When for example the bar manager couple broke up about one year after the bar emerged, and the remaining main manager eloped with another woman soon after, I was astonished to hear many women's harsh judgements citing concepts of *luan*/chaotic and *buwendong*/unstable relationship and behaviour, although they knew little of the reasons for the break-up. Several women predicted that the bar would lose customers due to this negative PR. My flatmate at the time, for example, shook her head when I told her, and said that the break-up was *buhao*/bad. Already a big sceptic of this bar - and a correspondingly big fan of the two weekend bars downtown - she added the fact of the break-up to her (long) list of reasons why the bar *meiyou wenhua*/had no culture and was *luohou*/backwards. News of the break-up generously contributed to the hectic gossip circuit for some time, but women did keep coming to this bar in droves throughout my time in Beijing.

The second major point emerging from Zhenzhen's narrative, and already alluded to in preceding chapters, is that marriage represents a normal way of life that excludes the forms of same-sex intimacy seen to challenge marital propriety. Attempting to cross these normative barriers - such as Zhenzhen doing Qiaohui's laundry, and Qiaohui 'admitting' to homosexuality (as behaviour, not identity) - were met with punitive sanctions from close family, and in Qiaohui's case also by the official government, represented by her lengthy hospital detainment. Note that in both cases the women's transgressive actions were not sexual as such (doing laundry, hair-cutting). However, the implications of these acts, their social significance, denoted subversive acts inappropriate to their social status as married, and hence, they were interpreted as marital infidelity. In both Zhenzhen and Qiaohui's cases, they were conventionally married at the time [of being found out], and others undoubtedly regarded their transgression as threats to the stability and normality of married life as wives, and in Zhenzhen's case, as a mother.

Some months later, when I chatted with Qiaohui again, she told me that a gay man she was friendly with had offered her a lump sum of money to marry him in a

contract marriage, so that he could purchase a downtown residence through his company. Seeing a chance for independence and earning money, she had then brought up the matter to her father - without mentioning that the man was gay – upon which he had beaten her (not an uncommon occurrence) and, not surprisingly, blankly refused it. Recently, her elderly parents were in the process of purchasing a flat elsewhere in Beijing, and she hoped that her married brother would now allow her to live on her own in her parents' old flat after the move. When we talked about this, she said she was looking forwards to inviting me and other friends, perhaps even a date she smiled, to the flat to cook for us - her favourite hobby.

In the following, I consider what was probably the complete opposite case to Qiaohui and Zhenzhen's short-lived relationship, namely one couple I knew who had stayed together for over sixteen years at the time of my fieldwork.

5.3.2. Enduring conjugal-like intimacy: Baozhai and Meijie's relationship

Baozhai and Meijie, whom I introduced briefly in chapter three, were for many women I knew the epitome of the ideal lala relationship. A couple for sixteen years by the time they started socializing in the bar at weekend evenings, others regularly referred to them as “role models” or “exemplary” of lala life styles and relationships. One woman put it this way: *tamen shi lalade bangyang*/they are lala role models ... [why, I asked] because they have been together for sixteen years, do you think that's been easy?!” Given their higher-than-average age - Baozhai was in her late thirties and Meijie in her mid-forties - they were regarded as *dajiel/jiejie* (big sisters) or *zhixin jiejie*/intimate elder sisters to many women. It was not uncommon to see them patiently discuss and help solve other women's problems with family and girlfriends in the bar at weekends. They seemed to greatly enjoy the status and admiration that they were accorded, by the younger women in particular, who regarded them as the embodiment of an ever-lasting relationship, and sure evidence that it was possible for two women to stay together over time.

The recurrent discursive emphasis on stability and normality when talking about life styles and relationships, did of course contain a premise of duration, and this was in many ways similar to the ideal of marriage ‘until death do us apart’. Yet, relationships between women who were part of lala sociality during my fieldwork, tended to be anything but long- or ever-lasting. This was in large part due to the intense pressures to conform, and the prevailing negativity among women themselves regarding same-sex lives and identity. I met numerous women in their late twenties and older whose life stories invariably contained the experience of a long-term relationship in their teens and twenties which ended because their partner married conventionally, usually depicted as against the will of the woman herself (see chapter four). Although it was not readily talked about, casual sex or one-night-stands (termed “419” or ‘for one night’), cheating and frequent change of partner were not at all infrequent, especially among women in the younger age-groups who had yet to achieve stability in their lives outside of the scene. Yet, break ups, as in the above example with the bar managers, were universally and morally frowned upon. The official attitude was that one should rather sort out problems than end a relationship, regardless of the reason behind a crisis.

The ways in which Baozhai and Meijie talked about their relationship demonstrate the ways in which they had successfully appropriated notions and practices of stability, normality and conventional ideals with regards to intergenerational kin relations and interpersonal relationships more generally. The reason they were able to maintain mutual affection over such a long time, Baozhai argued, was because they shared each others’ *tonggan gongku*/ joys and sorrows, and helped each other - including their respective families - through difficult times. These difficulties and sorrows included, for example, financial difficulties when Baozhai’s family business collapsed and her sister’s ensuing health problems, and then Baozhai’s own. It also involved their daily caring for Meijie’s father during five years of illness and old age until his passing. Referring to Meijie’s *xiaoshun*/filial responsibility as a single daughter as something that could not be compromised and as the key feature of what brought them closer together, Baozhai said she did not once complain about caring for Meijie’s father, even when cleaning him and assisting him to the toilet. She assumed this filial responsibility partially as a demonstration of their deep and profound relationship. They both likened these sentiments to the ideal of heterosexual relationships:

Actually, homosexual and heterosexual love is essentially no different from each other; the deciding emotional factor concerns the relationship's *wengude* /stable character, not the gender of the two people concerned. It is about *gerende zerengan* /taking responsibility for oneself; this is the fundament of two people's feelings for each other.

They were not explicitly out to their families, friends or neighbours despite their many years together, but as they pointed out: "Just because you haven't told them, doesn't mean people do not know ... We have a *moxu*/tacit agreement ..." This was certainly a very common way of dealing with 'coming out' and family.⁸³ What mattered when two people lived together was to be sincere and a *haoren*/good person to people around you:

Behaving in a respectful manner to neighbours and family has won us their respect, regardless. As a result, we have many *tongxing*/same-sex and *yixing*/heterosexual friends who all welcome us as their guests any time, any day ... Of course there have been instances of people saying evil and bad things about us, but we never hurt anybody ... Some people just don't understand.

Their deepest regret, as I have noted earlier, was their inability to have a child together, especially now that both of them were getting older and time thus was becoming more pressing. During a public debate in the bar where most participants lamented the persistent difficulties of coming out, parental pressure to marry and desire to be accepted by society, Baozhai spoke passionately about how they wished that it was possible for same-sex couples to have a family like heterosexual couples, to include children. For Baozhai and Meijie, then, the issues they were most concerned with were, in many ways, those that mirrored conventional heteronormative family set-ups. In contrast, other audience participants, usually much younger and with a different lala 'attitude', were vocal about the requirement for social recognition and lala acceptance. Through sixteen years together they had meticulously integrated their intimate relationship with general, normative social values, kin and social ties and had thereby achieved a liveable standard of social belonging precisely by evoking and practicing the structuring principles of stability, harmony and normality in everyday

⁸³ In chapter seven I discuss the issue of being open and coming out in more detail.

life and their social relationships. They had with time been accepted as, *ipso facto*, a couple, a household - or *jia*.

Later that evening in the bar, I asked them whether they had considered marrying each other now that this was becoming *de rigueur* among many lesbians in the cities. Baozhai looked at me for a couple of seconds, with an uncomprehending stare, both were suddenly silent, then Baozhai retorted: "That makes no sense to us, we have everything already, why would we do that." That was certainly not posed as a genuine question, and I understood immediately, in light of our previous conversation and the way in which they had talked about their long relationship and experiences together, that a wedding ceremony in their case would not just be superfluous, but also, as Baozhai had put it, *meiyou yiyi*/meaningless, given that the values often invoked by getting married were already considered to be attained in their case. This meant, having gone through sixteen years together as a couple, having been accepted by significant others over time and 'blending in' by their adherence to acceptable social behaviour and morals.

5.3.3. The promise of marriage: The role of engagement in one young couple's relationship aspirations

While marriage was "meaningless" to Baozhai and Meijie, it certainly held far more romantic value and aspirational promise to many other women, usually of the younger generations, whose relationships were less long-lasting and more precarious. On two occasions I observed engagement ceremonies between younger couples. One took place in a lala bar on a quiet weekday evening; the other took place in a couple's home where they had invited a small group of friends for a sumptuous hotpot dinner and drinks to celebrate a birthday. My impression of both of these actions and of the couples' overall relationship and living situation, was that getting engaged was far from 'just for fun' and on the spur of the moment, as was believed by some cynics. Rather, it was an attempt to establish stability and lasting continuity in a relationship that experienced intense external pressures, and where staying together was certainly not simply a matter of the two women's mutual feelings of being in-love. In order to

achieve this, getting engaged, I suggest, was an attempt to engage the principles of stable and normal life styles that the pervasive marriage ideal was emphasizing.

To illustrate some ways in which multiple social factors - including age, educational attainment, and financial and residential independence - come together to structure such possibilities, I discuss the young student couple Chenguang and Juanlan. Chenguang and Juanlan were experiencing considerable pressures in their relationship. Juanlan was a chubby urbanite, aged nineteen, with long hair and quite feminine appearance. She was the only daughter of well-off Beijing parents. She had recently moved to North America to graduate from high school and then start university studies there. Chenguang, her T girlfriend, was at the time I first met her, finishing her law degree at a Beijing university. At the time of our first acquaintance, a cool summer evening, she was sitting alone, chain-smoking at a table in the bar courtyard. Her appearance was very similar to the 'Supergirls' TV show idol - and general T ideal - Li Yuchun: dressed androgynously in fashionable urban wear, with black-rimmed glasses and spiky short hair. At 23, she was the youngest of four siblings from a southern province. She described her parents as *feichang chuantongde*/very traditional. In Beijing, she lived with an elderly relative until her graduation the following year when she started to work for a business company and had moved into a flat-share with lala friends.

Less than two months into Juanlan's stay abroad, missing home and feeling lonely, she returned to Beijing for a week to be with Chenguang. Juanlan had problems settling down abroad, complaining that locals were "rude" and that streets and shopping malls were "empty". They rented a hotel room for the duration of her stay as Juanlan's parents knew nothing of her home-coming. Neither did the parents (on either side) know about their relationship, despite Juanlan's mother once having asked Juanlan outright whether their relationship was tongxinglian. Juanlan, panic-stricken, had vehemently denied her mother's suggestion, and had called it "crazy". Chenguang was eager that I should meet Juanlan, and on their first evening back together we met in the bar. After some initial chatting, Chenguang appearing edgy and nervous, and Juanlan tired from travelling, Chenguang suddenly disappeared. She had previously mentioned, in a highly secretive manner, that she was planning a special surprise for Juanlan, which I suspected was a gift of some romantic kind, so I simply assumed she had ventured outside to pick it up. Juanlan had just begun to worry about her when Chenguang re-appeared, hand behind her back, and a large bouquet of flowers in the

other, which she then presented to a perplexed Juanlan. The next second, Chenguang went down on one knee, produced a ring from behind her back and proposed to her (*qiu hun*). The managers, always attentive to sudden bursts of ceremonial action among guests, quickly switched from the usual rap to George Michael ballads. The romantic moment was sealed when Juanlan managed to express consent with a nod. They embraced for the duration of one song while other guests applauded and shouted words of approval.

The remainder of their stolen week together in Beijing, however, proceeded less smoothly as the stress of imminent separation and their now very different life trajectories took its toll on what was meant to be the start of a mature relationship and planning of their future towards final reunion and marry abroad. Chenguang, Juanlan told me, was previously very introverted with no close friends and little experience with lala sociality. Now however, she was making friends with other women in the bars and online. One evening in the bar, Juanlan looked on, disapprovingly, as Chenguang moved between tables and greeted women whom she had come to know recently. Sure enough, there was a certain T swagger and bravado about her since our first meeting two months earlier, her first time in a lala space. Like Zhenzhen, Juanlan believed the lala bars were *luan/chaotic* and *buwending/unstable*. Hence, this would have a bad influence on Chenguang.

In one of our many conversations and exchanges of text messages during that intense week, I suggested that they join me at the next Salon to talk through their problems with manager Amei, who like Baozhai and Meijie enjoyed considerable respect due to her higher age (forty), event management, and mature and friendly presence. On the afternoon in question, we arrived there early to be sure that Amei would be free to talk un-interruptedly for some time. I introduced Juanlan and Chenguang to her. They then went on to explain their current malaise, and that they were considering running away together to somewhere else in China, to make a life for themselves there. Juanlan burst into tears and said she did not want to return to North America, but would prefer to stay in China with her girlfriend. Chenguang on her part, enthusiastically told Amei about their recent engagement and plans to marry. Amei listened silently for some time, before she spoke: "Getting engaged is easy, everyone can do it." Amei was concerned about Juanlan's young age and urged her to prioritise her *xueli/studies*. Chenguang, now her fiancé, and 3-4 years older than her, should encourage her to take

her studies seriously. Moreover, Chenguang should study hard and graduate, Amei suggested, so that she could save money and eventually travel to join Juanlan abroad. “You are both young”, she continued, suggesting it as a resource to develop and holding promise of a future together. She advised them to use this time apart to work towards their families’ approval of their actual relationship and not hasten conclusions, whether it be running away (“if you run away what will you do, what will you live on?”), or getting married (“this you can do when the time is right, [that is] not now”).

On the last evening of Juanlan’s secret Beijing visit, I met them again in the bar. They were both feeling very *tongku*/sad about parting. Their recent engagement, however, seemed to have done little to strengthen their resolve to stay together. Juanlan was upset and whispered to me that Chenguang had announced she need not return to her again. Chenguang on her part, arm around my shoulder in a ‘brotherly’ way later on, suggested that when she was ‘free’ again she would look for another girlfriend in the bar. Indeed, about one week after Juanlan’s departure, Chenguang greeted me with a knowing grin as we met up in that same bar, and she confessed to a “419”, allegedly with a foreign woman, which for some, including Chenguang I realized, entailed added significance of sexual prowess. When I asked “What about Juanlan then?” and mentioned their engagement, she quickly retorted: “just kidding!” Yet, the enclave of Beijing’s foreign grapevine later did confirm this momentary liaison to have taken place.

The promise of stability, longevity, and a future together which marriage-related discourses seemed to hold, were not sufficient to deliver its promise in Juanlan and Chenguang’ case, at least not in the short term. Having achieved little in terms of stable lives and cultural capital at such young ages, the act of proposing marriage and its constituent symbolic meaning, however well-intended and love-based at the moment, could not ensure the degree of social consequence or symbolic capital to cancel out normalizing pressures.

I now turn to the final ethnographic case, namely a woman who had achieved a high degree of independence and social status through living away from kin and her career choice. However, she was still seriously considering marriage - albeit one with a gay man - so that she did not have to foreclose her future aspirations for experiencing a love relationship with another woman.

5.3.4. Single Peijing's deliberations about marrying gay Zhongqian

Peijing was twenty-nine, university-educated, a member of the Communist Party since childhood, and with impressive near-fluency in English despite never having been abroad. We hung out many times in her lunch breaks at work, chatted online, and sometimes she showed up in the Salon or in the bar. Peijing worked for a large research company downtown. Her family was from a village in a province not too far from Beijing. She was by now an expert at putting off arranged dates with men, introductions, and at changing the conversation topic when family and work colleagues brought up her unmarried status. Her younger sister had married at twenty-four, and there was some concern that as Peijing was approaching thirty, she did not even have a boyfriend (and had never pretended to have one).

For years, Peijing had struggled to carve out a life for herself that she could live with, yet would meet her parents and relatives' increasingly direct questions about why she remained unmarried, now that she was fast approaching thirty. Her guilt at disappointing her parents, yet frustrations also with what she saw as the limitations to the possibilities for a free life true to her wish to find a woman as her life-long partner, were recurrent themes in our many conversations. She often mentioned her genuine desire to have a child, and she was uncertain about how she could possibly bring up a child if she were not in a conventional marriage situation. On the other hand, she expressed a strong dissatisfaction with the kind of life she was expected to lead, and she continually struggled with the pressure she felt closing in on her from all quarters given her age. In the frank and open manner which characterized her discussion of her life, she said that she sometimes thought about getting married conventionally, just to give herself a much more comfortable life and to "decrease pressure". Peijing acknowledged that this pressure was not just society-based, but also a pressure "sometimes from my own heart ... it is nature that I hope to have family and children ..." Being twenty-nine, she continued, was the most difficult time to deal with these conflicting demands: as the "current choice will lead [to] different future path ... and I am facing my life crossroad..."

During and after a Spring Festival holiday in her home village, she discussed marriage with her mother, which she then discussed with me (in English):

My parents are so eager for me to get married, but they are too afraid to ask me face to face anymore. Instead they get other relatives to inquire, and try to persuade me. My other relatives are alright, they just don't want to see my parents disappointed. So now I have contacted this gay guy [she had replied to his online ad about contract marriage] again, and we decided to have a good talk when I return to Beijing ... I tried to tell my mum this time that I don't want to get married. She told me that she would be very very upset if I didn't. I said to her that I know she wants me to be happy, but happiness for me is not about being married. And you know I really don't want to hurt my parents - I am Chinese, after all ... It's impossible for her to change her mind. She was born in the 1950s in the small countryside, and she hardly has any education [due to the Cultural Revolution in the sixties and its chaotic aftermath]. It's near impossible to communicate with her about this, she doesn't understand anything else. She would be devastated if I were to remain unmarried ... You know, she is also pressured by her environment - neighbours, other older family members and so on. I should understand her.

Later that spring Peijing announced to her parents that she now had a boyfriend: Zhongqian, the very same gay man she had met online. Her parents were overjoyed to learn the news, and Peijing made plans to introduce him to her family. His family on the other hand were from far-western China, and it took several months before they travelled to Beijing to meet Peijing. Meanwhile, Peijing's parents had made it clear they were happy with her choice, and were looking forwards to the wedding. Zhongqian, and his family too, increasingly pressed Peijing to settle a wedding date and to thus formalize their 'union'. It seemed that what was supposed to present a solution and to decrease pressure to conform, was fast becoming a problem for Peijing as the practical implications of marriage became clear and Zhongqian's ideas of the married life differed from hers.

While it was parental and kin pressure that initially concerned her, it was the direct implications of Zhongqian's old-fashioned ideas about married life, enhanced by his domineering parents, which came to worry her the most. Zhongqian had already bought a flat in Beijing where he wanted her to come live with him after they married. He believed living together made the marriage more 'real' but Peijing was unconvinced that it was a good idea. For one, travel distance to her job would increase considerably, which she dreaded. She also felt that living with him would make it harder to lead independent lives, socially, romantically, and financially. For example, her mother had already announced that after the wedding she could come and live with them for some time and help them settle down together. This would of course make it

even harder to keep up appearances and more difficult to live their own lives. Peijing also worried about having to take on parts of his financial obligations such as his mortgage if they married.

When initially considering nominal marriage, she had hoped that having a boyfriend would be somewhat enough, another way of postponing marriage talk and questions and of buying time. It seemed she had hoped that her strategy of postponement and evasiveness, which had worked so far, would in the end make the pressure fade away completely with her turning thirty and thereby allow her to remain unmarried. In addition, she was experiencing professional fulfilment as she had started to work for an international organization in Beijing. To my mind she had become more confident that she could remain un-married.

When Peijing and I talked online about one year later, she told me that Zhongqian's parents had ordered him to get married no later than by the end of 2007 and ideally during the summer. Zhongqian had suggested to her that they would either marry in June at the latest, or he would have to find someone else who would marry him before the end of the year. Peijing told me she was now more hesitant than previously. While Zhongqian's parents were obsessed with him getting married, although they lived far away and the marriage thus would have little practical impact on family relations, Peijing's parents now rarely mentioned marriage anymore. She also had the support of her younger (married) sister if she chose not to marry, which Peijing appreciated. The parents wanted her to have a husband to love her, she explained, but would not expect her to marry someone she did not love. She still worried about her options for motherhood though, and feared that being single and unmarried would make this difficult for her. On the other hand, she possessed a strong conviction that she did not want to have a child with a gay man within a contract marriage, mainly because she could not envision having sexual intercourse with a man in the first place, and having sex with a gay man was unthinkable.

5.4. Conclusion

The four examples discussed here have looked at strategies that incorporate aspects of heteronormative marriage ideologies and practices to maintain a relationship in the case of young couple Chenguang and Juanlan and long-term couple Baozhai and

Meijie. However, we have seen in the first example with divorcee Qiaohui and married mother Zhenzhen, that their relationship was made almost impossible due, in large part, to their marital status and experiences. They were also minimally self-reliant financially, due to their low degree of educational attainment, and they possessed little real autonomy to negotiate alternative lives. Compared with Baozhai and Meijie, in the similar age cohort, we come to see the full extent of the importance of out-residency and 'kin autonomy' that I argued for in chapter three. Baozhai and Meijie were themselves not university graduates but they had, through long working careers, been able to establish financial self-reliance, and lived together by themselves in a flat downtown. Still, they were and lived, as I understood it, close to their families, and were thereby able to negotiate their relationship and to establish an acceptable level of familial recognition of their non-marital status and relationships, through their filial, dutiful care of elderly parents. In a sense then, they achieved an acceptable status as filial daughters, and thus feminine adulthood, through their careful negotiations. Remember also that they had not been part of any sort of lesbian or lala social network prior to my fieldwork. They had simply worked hard to fit in and live their lives together, like everyone else.

This option had not been possible for Qiaohui, who lacked autonomy on multiple levels to establish such a momentum: living with her elderly parents, and with little independent income, and a high degree of surveillance and fear of violence, she had grown relatively accustomed to not expecting too much. However, she did harbour aspirations for some degree of autonomy through her elderly parents' planned move, which would allow for socializing and perhaps romance.

For Peijing, a single and high-achieving woman, contract marriage to a gay man presented one possibility to deal with normalizing pressures and to enable future same-sex relationships. However, she was reluctant to such a marriage, as she worried that she risked her autonomy by doing so. This was especially the case with regards to her deliberations about post-wedding residential arrangements and financial agreements between the two.

In this chapter I set out to explore how lala relationship possibilities are conditioned by marital ideologies and family structures. I suggested that the combination of social factors and distinctions that constitute lala subjectivity, serve to structure the possibilities for negotiating these dominant norms. Here, I have shown that women

generally experienced it as very important to ascribe to marital normative values, such as normality, stability, quality, and harmony. These values fundamentally structured the ways in which women's same-sex relationships were negotiated and aspired to. The varying differentiating factors in women's lives, especially marital status, age, and socio-economic circumstances, prescribed the degree of overall autonomy, and by extension, their possibilities to appropriate dominant expectations to structure their same-sex relationships, or aspirations.

Baozhai and Meijie had explicitly distanced themselves from the marriage concept itself, yet their long-term relationship seemed to have lasted - and crucially, been socially accepted - due to its similarity to the ideal conventional heteronormative marriage. One could add here that the kind of marital ideal which they invoked was a slightly old-fashioned one: they both emphasized key values that echoed the kind of filial respect based on Confucian moral principles. This included: respecting neighbours and other people and 'just getting on with it', and just blending in. I believe that a main reason why their relationship met such positive approval amongst so many women was due to this symbolic emphasis on a nationalist Chineseness that ignored the important differentiating aspect: the sexual difference, or the lala component, of their relationship. Their narrative expressed the idea that if you simply work hard at being normal and like everyone else, you will be accepted regardless. Thereby, the tensions regarding actual everyday difficulties of same-sex identity and relationships were conveniently ignored.

This illusion was very much absent in Qiaohui and Zhenzhen's troubled relationship, particularly because marriage had such a profound impact on each of their abilities to live free lives. Zhenzhen's case was probably less about wanting to pursue a same-sex relationship than about escaping marital expectations including sexual availability for her husband and the day-to-day surveillance and control by her in-resident parents. Qiaohui, on her part, had certainly encountered pervasive official and familial sanctioning and social exclusion since the 1980s.

With Chenguang and Juanlan, too, we see that despite their desperate attempt to mediate their difficulties by getting engaged and to secure the premise of a future stable relationship in this symbolic way, real life differences - especially in terms of their differing socio-economic backgrounds and different approach to lala community participation (and lala identification) - caught up with them as Juanlan's departure approached, and certainly continued after her leaving.

In a similar vein to the *dui pnua* bonds discussed by Friedman (2006), Liu and Ding's discussion of reticent poetics and shadowy queer lives (2005), and the same-sex marriage literature I have referenced earlier (e.g. Chauncey, 2004; Lewin, 1998), lala intimate relationships were not intrinsically countering normative cultural principles regarding acceptable same-sex intimacy. The absence of explicit references to or evidence of sexual difference – literally – allows the illusion of heterosexual normality to persevere, and in the familial image of marriage and “the love plot of [heteronormative] intimacy” (Berlant & Warner, 1998: 553). For example, Zhenzhen's circumstances are interesting in that she was normatively married and also a mother. Still, she invested significant emotions into her affair with Qiaohui. If anything, her experiences of being found out and the ensuing difficulties, including punitive violence, show clearly the threat of countering normative and transgressing marital morals. Zhenzhen's perils also demonstrate the high stakes in trying to maintain same-sex intimacy and relationships as ‘normal’ and passing. In turn, this indicates the pervasive threat that homosexuality actually poses to heteronormative society and the public; this, despite the continued efforts by mainstream queer activism (including in the PRC, as I discuss in chapter seven) to portray same-sex sexual difference as almost inconsequential by entailing no actual sexual or social difference.

The narratives I have presented here suggest that it is not marriage or the status of being married in itself that is sought by women in same-sex relationships. Rather, they aspire to the values of normality, stability, and so on, which are implied by such forms of relationships. Furthermore, they are considered fundamental values towards achieving social belonging and acceptance, as well as national membership: being Chinese. That these strategies apply marital-related notions and concepts in what may be argued as a highly heteronormative set-up, appear then, not as instances of mimicry or irony, not even performativity or a sense of drag in a self-conscious subversion, or an instance of countering normative regulations for intimacy (see Lewin, 1998; Weston, 1991). Rather, they may be seen as embodied practices that are infused with a desirable cultural meaning - such as being modern, normal, and Chinese - to create viable, albeit “shadowy” (cf. Liu & Ding, 2005), life strategies for intimate relationships and identity, and thereby to enable their social acceptance.

Instead of reading these relationships as instances of counter-intimacy (cf. Berlant & Warner, 1998) or blatant queer transgression, we should rather interpret them as intimate practices designed to tie in with normative familial values, and the

notion and status of marriage in particular. This approach makes lalas' quest for conducting relationships - 'just like everyone else' and 'being stable' - intelligible beyond the interpretation that these women simply had no other choice (*meiyou banfa*) but complying with dominant familial powers. Berlant and Warner have in a similar vein discussed "the deceptive appeal of the average" (1998: 557), to convey the illusory possibility that (queer) deviance from the (heteronormative) mass could be reinstated as unproblematic and assimilated similarity. While the women I knew were increasingly aware of the possibility to achieve social recognition and legal rights through same-sex marriage rights abroad, my sense was and still is that the attraction towards marriage-like set-ups did not result from 'imported' Euro-American queer family models. Instead, they related fundamentally to Chinese-specific cultural politics of belonging - Chineseness.

The following chapter continues the discussion of women's same-sex subjectivity and relationships in the specific context of the marital field, but from the perspective of women's creative negotiations of marriage practices and ideologies.

CHAPTER SIX

Marriage as contestable terrain

My *laopo*/wife and I will get married ... We hereby invite all our friends and online friends to come and join our wedding ceremony. There may be no legal recognition or support for us, but that is not important. Because we know, and we want all of you to know, that we will be together not for ten or fifteen years, but for a lifetime.

Biaoge and Mingchun's online wedding ad

6.1. The normalizing strategies of lala marriage practices

This chapter presents six detailed ethnographic examples of women's engagements with marriages and the kinds of moral and cultural values that the status of 'being married' is considered to entail. I showed in the previous chapter that conjugal ideologies and the marital field structured women's possibilities to negotiate and maintain same-sex intimate relationships. I argued that marriage remains a critical institution and status because it is the foremost social, cultural, and political institutional mechanism towards attaining 'good' hetero-marital feminine subjectivity and modern Chinese citizenship. I thereby demonstrated the simultaneous desire on the part of the women in my study to conform to these ideals, but at the same time, many also challenged them. In this process, they expanded the original, dominant meaning of marriage.

Here, I specifically consider instances where women appropriated marital strategies with the specific aim of negotiating kin relations, lala subjectivity and intimate same-sex relationships, as well as their everyday normative lives. By seeking the marital status 'wife' or 'married', they attempted to achieve not only the position of married woman that implied heteronormative gender and procreative sexuality, but also the wider cultural values of normality, stability, and quality that characterize the

contemporary, modern, and cosmopolitan Chinese citizen. The ethnographies include two instances of same-sex weddings (*tongxing hunyin*), and three contract marriages (*xingshi hunyin*) between lalas and gay men. It also considers a 'conventional' arranged marriage (*yixing hunyin*) between a lala-identified woman and a straight man.

Compared with the women discussed in chapter five, who - apart from Peijing who was a self-sufficient single woman - had limited opportunities for autonomy and upward mobility, the women in this chapter were on the whole very resourceful and upwardly mobile: they had already attained, or were in the process of attaining, financial if not residential autonomy, away from their families. Their *sixiang*/attitude was one whereby they considered their personal and financial independence and the continued ability to fend for themselves of utmost importance to their lives and future aspirations.

One might wonder why resourceful women such as those I discuss here, would still seek marriage as a solution to reconcile same-sex intimacy and lala subjectivity with heteronormative expectations. The narratives and practices portrayed in these narratives show that it is values such as stability and recognition ('being normal' and 'just like everyone else') that they seek, and not transgression, rupture, and difference. In the case of the couple who had been together for over sixteen years, for example, they emphasized that they lived together just like a married couple and pointed to their successful appropriation of the values of normality, stability, and filial disposition that in turn generate social recognition and acceptance.

This brings about a key tension with regards to marital strategies and social recognition: on the one hand, the importance and recognition of marriage rests on ritual performance (wedding) and official registration (*hunyin zheng*/marriage certificate). On the other hand, marriage constitutes a symbolic domain whereby it is the values inherent to 'being married' that define marital propriety and achieves recognition, not ceremony and registration. These wider values are what make marriage desirable. Although this goes beyond the remit of the discussion, it is worth noting the comparable and considerable differences within lala and gay communities in China with regards to supporting legal recognition for same-sex marriage. Whilst some argued that legal recognition and state support for same-sex marriage was of fundamental importance, others thought that such drastic action was unnecessary and undesirable: 'Just getting on with it' and living together like 'normal' (married) couples should be sufficient.

Much queer scholarship argues that lesbians and gays remain excluded from the realm of normative kinship (e.g. Weston, 1991). However, the growing body of scholarship on queer kinship strategies, including my own work, demonstrate that normative kinship ties and same-sex relationships and lifestyles are not categorically incompatible (e.g. Boellstorff, 2005; Chauncey, 2004; Cho, 2007; Lewin, 1998; Liu & Ding, 2005). This and the previous chapter are specific attempts to address the ways in which the sites of women's same-sex subjectivity and intimacy merge with normative kinship and social membership via the marital field. It emerges that legal recognition is not necessarily the fundamental ingredient in this quest towards recognition,⁸⁴ and the customary same-sex and contract marriages I present here, further support this tendency. The ethnography-informed discussion also argues the pervasive and normalizing effects of personal choices, against the common ideological predictions of subversive inevitabilities.

Juxtaposing ethnographies of same-sex and contract marriages aims to highlight the tensions with regards to the practice of managing intimate lives, maintaining good relations with family and in social life in general. The possibilities for alternative life ways are shown to be limited, as conventional social and kin duties circumscribe available life choices. Marriage as a threshold that marks the socially mature citizen and differentiates procreative (hetero)sexuality from the immature, remains the one *rite de passage* towards gaining socially acceptable female (and male) adulthood. As the ethnographic examples show, it is impossible to reject marriage outright: the woman who came out to her father still 'had to' marry, for example. Marriage must therefore be negotiated, in order to maintain good kin relations and professional success. The examples also draw specific attention to the process of negotiation *between* partners within a relationship. I consider the struggles between partners to define and maintain what exactly the marriage is for, how to negotiate the relationship vis-à-vis kin and others, and how to keep up appearances in the long term. Importantly, post-wedding strategies emerge as a critical site for negotiation of the degree of investment in the marital status.

In sum, this chapter discusses the particulars of lala relationship and kinship practices and ideologies as they are played out in the specific case of marriage

⁸⁴ although the continued exclusion of queers from fundamental civil liberties is a source of continued struggle. See for example: Berlant & Warner, 1998; Butler, 2004, 2008; Fassin, 2007; Warner, 1999.

strategies. It further demonstrates the contestable subject position of lala as a site that brings together a range of markers of social difference.

6.2. Marriages between women

Although same-sex marriage was a common topic of conversation and a spelt-out desire of many women (and gay men) I knew in Beijing, same-sex weddings were rare occurrences. During fieldwork I observed two such weddings, and to my knowledge no others took place in Beijing in this period, although there were recurrent rumours that some couples were considering or planning it. However, news about informal same-sex wedding parties in various parts of China circulated frequently during my fieldwork, and many lala and gay web sites and blogs frequently carried postings discussing the prospect of same-sex marriage in China. Many women I knew suggested that marrying a female partner *meiyou yiyi*/was meaningless, since the current cultural and political climate gave them no legal rights or societal recognition. What mattered, they argued, was the degree of *wending*/stability and *zhengchang*/normality in a romantic relationship, and the relative success at integrating them into family relations. Others, in turn, expressed their desire to marry a partner one day and live together as a “normal” married couple. They believed that they would receive *shehuide rentong*/societal recognition in this way.

Same-sex marriage rights and a proposed bill to legalize them also became a hot topic in parts of Chinese mass media while I was in the field. Renowned sociologist Li Yinhe proposed an official proposition - the third in consecutive years - to the Chinese People’s Congress National Meeting to legalise same-sex marriage in spring 2006. As expected, the Congress turned down the proposition again, but this time the event generated considerable media headlines, academic seminars, and television talk shows.⁸⁵

There is no evidence of a direct link between contemporary same-sex marriage debates and the introduction of same-sex civil partnership bills in other countries such

⁸⁵ There were hopes that Li would submit a fourth proposal for the spring 2007 Meeting. Instead, she announced on her blog that she had retired from campaigning due to pressure from her higher-ups. In her statement she said that she was sad to see that China was still not *chengshu*/mature enough to grant civil rights to all (Gardner, 2007).

as the USA, Canada, the UK and South Africa in the official media, but Chinese lesbian and gay websites increasingly carried news stories, translated reports and images of these events as they took place abroad. Undoubtedly, this contributed towards an increased awareness among Chinese lala and gay men that there was the possibility, if not a right, for their relationships to be legally, if not socially, recognised by marriage. Most of my informants had significant knowledge of countries where lesbians could get legally married, and some lala couples I knew were planning in impressive detail emigrating for this purpose.

Both weddings I attended took place in the same lala bar, albeit a year or so apart. The narratives convey that these events, despite many apparent similarities, also carried quite different meanings and related differently to lala culture and identity. Because I attended them both and because both ceremonies displayed considerable ceremonial and symbolic detail, which I consider significant, the following narratives are ‘thick’ with descriptive detail.

6.2.1. The first wedding: Shuyan and Zhenmei

This wedding took place on a Sunday mid-morning and afternoon in the Bar in January 2005. Friends had alerted me to this wedding some days beforehand. I had been urged to arrive by eleven that morning, and also not to bring or use any recording or camera equipment. It was to be a small gathering amongst friends, and the bar was not going to be open for general business until the evening. This would ensure a quiet and private space for the event.

I arrived just before eleven that morning. The two managers (themselves a lala couple) were observing the ritual from behind the counter by the door, and gestured for me to join and take a seat. I had arrived just as the ceremony itself was starting, and after a few moments of interruption due to several women getting up to let the foreigner have a seat right at the head of the table, the wedding ceremony got started. I noticed that the venue had been considerably re-arranged in order to accommodate the wedding. The space was beautifully decorated: red banners printed with the *shuang*

xi/'double happiness' character hung gracefully from the ceiling; red balloons and colourful paper were everywhere.⁸⁶

Three tables were adjoined in boardroom style, decked with mountains of snacks, tea, soft drinks, and beer. About fifteen female friends were sitting around the table, helping themselves to drinks and snacks. During and after the wedding ceremony, I learned that they were all friends of the two brides, and that many of them were themselves couples.

At the head of the table, the two brides, Zhenmei and Shuyan, were standing next to each other, facing their guests. They were just about to describe details of their first meeting, their first romantic encounter, their first kiss, their parents' reactions, and answer other similar questions from the guests. In many places in China, this is a common beginning to a wedding ritual: guests ask the couple questions about their relationship, often with the intention of causing light-hearted embarrassment.⁸⁷ I learned that they were now 26 and 23 years old, and had met about four years ago over the Internet. It took a year of online contact and meetings before they became a couple. Both sets of parents knew about their relationship, they said.

Zhenmei and Shuyan did not appear to follow the typical TP role division. In fact, they both looked rather androgynous and similar in terms of their outfits, T-look hairstyles, and general mannerisms. I quietly asked the woman next to me about the brides' potential TP roles, and was told that Zhenmei was P, and Shuyan the T. To emphasise this gendered lala assignment, at least for the purpose of the ceremony, Shuyan was wearing a decorative red ribbon on her chest, with the characters *xinlang*/'groom', and Zhenmei one with *xinni*ang/'bride'. Indeed, Zhenmei was probably the more feminine of the two, and during the wedding ceremony and after she took on the bridal role. She was wearing a white shirt, black washed-out jeans, and she was clutching a bouquet of flowers in her hands during the wedding ceremony itself. Shuyan's attire resembled that of her partner, with black jeans almost identical to Zhenmei's, and a black shirt with a similar cut to Zhenmei's white one. Neither of the

⁸⁶ The colour red and the *shuang xi* character are, of course, common and traditional Chinese symbols of happy occasions and rituals, especially weddings.

⁸⁷ When I note that a particular practice is a 'common' or 'customary' part of a wedding ritual, I do not mean to say these are necessarily universally practiced in China, or that they are somehow particularly and homogeneously 'Chinese'. Chinese wedding ritual practices are, of course, highly diverse. Here, I mean to show that, although same-sex weddings in many ways are different from regular heterosexual weddings, they also incorporate, and creatively circumvent, certain normative aspects.

two wore make-up or seemed to have undergone any cosmetic grooming for the occasion.

The wedding ceremony was expertly directed by a TP couple, Ruomei and Shisheng. Ruomei, the P, held hand-written, detailed notes, and coached the ceremony, occasionally aided by others' impromptu comments. Her T girlfriend Shisheng, recorded the proceedings with a digital film camera. Later that afternoon, they showed me the entire sequence of events from the early morning onwards on the small camera screen. They had hired a white car and decorated its front with red *shuangxi* ribbons and had all arrived at the couple's flat in the early morning. There, Shuyan presented Zhenmei with the customary *hongbao*/red envelope containing a symbolic sum of money.⁸⁸ The camera showed Zhenmei, just woken up by her partner and the arrival of several friends. She was opening the envelope and counting the money, looking confused by the hullabaloo, and slightly uncomfortable at being filmed. The next sequence showed Shisheng, who was the driver, carrying the bride-to-be - with somewhat comic difficulty - over the doorstep out to the waiting car. As Shuyan and Zhenmei told me in a later conversation, the wedding was entirely Shuyan's idea, and was in fact a surprise for Zhenmei who on her part knew nothing of it until the very same morning. It was organised in secret with the help of their friends.

An ornately carved wooden table standing against the far-end wall carried a large Buddha, plates with fruit and sweets, burning incense and candles, red ribbons, and old-style China vases. This altar-style decoration provided a beautiful ceremonial backdrop, and added a somewhat spiritual element to the ceremony. On either side of this table stood two heavy, dark wooden chairs facing the guests and wedding couple. Just before the ceremony began, the toastmaster asked two guests to sit on these chairs, and I was later told that these two seats and people represented both sets of parents.

Now, Shisheng and Ruomei switched roles. Shisheng, as the now minister of ceremony, read from her notes about the mutual commitment expected from two people in marriage. The brides were then asked whether they agreed to love and support each other for the rest of their lives; first Shuyan, then Zhenmei. Both solemnly replied: *wo yuanyi*/'I do'. They then swapped rings, which had to be quickly

⁸⁸ This often equals or resembles numbers that are associated with good luck and good fortune in Chinese cosmology (such as eight).

recovered from someone's bag. At this stage, most of the guests were leaning back, chatting amongst each other, with half an eye on the unfolding ceremony.

Directed by Shisheng, who was frequently re-checking her programme in order to get it right, another exchange of *hongbao*/red envelopes containing symbolic sums of money followed. This time the parental stand-ins on each side offered envelopes to each bride. The ritual of the *sanbai*/three bows, another traditional wedding ritual, then followed: the brides bowed deeply, first before the *tiandi*/heavens and earth, then before the parents and in-laws symbolically present in their two friends, and finally, Zhenmei and Shuyan bowed deeply before each other. As the very last feature of the wedding ritual - perhaps to give the wedded brides an authoritative blessing, but also because several guests suggested this by shouting - Shisheng made a symbolic gesture across her chest to mimic the Catholic ceremonial act of crossing oneself.

Finally, the ceremony was wrapped up with the happy couple kissing on the lips for a very brief moment. This led several guests to complain in mock-disappointment that it was not more passionate. The atmosphere was relaxed, jolly, and merry throughout the ceremony. The frequent interruptions caused the participants to laugh or smile at the realization of what prop they had forgotten to prepare. They also provided welcome breaks to chat, smoke, eat snacks, and go to the restroom.

A small break followed, in which a small table was placed between the main long-table and the altar table by the wall. A large wedding cake and a bottle of local Chinese 'Champagne' were put on it. The toastmaster and the brides then proceeded to administer cake and drink to every individual guest around the table, accompanied by deep bows and words of 'thank you'. In return, the guests for their part offered their greetings and well-wishes for the couple's future. At this point, Shisheng approached me to read out and simultaneously translate an English poem as a special greeting to the newlyweds. It offered suggestions on how to achieve happiness and harmony in long-term relationships.

The formal part of the wedding ceremony was now over. The married couple started the long-anticipated eating and drinking by serving every guest a glass of beer, and saluting each and everyone in turn. Food arrived by courier from a nearby restaurant that consisted of a wide range of typical festive dishes: a whole duck, a large fish, meaty soup, *gongbaojiding*, *mapodoufu*. Boxes of local beer were rapidly consumed, drinking games eagerly pursued, and it did not take long before several guests had hot flushed cheeks, one even lying on the sofa in what appeared to be an

unconscious state. The Ts engaged in drinking games, with their P girlfriends urging them to stop drinking and mildly shaking their heads in disapproval. It was like any other weekend in the bar. As the excessive drinking gradually took its toll on the guests, most settled and scattered, in the sofas for more quiet chatting, even sleeping.

6.2.2. Zhenmei and Shuyan one year later

Almost one year passed before I met Zhenmei and Shuyan again, as they had not been or were not to become frequent participants in Beijing's lala spaces. When we finally did reunite, I learned that after the wedding they had moved to a southern city in order to find work. Now they were back in Beijing, and were staying in a small flat in the city centre, that had been negotiated by Zhenmei's Beijing relatives. Zhenmei was currently financially supporting them both because Shuyan was out of work. Since we met up just as the Spring Festival holidays were coming to an end, they told me that Shuyan had just spent a full month with her natal family up north. Meanwhile, Zhenmei had relocated back to Beijing, which was her place of origin, and spent time with her family and settled into her new job.

They looked decidedly different from the last time, and also from each other: Shuyan was sporting a T-style short and spiky haircut, and was generally displaying very butch mannerisms. This was further emphasised by her incessant smoking throughout the entire evening. Zhenmei, on the other hand, had longer hair, and appeared more *guanzhu*/caring or managing of her partner through the dinner, and the following drinks and chat in the bar. She was careful to eat more and smoke less than her partner, not drink more than one glass of beer, and periodically scolded Shuyan for her chain-smoking, yet in a reassuringly affectionate way. They identified mainly as *bufen*/versatile, they told me, although they also emphasized that they did not really find such categories useful or important.

As the Spring Festival is *the* time to spend with one's family in China, I enquired how they integrated their relationship with family relations. In a familiar manner to many women's somewhat formulaic narratives when discussing these matters, they told me that both sets of parents knew about their relationship and also their wedding one year

before. Overall, they did not experience any significant pressure to marry heterosexually. However, upon further discussion throughout the evening, it emerged that Zhenmei's family in Beijing, with whom they were now in near geographical proximity given their recent relocation to Beijing, expected her to eventually get married, and they actually seemed to be quite preoccupied with this issue. Shuyan, who was now aged 27, and hence three years Zhenmei's senior, suggested that as her own parents were university graduates they were more *kaiifang*/open-minded and able to accept her. Still, neither of them had discussed their actual relationship explicitly with their families, apart from confirming that they were indeed in a tongxinglian relationship when being explicitly questioned. The reason that this issue had been discussed at all was because of the marriage pressure. Both of them had told their families that they did not want to get married at all, and had therefore decided to be open about the true nature of their relationship, including their wedding. Shuyan told me, however, that when she was at home for the holidays, their neighbour had tried to introduce her to a couple of men for marriage, but she had refused. Previously, when they both worked for the same company, Shuyan had apparently been approached by many men, according to Zhenmei. Indeed, their marriage, or coming out, were not sufficient to ease, or erase, the normative marriage pressure.

As the evening proceeded, we were joined by a friend of mine, Mingxia, an outspoken lala in her early thirties, and her straight female friend, Hongjiao. Mingxia, appropriately enough, wanted to discuss the issue of lala-gay contract marriages. She had a gay friend who was looking for a lala-identified woman for his boyfriend, so that the four of them could get married and provide (kinship) cover for each other. It gradually emerged that Shuyan also wanted to find a gay man for Zhenmei to marry, due to the marriage pressure she experienced; this was probably exacerbated by her younger age (twenty-four) and career stage. Zhenmei herself seemed reluctant. Zhenmei and Shuyan insisted on the importance of ensuring that the man was exclusively gay. To their minds, this was best guaranteed by finding an effeminate gay man, i.e. who was a *ling*/ 0, not a *yao*/ 1.⁸⁹

With regards to their own marriage, Zhenmei and Shuyan maintained that the wedding had not changed their relationship in any fundamental way. They emphasized

⁸⁹ According to general discourse among gay men and lalas in the PRC, 0 usually means 'passive', 'bottom', or 'penetrated', while 1 means 'active', 'top', or 'penetrator'. A common ideology amongst lalas was that a sexually active (i.e. penetrating) gay man is more likely to be able and want to have sexual intercourse with a woman; thus he is potentially *weixian*/dangerous, as Shuyan put it.

that the wedding was a way to bring their friends together, and to celebrate each other and their relationship. The wedding party in the bar had later escalated into a big argument between some of them due to past unresolved issues about someone's ex-girlfriend. Shuyan got sick from too much drinking, and in the end they had just gone home to sleep it off.

At the time of their wedding they were unaware of any other Chinese lala weddings, so they believed they had been the first couple in China to do this. However, they seemed little concerned with the potential significance of the event. They argued that a lala marriage was not valid anyway, given the lack of legal recognition, and because Chinese society and culture were still *tai chuantong*/too traditional. Rather than going out to lala social events and bars, they preferred to stay at home and lead a *wending*/stable and quiet life. They enjoyed taking care of their old cat, cooking, watching television, surfing the Internet, and generally just getting on with their daily lives.

6.2.3. The second wedding: Biaoge and Mingchun

Just a few weeks before I met Zhenmei and Shuyan again, I attended a second lala wedding in the same bar. Several aspects of the two events were very similar: both couples picked the same venue, both were of the same age-group (mid-twenties), they had met over the Internet, and they both appropriated the TP-based roles. Still, many aspects of the events and the couples' circumstances differed significantly. The following narrative is based mainly on the lengthy conversation I had with Mingchun, the 'bride' and P of the couple, as well as my observations of the wedding event that evening.

While news about the first wedding was circulated informally and required personal invitation for me to participate, Biaoge and Mingchun's wedding was announced publicly by Biaoge on a popular lala website discussion list:

Come and join our *hunli*/wedding! My *laopo*/wife and I will get married. Although there is no legal recognition [for our marriage] we still want to go through with this because we believe it is very important for us ... We hereby

invite all our friends and online friends to come together and join our wedding. There may be no [official] recognition or support for us, but that is not important. Because we know, and we want all of you to know, that we will be together not for ten or fifteen years, but for a lifetime. [Followed by details of date, time and location]

On the Saturday night in question, I arrived at the bar around eight, and found it bustling with life. It was an unusually large number of women for that early evening hour, even for a weekend night. About one hour later the couple and their friends arrived, and caused quite a stir as everyone turned to look. The bar managers had reserved one of the larger tables in the back of the venue for them, and the arriving party quickly decked it out with flowers, candles, sweets (Dove chocolates carrying the *shuangxi* festive symbol), a large bottle of (foreign) Champagne, and several bottles of Budweiser and Corona beer ordered from the bar. Apart from the couple, six female friends were in tow.

I asked a friend to introduce me, and for the next hour until the wedding started, I chatted with the P, Mingchun, and their friends. Biaoge, the T, was a quiet, boyish-looking woman wearing a black suit, white shirt, and sporting a short typical T-style hair-cut. While I was talking to her girlfriend, she went out to get the wedding photos and posters they had had taken earlier that day. Upon her return they decorated the entire inside of the bar with them.

Mingchun's already pretty face was carefully made up and she was dressed for the occasion. She wore a dark purple, very close-fitting strapless dress with a red rose fixed on her chest. The back-less dress exposed a large dragon tattoo covering most of her back, from her neck down to her waist. She had curled long hair and distinctive make up - all in the contemporary fashionable bride-look. They were both 27 years old, and college graduates who were now office workers, Mingchun told me. She herself was of Korean ethnic origin and grew up in a coastal province, where her family still lived. They were *feichang chuantong*/very traditional, and ignorant about her relationship with Biaoge. Biaoge was a Beijing native, and an only child, and they both lived with Biaoge's parents in a central Beijing flat. Although nothing had ever been said directly about the actual relationship between the daughter and her 'friend', they had a tacit agreement of understanding and acceptance, and apparently all got on very well. Mingchun laughed slightly when talking about this. She joked that if the parents

had not 'got it' already, then they certainly would when they decorated their room with the wedding posters after this evening.

Why did they want to get married given the lack of legal recognition, I wondered, and how would they cope with conventional marriage pressure? Mingchun solemnly told me that marrying Biaoge was an important next-step in their relationship because she knew that this was the *ren*/person she wanted to spend the rest of her life with.⁹⁰ The wedding ceremony would cement their relationship and commitment to each other, she argued. Yet, she was aware that lesbian weddings rarely happened in China, and hence that their wedding was unusual: "China is still way too *luohou*/backwards", she laughed, "... perhaps in fifty years ...". She knew of only one other lala wedding, which took place 4-5 years beforehand in Beijing, and which 'everybody' knew about since it was covered in the mainstream media at the time. She talked passionately about how she had come to accept herself as someone who *xihuan nüren*/prefers women that previous year, and that she was *zhengchang*/normal, 'just like everyone else'. It followed that they should be able to do what normal people in love do, namely get married.

As for normative marriage considerations, the couple seemed to differ in their views, according to Mingchun's presentation. She maintained that she did not mind having to marry to please her traditional parents, because what ultimately mattered was the love between Biaoge and herself. A heterosexual marriage would only be a means to make their lives convenient, i.e. to reduce the pressure to conform. My suggestion that she could perhaps marry a gay man as a middle way did not seem an interesting option. Biaoge apparently saw this issue quite differently, and was opposed to the idea of either of them marrying a man later, even if it would only be to fend off pressure. Biaoge believed that their marriage was valid and could, therefore, not be contested by another marriage. Mingchun, however, seemed eager to minimize this apparent conflict of attitude. When I continued asking about residential issues and negotiating their relationship and marriage in everyday life, she seemed increasingly irritated, and only gave vague, short answers. Clearly, these were not the kinds of issues she wanted to think about on her big night.

Like Zhenmei and Shuyan, who preferred to stay at home and lead a stable life instead of participating in lala sociality, Mingchun also emphasised that they never

⁹⁰ Interestingly, she did not say 'woman', 'lesbian', or use a similarly gendered identity term.

went to bars, did not have any lala friends, and preferred a 'normal' life at home with each other. The six female friends who joined them were all straight. Three were Mingchun's, and visiting from her home city. The other three were Biaoge's college friends from Beijing. I thought it interesting, given their emphasis on normality and disinterest in lala community, that they chose a lala venue for their wedding, and asked her about this. Mingchun told me that for the occasion of their wedding it was important for them to be in an all-woman environment. She had heard about other lala bars in Beijing, but she was under the impression that they were *renao*/noisy or *luan*/rowdy, and full of *xiaohaizikids*. She told me they had been to this bar once or twice before, and they liked its *you wenhuade*/cultured environment. They advertised it online so that other lalas could attend, and because they both felt that their wedding could inspire others.

Biaoge eventually returned with a large photo album, which was passed around in the bar for everyone to peruse. The photos, which had been taken in a professional studio downtown, showed the two of them in typical bride and groom postures and outfits. Poster versions of several of these photos were pinned up everywhere in the bar. The lights were then turned on, and the music turned off. Over the projection screen hung an enormous poster of the happy couple-to-wed, which provided a backdrop for the wedding ritual itself. The wedding then began in earnest, at ten in the evening.

This wedding ritual differed from the more elaborate and participatory one I witnessed about one year earlier. This was partly due to the number of people present. Over fifty women were occupying the seats, and many were standing by the bar, drinking and smoking, and observing the unfolding event. They were cheering, taking photos with their mobiles or cameras, and generally seemed to take great pleasure and joy in being 'guests'. The atmosphere was happy, cheerful and highly interactive, although with much less of the personal touch of Zhenmei and Shuyan's wedding. The participants in the wedding ceremony itself almost exclusively consisted of Biaoge and Mingchun. No friends acted as stand-ins for parents like in the previous wedding. One of Mingchun's friends took on the role of the toastmaster, and by using the karaoke microphone from the other end of the bar she thus directed the wedding proceedings, such as when to offer drinks, snacks, cigarettes, and the final ring exchange.

At first, the couple posed in front of the large poster for others to take photos and congratulate them. They then undertook a typical Chinese wedding ritual of *ban xi*

shi/doing three goods, offering cigarettes and sweets and toasting to everyone in the venue. This took quite some time, given not only the number of people present, but also the near-impossibility for Mingchun to move around in her tight-fitting wedding dress. After they had handed out cigarettes to everyone, they merely threw out sweets and also toasted each other symbolically. The karaoke-toastmaster encouraged everyone to join in from their seats, and so the entire venue raised their glasses or bottles to the couple standing in the centre. Following this, the couple lined up next to each other, with Mingchun speaking into the microphone: she narrated the circumstances of their first meeting, and the development of the relationship. They had first met one year earlier in an Internet lala chat room. She described that it was love at first sight when they met face-to-face after two months, and that they knew early on that they were destined for each other. Biaoge, notably, seemed very shy and did not speak at all; she merely looked down at the floor while her girlfriend was speaking.

Following this, Biaoge and Mingchun moved to the centre of the floor to exchange rings. There was not, as last time, an appointed 'minister' to read out ritual vows, but merely an exchange of rings. They paused for a moment after this, and the various bar guests took many more photos of the now happily married couple. Then they moved over to the karaoke table to address the guests. Mingchun gave a kind of thank-you speech to the attendees in acknowledgment of their support. Biaoge went on to sing a slow romantic Chinese love song for Mingchun, which she ended by giving her partner a full-on kiss. This was enthusiastically received by the audience.

What was really interesting was Mingchun's closing speech, where she encouraged more couples to marry. She told everyone to ignore the problems and the lack of recognition in society, and instead focus on the love for each other. In China, there are very few lalas, she argued, so she hoped she and her partner could be an example to those who were having thoughts of marrying. She then listed their online chat number and nicknames so that people could contact them. This was followed by wild cheering from most of the guests. One of the bar managers then announced that they would be delighted to host more lala weddings in the bar, and she encouraged guests to contact them to arrange this.

As soon as the wedding ceremony was over, the couple and their friends returned to their table where they had a bottle of Champagne waiting. They celebrated amongst themselves without any further interaction with other guests. The party music

was turned on and up, the lights turned low, and the bar returned to its regular Saturday night mode. Within an hour, Mingchun, Biaoge, and their friends were packing up to leave. As I was saying goodbye to them, they told me how they had been celebrating since the morning, having big meals and drinks, and that they were very tired. I never saw them again in any of the lala venues, and Biaoge never replied to my emails.

This time the wedding ceremony, and in fact the entire event, was certainly less detailed and participatory in terms of interaction between couple and guests. The two weddings may both have been equally well-planned and scripted, but the performances differed greatly. One could argue that the former was more of an informal social event *amongst* friends, whereby the events and the duration of the wedding all contributed to strengthening ties and affinity with lala subjective and social identity. This was participatory because they were all lalas and friends. The jokes, friendly guidance, dénouement of the wedding and the lengthy dinner in the bar displayed a positive identification with lala culture compared with the second wedding. Biaoge and Mingchun appropriated the bar, which was at the time becoming a well-known lala bar across China, as a legitimizer for their wedding; however, they displayed little affinity with lala sociality whatsoever. Mingchun spoke passionately about the importance of putting love first and above everything else, but she also stressed in conversation with me that in everyday life they had no contact with other lalas, and that they had no lala friends. She opposed the idea that a stable life could include any aspects of the lala sociality, the Internet aside. I would have liked to hear her partner's views here - I suspected that they differed as Ts often experienced a more fundamental affinity for lala identity and sociality than did Ps like Mingchun.

Financial investment in the wedding, moreover, differed considerably between the two weddings. At Zhenmei and Shuyan's wedding, little money seemed to have gone into the conventional wedding expenditures such as various outfits for the bride/P, photos, photo album, and even posters. However, friends donated symbolic 'red envelopes' with small amounts of money, and a car was hired to take them to the bar. As for Biaoge and Mingchun's wedding, I noticed from looking through the photo album that Mingchun must have rented at least three different dresses, had her hair, skin, and nails done, and hired a professional photographer. They also had a wedding photo album made, including several photos copied to poster size. This should entail

considerable cost, probably several thousand *yuan*.⁹¹ In the bar, they purchased foreign beers, snacks, and they brought expensive foreign Champagne.

In a sense, the two weddings may be seen to display two different approaches to emergent same-sex sociality: the women in the first wedding displayed a deeper affinity with lala symbolism and culture. The event not only established Shenmei and Shuyan's relationship, but reinforced already-established group identity, belonging, and cohesion. As for the second wedding, there was no particular lala affinity to reaffirm, and the lala significance of the ceremony and choice of arena was momentary at best. In fact, it was important, at least for the P, to stress a lack of affinity with laleness. The significance of their wedding resembled the circumstances of the engagement between the young couple Chenguang and Juanlan in chapter five: to establish a sense of continuity and stability in their relationship, and aspirations for a future together, and in the face of an everyday life that must have made positive affirmation extremely difficult. Whilst Biaoge and Mingchun were both in jobs and thus making money, they lived with Biaoge's parents and were not open with them about their relationship. Hence their opportunity for any kind of significant autonomy was minimal. Chenguang and Juanlan's difficulties were also due to lack of autonomy. Both were students and financially reliant on their parents. In addition, Chenguang lived with a relative, and Juanlan had been sent abroad. Again, we see how the particular combinations of socio-geographical factors structure lala life possibilities in fundamental ways.

6.3. Lala-gay contract marriages

The possibility to marry a gay man as a means to deal with the immense pressure to find a boyfriend and get married, emerged as a frequent discussion topic, if not practice, during my fieldwork. One prevailing problem was of a practical nature: namely that lalas and gays rarely socialized together. Many women were explicitly negative to the prospect of gays - or men, period - partaking in the Salon, the bars, or other lala events. Ethnographic and ethno-historical research into same-sex cultures in many urban settings, show an overlap in socializing between gay men and lesbians at

⁹¹ *Yuan*, or *renminbi* (RMB), is the Chinese currency unit. 1000RMB/*yuan* = approx. 75GBP (June, 2008).

least in the early stages of community development (e.g. Boellstorff, 2005; Kennedy & Davis, 1993; Newton, 1972, 1995). This was also the case in China in the 1990s, as I showed in my discussion of He (2001, 2002) and Rofel (1999, 2007) (chapter one). The period of my fieldwork, however, was characterized by gendered fragmentation. Lalas and gays socialized in largely separate spaces. The main exceptions were the fast-developing activist networks where women achieved support and resources from long-standing gay and HIV/AIDS organizations (chapter seven).

Online postings on lala and gay websites often advertised for a matching partner, with detailed requirements and attention to parental strategies. Such postings were especially numerous in the run up to national holidays, so that a photo of the 'partner' could be brought home as proof and trophy and in the hope that the nagging would now stop. The Bar hosted at least one get-together for lala women and gay men on a Sunday afternoon with the purpose of such match-making. A social-cum-sports group for lala and gays took it upon itself to arrange get-togethers, information services and outreach to lala and gay venues about the possibilities of contract marriage.

What made contract marriage more talk than action was probably, and in part, due to people's diffuse ideas about what exactly such a marriage would or should entail. The kinds of issues that often came up in conversations were, for example, sharing material wealth and income, legal rights and responsibilities, the logistics of dealing with kin and other 'outsiders', and in the case of women, concerns about sexual 'danger' and parenting.

A detailed online exchange between a lala couple and gay acquaintance of mine goes some way in revealing the major concerns with regards to contract marriage arrangements. The posting in question was written by a woman seeking to help her girlfriend to find a partner for a contract marriage, and titled: "Wonderful Beijing lesbian in search of gay for contract marriage". It read:

[My girlfriend is] Beijinger, 26 yrs old, 172cm, Master's degree, financially independent, cultured, good temperament, with long hair, kind, easygoing. Seeks contract marriage mainly to satisfy the parents ... Our relationship is very stable. Our circle is small, with few 'homosexual' friends. We like sports and reading. We have a healthy and positive attitude towards life.

The criteria they listed for a potential marriage partner were:

Accommodating and responsible, *bu C*/not a sissy [effeminate] ... settled in Beijing with considerable financial means (mainly to appease the parents) and

own apartment (which hopefully will be the residence of the contract marriage) ... willing to get a fake marriage certificate.⁹²

In further email correspondence, the lala couple provided more detailed views on “the fictitious marriage” in order to “reconcile differences and ... avoid blowing the cover”. The first issue here concerned sex and sexual identity: “We are both 100% pure lesbians. We hope the other side is pure gay. Except for sex, we don’t shut guys out.” This matter was indeed what I heard referred to most frequently when women discussed contract marriages, as I mentioned in the narratives of Zhenmei and Shuyan (6.2.2.). Women often worried about being raped unless they could somehow prove prior to the marriage that the gay partner, too, was one hundred per cent gay.

A related issue to the one of sexual danger is that of having children. My general impression was that women feared they would be pressured to have a child if they were already married. A further point that the lala couple listed went: “Contract marriage cannot provide a healthy nurturing environment for kids. Consequently we are not in favour of contract families having kids.” This was a commonly expressed view, even amongst those who argued that ‘being lala’ was perfectly normal and natural. Many women displayed fears of exclusion and discrimination, as well as the child possibly becoming gay (which was considered ‘bad’), in conversations about such marriages.

A further concern was the degree of access they would have within the marriage to material wealth - pre-existing and accumulated - and what would be their rights in the case of a possible later divorce. Peijing, whose deliberations about contract marriage I discussed in the previous chapter, was of course worried about this. Some women, usually with little financial security in their lives, believed that getting married meant that the husband would and should provide for them financially. One long-time unemployed T in her thirties put it this way: “Getting married would end all my money problems, maybe I should just do it.” Some gay men I knew complained that lalas seemed to want the rights and freedom that a contract marriage provided. At the same time, however, they expected their husbands to support, or provide for, them financially.

Yet other women worried that their future gay husband could actually turn out to be very traditional and conservative in marriage with regards to gender equality and

⁹² While quotations in English throughout are usually translated to English by me, this exchange was already translated into English by my acquaintance and forwarded to me through his personal website.

women's freedom. For example, Peijing worried that, once married, she would be pressured into living in his apartment far from the city centre. In the case of a future divorce, she worried she might lose her accumulated savings and material possessions if her conservative gay friend did not support her claims.

Knowledge about legal rights and responsibilities in a marriage was often limited, and it seemed that many women were unaware of the current legal framework for marriage. The Salon organized discussions where volunteers from Beijing-based telephone help lines for women contributed their knowledge on legal issues about marriage and family. The Tongyu network, moreover, planned to produce and distribute leaflets. Their aims were to empower women to fully utilize their legal rights and make use of contemporary possibilities for (some degree of) autonomy, in case they decided to marry, whichever way, instead of simply allowing - or giving in (i.e. the *meiyou banfa*/have no option approach) - a husband or their families to orchestrate the arrangements, both in their pre- and post-wedding lives.

Related to the former point on legal rights and duties, several women I spoke with believed it was better not to formalize the marriage by getting a *hunyinzheng*/marriage certificate. They preferred, instead, to just organize the marriage ceremony for family and friends and then live together as (if) married thereafter. This was the case with the lala couple in the ad above:

It's best not to get a certificate at all. First of all this avoids the hassles of listing the pre-marriage assets and having the list notarized. Secondly, even if we have the pre-marriage assets notarized, legally it's still troublesome to deal with assets acquired during marriage. Thirdly, nowadays we don't need our work units to provide certificates in order to marry, nobody would bother to ask to see the marriage certificate.

From this it is clear that the lala couple were seeking the appearance of a married life for the one partner, not an actual marriage contract that was legally valid. My impression about the difference between a legally valid and 'appearance' contract marriage was to do with its temporality and duration. Marriage was for those who sought contract marriage, about postponement, or even refusal, and thus a temporary strategy to deal with the here-and-now problem of marriage pressure. Increasingly many women considered the realistic possibility for divorce, and that after a marriage you were free to make choices, even about divorce. After a few years, they could get

the divorce and the family would accept it if you were clever at arguing the reasons why. However, whilst this was a common and popular discourse, my data on contract marriages show that they do not necessarily solve all problems. In fact, the marriage event usually created new ones, which Cho also showed in his study of Korean contract marriages (2007).

6.3.1. Huaxi and Zhilei's arrangement

Huaxi and Zhilei, who were both in their early thirties, got married in 2001 in their home town. Zhilei worked for an international company in Beijing, and Huaxi was a successful entrepreneur in their native city, some distance away from Beijing. They grew up in the same neighbourhood, and although their parents were friends, they were not themselves close friends until they met again as adults. Some years ago, Zhilei, who had already moved to Beijing for work, started bringing his many foreign friends to Huaxi's bar on his frequent returns. He was intrigued by Huaxi's butch appearance and personality and suspected she was a lala. Gradually, they became good friends and spent much time socializing. One night, after much drinking and talking, they came out to each other in the context of lamenting the marriage pressure they were enduring. Soon after, they decided to do business together and thus became even more involved in each other's lives. Both complained of increasing pressure to marry, and one night - again after a few drinks too many - Zhilei suggested that they should get married to end their parents' nagging. The next day they went to apply for the marriage certificate, but they did not arrange any ceremony or banquet. Their parents were very disappointed about this, although they supported the marriage as such. They did complain for quite some time to try to make the couple change their minds and agree to throw a party. Zhilei explained that where they come from traditional ideas about marriage are still prevalent: unless you throw a wedding banquet, people will not consider you to be married for real. This extended to his parents' ill feelings about his and Huaxi's wedding.

Zhilei also told me that he had a second and more selfish motive for wanting to marry Huaxi at the time. He was then in the process of applying to work abroad, in North America, and he knew that his visa application was more likely to be approved if

he could prove close familial ties in China. Thus, a spouse was the perfect cover. It was a spur-of-the-moment decision, he explained, and he doubted that they would have gone ahead with it if they had considered it for longer.

While Zhilei believed that marrying his friend was helpful in stabilizing ties with his family and appeasing their concerns about his future and their own old age, he emphasised that the fact that he was in a good job with a comfortable income was probably just as important. Both financial independence and being married provided, in different yet intersecting ways, considerable means of insurance - material and social - with regards to one's future life when old. In addition, getting married ensured continuity within the family and saving face towards neighbours and other kin. Zhilei then mentioned something that many people I knew had told me, that the phenomenon of marriage pressure is not a linear pressure exerted exclusively from parents towards their child. Neighbours enquire endlessly into other families' relationships and practices, distant kin nag about the son who never finds a wife, and so on. Many women and men I knew harboured considerable compassion - and corresponding guilt - towards their elderly parents who still lived in their native village or local town, away from the cosmopolitan city, and were endlessly probed about their son or daughter never marrying.

Huaxi spoke slightly differently about their post-wedding lives. She pointed out that her and Zhilei's circumstances were dissimilar because Zhilei had left their native town at a relatively early age and was now well settled in the capital. She, on the other hand, had never left. Hence, she had to deal with her family with regards to her sexuality and intimate relationships on a regular basis. People there were also much more conservative and much less open-minded than in Beijing, she argued. Huaxi explained that the *yali hai cunzai*/pressures are still there, especially because she was well known in the home region due to her sports achievements when younger: *henduo ren renshi wo*/many people know who I am, she told me, with some pride in her voice. But this local fame also caused upsetting events for her, such as when a stranger on the street had loudly commented that: "here comes that woman who likes women" when she passed by. Clearly, rumours about her sexuality were circulating, aided by her particularly masculine appearance and personality. She characterized herself as a *feichang chunde T*/very pure T, who was frequently being mistaken for a man.

However, the gossip did not seem to bother her too much. She attributed this to her successful business entrepreneurship, which many people also admired her for.

Being financially independent, with her own successful and expanding business, Huaxi could afford to ignore others' opinion and judgment. She also highlighted the necessity to be financially independent when talking about contract marriage as a coping strategy for lalas and gays. Huaxi argued that because China was very traditional and conservative with regards to married life and gender roles, such as women being financially supported by their husbands, it was even more important for lalas and gays to secure financial independence before taking the step to enter into a contract marriage agreement. When that is achieved, she argued, and you marry each other, you can do whatever you want afterwards. Money gives you the freedom to live your life as you wish after marrying. It puts you in an advantageous position to deal with the *shehui huanying*/social environment and discrimination, so that you can afford not to care, and not be anxious.

For Huaxi, marrying Zhilei was primarily to please her parents. Given that Zhilei lived out of town, she usually visited her parents without him, although she blamed her busy work schedule for not being able to visit as often as she perhaps should, in being an only daughter. During the recent Spring Festival she had not visited them at all because the holiday season was when her business was at its busiest. She had been in a relationship with a local woman for two years now, and would usually bring her along for weekend visits to her family. Huaxi had never said anything outright about their relationship to her parents, and neither had they asked, but they welcomed her friend to their home. She appreciated and lived by the principle, that people mind their own business, that they *buqu darao bierende shenghuo*/do not interfere in other people's lives.

By being financially independent and living alone, she could ignore pressure and discrimination, and carve out a different life for herself and her girlfriend. She had recently expanded her business and opened a bar in a bigger city, and she planned to move there with her partner (who worked with/for her) to enable them more freedom and leeway in their private life. They had on some occasions travelled to Beijing - she owned a car - and met up with Zhilei and his long-time partner for dinner and drinks. Huaxi described Zhilei as someone who was closer than a good friend to her: *ta shige jiaren*/he was family, "we can talk about everything", she explained to me.

Huaxi had only minimal contact with other lala women, networks and bars, and seemed little interested in finding out about emerging initiatives. She also did not use the Internet much at all, which was quite uncommon amongst my informants. She did not know of anyone else like her in her home town. Her girlfriend was not a lala, she was careful to emphasise, and most of her friends were *zhide*/straight. She argued that they admired and respected her because, although she was a woman and they knew she was lala, she could 'pull' even the most beautiful women. She had many gay male friends, though, in the home village and in the area, and she seemed to enjoy spending time with them. Huaxi described the lala and gay community as *luan*/chaotic and erratic. In terms of the lalas, there were many young women coming to the lala bars now, but they only wanted to *wan'er*/have fun. She insisted they were immature and *meiyou sixiangde*/have no clue (lit. 'attitude', or 'thinking'). She seemed to imply that these younger women had little life experience, and therefore understood nothing of the duties in life, such as the marriage pressure that she had encountered. In terms of online lala networking, she found it hard to establish people's motives and identity, she argued that you never knew who they really were; some people would suddenly ask you for money, and dishonesty was rife.

I got the impression that Huaxi had more first-hand experience with the gay male community. She told me that she used to go to gay hang-outs and bars in other cities with gay friends. For example, she sometimes went out to bars and saunas with a close gay friend who was conventionally married and had two children. She had a car and would drive him to these places so that he could meet partners for casual sex. She found this very depressing given the increasing presence of money boys (male prostitutes), foreigners and the AIDS epidemic. Huaxi said she felt that people lived with such a high degree of pressure in their lives, that it made them very tired/exhausted (*huode henlei ... yali henda*). But the bigger problem, she suggested, was with general Chinese society. She hoped that, with further development, opening up, and better welfare, the situation for lala and gays would improve correspondingly. The long history and traditional culture of China made it difficult to envision the possibility for same-sex marriage being legalized. Western countries were far more open with regards to this issue, she argued. She had heard that you could marry in Holland, and she had thought about going there with her girlfriend to get married.

Their marriage, then, had quite different implications for Huaxi than for Zhilei. I suggest that apart from the issue of residency and financial autonomy, it was gender

norms that structured their possibilities and post-wedding lives. Huaxi seemed more rooted within a local, small-city, normative framework for women's possibilities. This was exacerbated by her kin proximity. In our conversations she emphasized her skills as a businesswoman, as a youth athlete, and as a T who could pull the most beautiful women. The sub-text, however, was one in which her personal agency as a transgressive masculine woman with a female partner, and her ability to maintain her relationship, depended on maintaining normative boundaries for female conduct. This was probably part of the reason why she now planned to relocate to a bigger provincial city. It further reminds us of the narrative of the long-term lala couple, in the emphasis to fit in and be normal entirely outside of the context of lala sociality.

6.3.2. Yumei and Jake's customary marital arrangement

While Huaxi and Zhilei had obtained the legal marriage certificate but ignored the plea from their families for a wedding banquet, Yumei and Jake did almost the exact opposite. They invited family on both sides to a social gathering to introduce their partner to their respective families, but they did not formally seal the marriage by applying for the official marriage certificate. Both their families were living some distance away from Beijing, and were not aware of this fact, though. Yumei and Jake reckoned they did not need a legal document, and that their vow to each other, and their families' blessing, were sufficient. Yumei and Jake, both in their early thirties and in well-paid white collar jobs, met online three years ago, when Jake advertised on gay and lala web sites for a 'wife'. They 'married' after one year. Now, they live together in a spacious central Beijing flat, owned by Jake. Yumei had 'dated' a few gay men before she met Jake for the purpose of a contract marriage, but she told me that when she met Jake she knew she had found a kindred spirit.

Yumei had previously been formally married to a man many years her senior. She had run away from the marriage soon after the wedding when her husband refused to grant her divorce, as she felt she could not cope with the situation. She characterized herself at that time as being too young and naïve. The husband had grudgingly agreed to the divorce in the end, and Yumei moved to Beijing to work and gain some distance from the prying eyes of family and neighbours. Her parents disapproved of the divorce

and started matchmaking proceedings in the hope that she would soon re-marry. According to Yumei, her parents worried about others' talk about their daughter's sudden divorce, and could not understand why she would not seek to reconcile instead of divorcing. The pressure was unbearable for her. For example, she told of how her mother would call her every evening after work to ask if she had met someone. Her mother also took it upon her to find her a matching partner and reported in detail on every minor development in finding a suitable husband. Despite the fact that Yumei had two older siblings who were already married with their own families, this did not stop her parents from pushing her to re-marry. This was why she started looking for a gay husband, to appease them and stop the pressure, but at the same time she also wanted this in order to protect herself from being "hurt" again in a conventional marriage.

Yumei and Jake's relationship was one of being *henhaode pengyou*/very good friends, Yumei told me. She admitted she had her parents' wishes and happiness (*weile xingfu fumu*) in mind when she started looking for a gay man online. She 'dated' about three men before she met Jake. Soon after they met she felt that they matched in terms of personality and outlook on life, and now they enjoyed living together. They had many friends in common, and Yumei particularly enjoyed hanging out with Jake's many gay friends, and was probably less often to be found in typical lala venues. They even shared beds on occasion, although they did have separate bedrooms.

From the start of their relationship they were careful to share expenses equally ('AA'), such as food purchases, and expenses to buy gifts when visiting their families. Yumei emphasized this financial equality on a couple of occasions when we chatted. Similarly, financial agreements were generally a crucial concern for women when considering contract marriages. Yumei paid rent to Jake as an ordinary tenant, so that theirs would be a friendship fully based on equality, including in financial terms. It was important for them to avoid possible conflict based on financial provision or dependence, and it also seemed to me that it was particularly important for Yumei to retain her autonomy vis-à-vis a partner and thereby remain in control of her life as opposed to her experiences with her first marriage. When Yumei spoke about contract marriage in a Salon discussion, she advised the women to be careful to work out the logistics such as financial input and provision before entering into a marriage. She knew several lalas and gays who considered contract marriages but were reluctant, and she believed that the main problems were often that women tended to expect being

provided for financially, while the men just wanted someone to take home to show the parents a few times a year. The reality was probably not always this clear-cut, as Peijing's story shows (chapter five), but the tendency towards conventional gender stereotyping amongst both lalas and gays in relation to marriage arrangements seemed clear enough.

Given that Yumei and Jake were not formally married and her sexuality not exclusively same-sex oriented, I wondered if she was still considering marrying conventionally in the future, but Yumei doubted that she would ever want that again. Jake and she were adamant that they did not want to have a child, and they also did not face much pressure from their families about it. They reckoned that this was because they both had established careers, with stable incomes and were already in their thirties, and also because they both had other siblings who had provided grand-children for their parents' enjoyment.

Could she ever let her parents know about their agreement, I wondered, and consequently, her sexuality (and his)? Yumei felt strongly that in her case it would be *bu gongping*/unfair on her parents. They were now in their seventies and were *lao zhishifenzi*/old intellectuals, she explained to me, hence conservative and unable to really understand this. "In China, you can not just tell your parents something like this directly", she argued. Her words echoed many others' who argued that 'coming out' in the Western direct and confrontational way was un-wise and selfish. You needed to take a 'softly-softly' approach, and accept that for the parental generation it would be very difficult to understand and recognize this. In many cases this would in practical terms translate into a 'don't ask, don't tell' strategy of postponement and avoidance so as to not lose face on behalf of the family.

Yumei had not known about any gay or lala life prior to coming to Beijing, and considered herself to have been very naïve and conservative previously. Informed solely by the negative public discourse, she used to be afraid of gay men and believed that they were carriers of HIV/AIDS. Now, however, she had come to find herself very comfortable in this community and appreciated its diversity and openness. Yumei mentioned casual sex ('419') as an example of this openness, because that was something she said she enjoyed. General society was hypocritical about casual sex, she argued: everybody does it but no one admits that they do it, or talk about it. But in the gay community people were accepting of '419', so she felt more *fangsong*/relaxed,

comfortable.⁹³ As with the lala categories TP or bufen, she was equally reluctant to categorize herself as a firm participant within either the queer community or general society - “It’s like a *kouwei*/taste”, she explained to me: “One day you want to eat rice, the next day you want noodles.”

6.3.3. Yingyu and Qibing’s contractual wedding

Yingyu and Qibing met online through specific advertisements for contract marriage arrangement. They were both in their early thirties and had well-paid jobs in the media. They soon became good friends and after about one year they married. Unlike the former two couples, they both got the official legal marriage certificate, and hosted a wedding banquet for family and close friends. As Qibing’s family lived in South-West China and was unable to travel to Beijing, none of his family turned up for the party. As a remedy, Yingyu and Qibing had decided to visit them during one of the upcoming national holidays and host a belated wedding dinner for them there. Qibing’s long-term partner in Beijing, as well as gay and lala friends of them both, including Yingyu’s then girlfriend, participated. Yingyu’s family, however, was oblivious to the considerable gay and lala presence. All in all, the wedding party guests numbered twenty-three, with eleven of Yingyu’s family members including the frail elderly grand mother, and ten of their mutual friends.

In fact, Yingyu had told her father that she did not want to marry years back, when she was in her first serious relationship with a woman. She had also informed him about the nature of the relationship with her then girlfriend. She had reasoned that it was best to be honest with her parents, and she had hoped that they would understand. Her father had simply replied that she still should marry, and that two women together was *buhao*/not good, and would cause her a lot of problems in life. At the time, and later, she had felt that her attempt at ‘coming out’ and refusal to marry was not taken seriously, which was probably the case. The pressure to marry had

⁹³ My impression was that casual sex was not easily accepted among women (see, chapter four). Those who did admit to it - and nobody ever admitted to straight sex, casual or other unless they had been married - often said they regretted it, that it made them feel dirty, and in other ways expressed guilt. Women were generally very judgmental of others who were seen to be sleeping around, or changing girlfriends too often. Descriptive terms often used were that they *meiyou suzhide*/had no quality, or *meiyou wenhuade*/had no culture.

intensified as she approached thirty, and that was why she had decided that a contract marriage would be the better solution.

Yingyu and Qibing went together to register the marriage in December and then hosted the wedding reception about one month later, before the Spring Festival holidays. Meanwhile they went to a photo studio to have their wedding photos taken together, and ordered photo albums to distribute to various family members. To save money and downplay the conventional over-feminization of the bride in these kinds of photo shoots, Yingyu brought her own clothes from home, more unisex and sporty urban clothing, to wear for the different photos. Qibing wore shirts or t-shirts. They also chose the smaller photo albums compared to the big one I had seen at Biaoge and Mingchun's wedding. Yingyu told me that the average price of a small album (A5 size) was around 800 rmb, while the big ones (A4-sized) easily amounted to 2-3000 rmb per copy.⁹⁴ Yingyu covered most of the wedding expenditure, including the photo shoot, food and drinks. Her father had given her some money to partially cover the expenses some time before the wedding, but my understanding was that Yingyu paid for most of the expenses out of her own savings. The rationale was, she told me, that the wedding reception was mostly with her family in mind, not his, so it was deemed as only fair that she paid for it. Indeed, the only guests related to Qibing were in fact his boyfriend and one other gay male friend.

The event was a deliberately low-key affair, to save money and make as little of the wedding's significance as possible while still satisfying Yingyu's family. It started around noon on the Saturday, with a festive meal and celebrations in a restaurant near Yingyu's home, and proceeded to an informal gathering with more drinking, food and socializing in Yingyu's flat. By the late afternoon the parents and other relatives returned to the nearby hotels where they were staying, returning to their native town not too far outside Beijing by the next day. The next day, Yingyu and Qibing invited many gay and lala friends for brunch and drinks in a downtown restaurant, which indeed had been a more relaxed and joyful celebration, Yingyu told me.

The venue of the after-dinner reception with the family was, as mentioned, Yingyu's own spacious and modern flat, on the twentieth floor in one of Beijing's

⁹⁴ 800rmb = ca. USD104 /GBP53 , 3000rmb = ca. USD 388 /GBP 199. In comparison, annual average income in Beijing for 2005 was 29, 674rmb (GBP 1,932); national income average for 2004: 16, 024rmb. (National Bureau of Statistics 2005, 5:25)

central high-rise *xiaoqu* compounds. Instead of celebrating over several days as often happens in the case of Chinese weddings, their wedding reception took place over the course of one weekend afternoon only. Due to the home-location of the event, Yingyu and Qibing's pre-wedding preparations were mainly concerned with coordinating with Qibing and his boyfriend (who lived together elsewhere in central Beijing) to make it appear as if Qibing and Yingyu actually lived there together. This included removing every possible trace of her girlfriend, including her long hair in the bathroom and on the sofa, and hiding her possessions while moving in some of Qibing's for the day. Furthermore, they made sure to coordinate detailed stories of everyday life together, including how they had met and 'fallen in love'.

In the cases of the two lala weddings I described in the first section of this chapter, there were consistent attempts to host a formal wedding ritual that made up the core event of the wedding. Yingyu and Qibing's wedding was probably more formal than Yumei and Jake's social gathering, but did not equal the two lala weddings in terms of the ceremonial emphasis. During the lunch in the nearby restaurant there were toasts and speeches, including Yingyu and Qibing toasting and bowing before their elder family members and each other (similar to the *san bai*). One photo in particular struck me. It showed Yingyu and Qibing, each holding a glass of beer, bowing to each other in typical formal wedding ceremony style. In the background, family and friends congregated around them. In the foreground next to the couple was Yingyu's mother, clasping her hands with a huge smile on her face while looking on. Her mother's pleasure in the scene before her was evident, and Yingyu commented on several occasions how happy her parents were with her now.

Another memorable photo showed Yingyu and Qibing surrounded by all their friends on one of numerous group photos taken that afternoon. Two lala couples stood next to each other, and Qibing's boyfriend stood behind Qibing - who wore a cream-coloured suit and indeed looked very handsome - with his hands on his shoulders. Both smiled brightly and looked very happy. Yingyu, normally a confident and out-spoken T who would wear unisex urban clothing, looked very unlike herself in all the photos I was shown from the wedding. As she had no feminine clothes whatsoever, her girlfriend had lent her what she ended up wearing: a feminine black and flowery skirt, a black blouse and a colourful silk scarf around her neck, with high heeled black boots to top it off. Yingyu looked much less unreservedly happy than her 'husband', but still

smiled. Notably, her girlfriend did not stand next to her in the centre of the group but at the very outer edge of the picture, and was looking gloomy. Although she supported Yingyu's wedding, she was unhappy with the realities of the arrangements, which excluded her altogether.

Yingyu later described the time running up to the wedding as very stressful and depressing (*te yayi*) due to the intensification of the marriage pressure. Her mother was on the phone every single day to inquire about the preparations and double-check that Yingyu was doing everything right. In addition to her very demanding day-time job, Yingyu was at the time taking weekend classes in accounting and therefore had little spare time to spend preparing the wedding. Moreover, her girlfriend at the time, about eight years her junior, who already complained that Yingyu was working too much, was unhappy with the upcoming event, because it meant that they had to pretend she was merely a flatmate, or not even living there. She had moreover expressed that she did not want to attend the wedding at all, but did so in the end upon Yingyu's insistence.

Post-wedding, Yingyu harboured mixed feelings about the marriage's success in providing absolute relief from the pressure she had experienced. While her parents were now content and she experienced a significant decrease in familial expectations in the short term, she believed that her parents would probably start asking about children. She thought this kind of pressure was much smaller than marriage pressure, though, and it did not seem to consume her to the extent that marriage had previously. On the plus-side, she talked about how she felt free from pressure to visit her parents every holiday, and consequently spent the following Spring Festival holidays in Beijing with her girlfriend and lala friends, going on trips and outings to sights, restaurants and bars. Now that she was married, her parents would not busy themselves too much with her life, she said: *tamen buguan wole*/they don't mind me anymore, and: *wo yijing zoule*/I'm gone now. On one occasion, she reflected on the last year running up to the wedding, and talked about the life-changing circumstances she was experiencing: One year earlier she had been single and unmarried, and had been worried about her future life and the relationship with her parents. Now, she had both a *laopo*/wife and a *laogong*/husband, she grinned.

While Yingyu welcomed the cease in family tensions, she was now experiencing other sorts of pressure in her everyday life as a result of the official onset

of married life. Her neighbours in the apartment building were curious about her wedding, marriage and husband, the fact that Qibing never seemed to be around, and that a young woman was living with her. That she had married was public knowledge given that the wedding celebrations took place in her flat and festive *shuang xi*/double happiness symbols were plastered outside her door. The woman operating the elevator - primary locus for gossip about the tenants in the building - also asked questions and displayed uninhibited curiosity about Yingyu and her female friend. Yingyu thus felt that she always had to be on the alert, to produce stories and remember those previously told. She could therefore never relax. She complained of similar problems at work, where un-/suspecting colleagues always asked what seemed to be innocent questions such as: “What are your plans for the weekend?”, “What did you and your husband do last weekend?” and so on. Stories had to be invented, remembered, and edited according to the circumstances. As she was talking about this when we shared a meal with her girlfriend and some other friends in her flat, she broke down in tears. After being comforted by her girlfriend, with everyone saying how they *zhichi*/support and *peifu*/admire her actions, she quietly declared that she hoped her experiences could prove helpful for other and younger lalas, so that they would not have to go through the same difficulties.

We have seen here that a contract marriage did not necessarily mean a total relief and an end to conformist pressures. Yingyu still hoped that she could be open with her parents in the future about who she really was, introduce them to a female partner without telling lies, and let them know about the actual circumstances of the marriage with Qibing. She still felt guilty and bad about lying to her parents and to everyone else in her daily, ‘normal’ life.

6.4. A ‘conventional’ marriage: Jinsong’s experience

Entering a conventional marriage usually meant ceasing to participate in lala socializing. It was therefore unusual for me to meet women who had recently married, yet were still pursuing lala relationships and sociality. The exception was the

increasing number of older women who had been married for a long time, now with older or grown-up children (see, discussions in chapters three and four).

Jinsong, therefore, was something of a case in point as she had married a man just months before she emerged in the Salon for the first time. I discuss her situation to provide a further example of the variety of marriage strategies that lala women adopted, especially because hers involved the consideration of contract marriage following a future divorce to deal with the enforced conventional marriage.

At twenty-nine and a native of another provincial capital in northern China, Jinsong's mother had forced her to marry a man the previous year and move to Beijing with him, when she found out that Jinsong was in a relationship with a woman. Her mother had been so shocked by her untimely revelation that she had become acutely ill and ended up in hospital. Jinsong therefore felt intense pressure to comply with her mother's demand for her to marry so as not to cause her getting ill again.⁹⁵ Jinsong had at that point been with her girlfriend for four years. They lived together in Jinsong's spacious flat, and Jin had a fulfilling office job with a local travel agent. At the time, Jinsong had been planning to marry a gay male friend in order to appease her family's expectations, and enable her living arrangements to continue without the added stress of marriage pressure and constant strategizing so as to not be found out. However, her mother's outing put an end to this plan, and within months she was engaged to a man that her mother had arranged through professional matchmaking services. Meanwhile, her girlfriend expressed little sympathy or understanding for Jinsong's plight. She fled to a southern town where she soon eloped with another woman, in the belief that Jinsong had actually chosen to marry and end their relationship. A year on, Jinsong was still emotional when talking about her girlfriend, which she did often, and she recalled with affection and sadness her beauty and their life together.

The relationship with her husband was more a flat share than a marriage. He slept in the bedroom, and Jinsong slept on the sofa. She refused to have sex with him on all but one exceptional occasion just after the wedding. Jinsong had told her husband that she was in love with someone else but did not tell him that it was a woman. She led him to believe she loved a man who had moved abroad for work. The husband apparently liked Jinsong and wanted to make the marriage work, but Jinsong told him she wanted to seek a formal divorce after one or three years (she changed her

⁹⁵ According to Jinsong, her mother used the term *shoubuliao*,/[I]can't take it

mind a few times). The husband jokingly retorted that he would make her change her mind by then. Jinsong figured that the mother would accept them divorcing after some time if the official reason was that they did not get along. After the divorce, Jinsong planned to find a gay man for another (contract) marriage. This would be a far more suitable arrangement for her (and his) chosen style of life, she argued when we discussed this. I asked her why she had to re-marry given divorce is now increasingly acceptable in (urban) China. Jinsong replied that because her mother - who was herself divorced, in fact - already knew she was lala she could not stay single. That would make her mother suspicious - perhaps even ill again - and Jinsong would then have a lot of problems justifying and living with her choice. In general, she told me, lala/gay people could get away with remaining officially single if the real reason remained a secret. In her case, however, it would make life much easier to find a gay husband who wanted a similar resolution, and with whom she could create a married life that helped them to cope with their families, as well as enable them to pursue a same-sex partner.

Over time, Jinsong began to speak about feeling increasingly *fan*/angry with her present living circumstances, which differed so completely from her life prior to the marriage. She felt isolated, bored, and under constant surveillance. She lived with her husband in a flat in the suburbs, and she spent most of her days there because she had not been able to find full-time employment after relocating to Beijing. Her mother had been adamant she had to leave her home town in order to stop seeing her girlfriend and get away from the 'homosexual community'. Jinsong's mother still did not trust her 'recovery' however, and would call almost every evening to make sure Jinsong was not *luan pao*/straying. What her mother obviously did not know was that Beijing was gradually developing into *the* gay/lala capital of China. Jinsong soon found lala friends online and started to join social events as often as she could get away. Her husband and mother, however, were on good terms, and the mother seemed to have recruited her clueless husband to watch over Jinsong's life and report back that everything was ok. Jinsong's lack of financial independence exacerbated her already difficult situation, as she had to ask her husband for money towards every little expense. This was a highly demeaning situation for a woman who was used to fending for herself for years before the marriage. Given that her husband believed that Jinsong was in love with another man, he worried about giving her more freedom - in time and money - to cultivate, he thought, contact with this man, or perhaps other men.

All this meant that Jinsong mainly had the week days while he was at work to socialize as she wished, and it was hard to plan ahead to join friends for bars and dinners at the weekends. She therefore spent a lot of time chatting online, where we often 'met'. She also posted a personal ad for a girlfriend who would understand her current circumstances.

6.5. Conclusion

These ethnographic examples of marriages and weddings have demonstrated the considerable variation in approaches to normative pressures and family and romantic relationships. I hope to have shown that the ability to imagine, plan, and execute alternative marriage strategies to those prescribed by family and the general society, is fundamentally linked to socio-economic circumstances and the degree of overall kin autonomy.

In terms of the contract marriages, it seems that those with stable careers and high income - such as Yingyu, Huaxi, and Yumei - tended to have already established their own home away from kin. This fact corresponds with the overall residential patterns which showed that 62 of 95 women lived away from their families regardless of age and marriage experience. Women who were not yet able to move out of the parental home before marriage-able age or afterwards, including Qiaohui and Zhenzhen in the previous chapter (see, 5.3.1), experienced severe restrictions with regards to their personal freedom and financial independence.

The two lala couples who wedded in the bar did not readily fit this emerging picture. Compared with the women who sought contract marriages, it seems that these women were less able to negotiate autonomy. This was probably in large part due to their lower degree of financial self-sufficiency and kin proximity. Shuyan and Zhenmei had to some extent been able to negotiate their relationship by living away from their natal home, and by supporting themselves through jobs, although their employment was not stable. They had also 'come out' to their parents. To them their marriage was an affirmation of what they already had and knew. They appropriated the TP roles only occasionally, and they believed that such binary distinctions were of no use in daily life.

Mingchun and Biaoge, however, lived in Biaoge's parents' home. They were not 'out', and they seemed to differ on crucial issues with regards to the meaning of their marriage, as well as their gendered roles in the relationship, and probably also their experience of sexual identity (as either normative or transgressive). They placed great emphasis on the wedding ritual itself, such as the lavish spending, the choice of place and timing of the event, and the playing out of the ritual itself - a spectacle for an audience of guaranteed approving women. Perhaps this was meant to make up for the total lack of affirmation and recognition in their daily lives. What they did share was their emphasis on living stable lives, and spending time at home doing 'ordinary' and 'normal' things, like any other (straight) couple. Yet Shuyan and Zhenmei seemed to have resolved their lala identities to a far greater degree than Mingchun and Biaoge, in that their wedding was a definitive lala event with lala friends. Mingchun and Biaoge brought six non-lala friends to their wedding, and Mingchun prided herself on telling me that they normally had nothing to do with the lala community. Normality and everyday life, and belonging to lala sociality seemed totally separated, but more resolved in the case of Shuyan and Zhenmei than with the other couple.

This and the previous chapter have considered the importance of marriage to lala subjectivity, relationships, and life strategies. I have shown that the marital terrain brings together multiple and different allegiances and desires for belonging and status, and in a language that simultaneously invoke romantic intimacy, filial kin ties, and national Chineseness. Lala subjectivity remains a site of tension and struggle, and a position that cannot usefully be designated to a privatized sexual domain. Lala subjectivity in all its changing manifestations infuses the ambitions for social belonging at private, familial, and national levels through the moral trope of marriage. We have seen that these struggles are being played out between lalas and their natal and affinal kin, but also between two lovers who rarely, if ever, uniformly subscribe to the marital meanings and kinship practices that they engage with.

Introductorily, I posed the question why women would choose to engage with social institutions that seem to negate the possibility for conducting fulfilling same-sex relationships. The detailed ethnographic examination of marital practices and narratives has demonstrated the wide-ranging and deep-seated cultural meanings of the moral values that marital status entails. This normative familial model is predicated on

‘being married’ without questioning the contradictions it simultaneously involves.⁹⁶ It works to enable queers to appropriate its core values in order to attain socially recognized and seemingly un-conflicted personhood. At the same time, a partial ascription that is primarily directed at surface (‘face’) level enables alternative possibilities at personal and intimate levels. The ability to maintain a hetero-marital face, as it were, allows for the possibilities for same-sex intimate relationships in private.

Thus, marriage and lala subjectivity in their varying manifestations constitute fundamentally important and critical sites where meanings of gender and sexuality are being constantly configured, challenged, and negotiated. It is true that they appear to conflict across - even within – social fields and subject positions, and that they seem to provide only “an illusory sense of wholeness” (cf. Ewing, 1990: 266). However, it is these fields and sites of contestation and struggle that we must engage with in order to comprehend the multiple and ambiguous affiliations of lala subjectivity. Together with the trope of lala, marriage provides a defining axis of differentiation where a range of subjective and social factors engage each other and produce lala subjectivity.

In the final main chapter I will turn to another important critical field where lala subjectivity is simultaneously configured and contested, namely that of ‘community’.

⁹⁶ I am thinking of Berlant and Warner’s argument that the ‘love plot’ of familial intimacy is predicated upon an imaginary community that makes social relations an entire field within a “utopia of social belonging” (1998: 555).

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Our lala space”:

Making community in post-millennial Beijing

I think that civil society now has achieved some space in China, and that this is really a chance for activism. So, for lesbians, then ... there is a social space, so we have to take it ... Someone from the lesbian community have to take it.

Xingmian, 32 years old, lala activist

I have never been [to offline/real life lala spaces]...I don't know anyone there. I don't want to attend that kind of activities, there's going to be lots of strangers, I'm not used to it ...

Kuangrong, 29 years old, in online chat

7.1. Conceptual meanings: Making community

This chapter focuses on lala collective identity and sociality, and considers the prevailing ambiguity of lala community, participation, and membership. In line with my earlier chapters, I appropriate lala as a trope that brings a range of personal subjectivities, familial and social meanings and circumstances together into specific lala spaces. It thereby constitutes a central, critical site - figuratively and physically speaking - where meanings about gender and sexuality are being produced, negotiated, and challenged (cf. Jean-Klein, 2000; Valentine, 2007). These sites are places such as the Salon, the Bar, the weekend bars, Internet sites, and other social settings that bring women together. Lala sites are also symbolic and ideological because they assume the participants adhere to a pre-defined identity marker, namely their romantic and sexual interest in other women.

As Xingmian alludes to in the quote above, the socio-economic and political situation in the PRC now enables possibilities for alternative, spatial formations outside the immediate boundaries of public life. These spaces simultaneously exist as concrete physical manifestations and as social relations, which are infused with moral values and power inequalities. In a Foucauldian sense, these socio-spatial dynamics incorporate disciplinary regimes of discursive power relations. One effect is that categorical identities are established on a binary grid-line of dominant versus subjugated. This generates further disciplinary effects, which we have seen with regards to, for example, the pervasive discourse on being ‘good’ lalas, where certain categorical meanings are becoming more dominant and desirable than others. The preceding chapters have shown how a state-sponsored discourse of ‘normality’ versus ‘abnormality’ (*bu/zhengchang*) structures lala perceptions of ‘good’ same-sex sexuality and life styles, and official discourse on normative citizenship. This chapter considers how such socio-spatial possibilities are being moulded into lala space and the corresponding appropriation of ideologies and discourses that aim to establish a prevailing sense of community herein.

The chapter is divided into three sections. The first discusses meanings of lala spatiality in various narratives of “our lala space” in the zine *Les+* (2007). Four women, some who themselves have been and are instrumental in creating such spaces, present their views on why they think ‘their lala spaces’ are important. I outline the qualities of contemporary spatiality in comparison with initiatives in the 1990s. My aim is to demonstrate that, whilst there are distinctively new aspects to lala community and networking activity that differ from previous practices, the memories and experiences of past events, influence contemporary space-making, social activism, and also inform individual choices to participate. The second section presents ethnographic narratives from two different, yet overlapping, lala spaces: the Salon and the Tongyu network. I discuss these women’s engagements with the various lala spaces now available, and the ambiguity of membership and group identification.⁹⁷ In the final

⁹⁷ My choice to emphasize, perhaps privilege, the Salon and Tongyu is, of course, at the expense of other spaces, such as the bars, and the badminton group. However, for the purpose of showing the overlapping and shifting nature of lala socio-spatial practices, I think the Salon and Tongyu - which did after all congregate in bar spaces - provide very good examples. I will discuss the specificity of Internet spaces elsewhere.

section I consider lala community's interrelationship with regional and global queer activist politics and networking.

The discussion considers how to understand current lala social activism and community in relation to dominant queer frameworks of 'queer globalization' and 'global sexualities' (cf. Binnie, 2004; Wekker, 2006). I discuss how and why we should still consider lala social activism as specifically and authentically Chinese, as opposed to being or becoming abstractly 'global'. This approach questions the very notion of community as based primarily on sexual subjectivity. This relates to the preceding chapters' discussions that demonstrated 'lala' as an indexer for wide-ranging, cross-cutting affiliations, and social distinctions, and extending beyond an exclusively sexual domain. Chapter four highlighted the 'lala similitude' at work in lala spaces such as the Salon, the bars, and the Tongyu network that was highly contentious and an aspiration more than experiential reality. The complexity of all the social distinctions at work, not only confirms the fraught sense of community but, moreover, questions the ontologies of gender and sexuality.

Anderson's notion of 'imagined communities' (1991[1983]) has been widely appropriated to theorize marginalized queer spaces in hetero-dominant societies. I disagree that such communities are imagined, or figments of an imagination, and therefore inauthentic and deluded.⁹⁸ Rather, I would argue that they are, to borrow Valentine's formulation, "*products of an imaginary*" (2007: 68; emphasis in original). This approach is productive for the further analysis as it converges with the one on multiple subjectivities developed in chapter two. This approach analyzes seemingly illusory and paradoxical modes of self-presentation as producing strategies and modes of selfhood that successfully assist in negotiating the facets of lives in widely differing spheres.⁹⁹

The earlier chapters detailed the notions and relationships of identity and community, and their interrelationship. I demonstrated that lala as a straightforward identity that denotes same-sex preference is problematic for most women, and subjective forms of identity, gendered categories like TP roles were used far more.

⁹⁸ One pertinent issue in this regard is whether Chinese queer communities are not 'real', because you cannot, as one Beijing-based expat Anglo-ponic queer put it to me, parade down Tiananmen Square carrying rainbow banners on Stonewall Memorial Day.

⁹⁹ An 'unsuccessful' attempt at negotiation would be social death (exclusion), or schizophrenia (Butler, 2004, 2006; Ewing, 1990).

However, these identity categories were further cross-cut by differentiating factors beyond the domain of gender and sexuality. Yet lala, TP roles, and to some extent the normative discourses on tongxinglian/homosexuality signalled a commonality, namely the sharing of a sense of being different due to romantic and sexual interest in other women.

Moreover, negotiations about identity and community required a total separation of lala sociality and intimate relationships from everyday life, i.e. a categorical public/private. As previous chapters have shown, familial and social recognition of same-sex relationships and identity seemed to hinge fundamentally on lala appropriation of normative ideologies of the everyday, the normal, and 'being just like everybody else'. In the following section I will probe the possibilities for lala difference and activism, with reference to Jean-Klein's notion of authorial agency (2000), and Liu and Ding's notion of queer reticence, and a reticent queer poetics (2005).

What, then, is 'community'? I have shown in the chapters on sexual subjectivity (four) and relationship, marital, and familial strategies (five and six), that being and feeling different with regards to romantic and sexual interest in other women, and one's gendered subjectivity, was in large part what established a consciousness that later propelled women towards lala sociality and possibly identity. The experience of difference or being different¹⁰⁰, is a constitutive marker of lala subject positioning, vis-à-vis dominant heteronormative regimes. Similarly, Kennedy and Davis' ethno-history of working-class lesbians in Buffalo, New York, in the early-to-mid-1900s, noted "[t]hose who participated in these communities experienced themselves as different and this difference was a core part of their identity" (1993: 8).

In line with Valentine's work on the transgender category and community, I approach 'lala community' and 'lala spaces' as a variety of dispersed places and experiences which are brought together by this category and the idea of community that it entails (2007: 72). This approach highlights community as an achievement and in doing so opens up the analysis to consider "how the achievement of a [lala] community fails to account for all its imagined members" (ibid.: 73). This attention to

¹⁰⁰ To reiterate, I have argued that 'being different' is also a fundamental marker of sexual subjectivity for bufen and P-identified women, who discursively rejected difference by stressing sameness (i.e. 'just like everyone else'). However, it is true that they also recognized that others would view their relationships as 'different' and they negotiated their positioning accordingly.

failure and borders and to the question of membership is important because it takes seriously statements and experiences such as Kuangrong's and many others. She had never been to lala spaces such as the Salon or Bars and vowed that she never would. Still, she wanted to find a girlfriend and experience a romantic relationship. As Weston (1991) commented, not everybody feels at home in what is ideologically perceived as an encompassing and unified lesbian and gay community (1991: 206). Martin and Mohanty argue for "a new sense of political community which gives up the desire for the kind of home where the suppression of positive difference underwrites familial identity" (1986: 204-305; in Weston, *ibid.*). Paying attention to the edges of community, to reticence and the shifting appropriations of lala identity, to those who resisted categorical identity, and avoided lala spaces, helps us understand the limitations to and the liminal aspects of lala collective membership (Valentine, 2007: 73).¹⁰¹

Therefore, this chapter examines the meanings of lala collective experiences and sociality to define community. Instead of assuming a pre-defined community and collective lala identity based on activist rhetoric of rights and recognition, I enquire into the trope of community beyond activism, including 'just having fun'. The discussion shows that local social activism assumes different sensibilities beyond those of trans-national queer activism. Finally, the discussion probes the ontological boundaries of gender and sexuality that are further elaborated in the concluding section.

7.2. "Our lala space" past and present

The current surge in lesbian collective life and social activism, alongside increased public visibility and a degree of positive media interest, is unprecedented in the PRC. The current visible activities builds significantly on networking carried out in the 1990s, which were significantly different. This section outlines the features of lala/tongzhi networking in the 1990s and the post-millennial lala initiatives. Comparing and tracking the networking practices and lesbian spatiality in these two

¹⁰¹ Yet, as Johnson argues: "there is nothing ambiguous about ambiguity, sexual or otherwise." (1997: 14). This statement refers to the problem of the binary character of most forms of identity politics.

time periods provide insights into the current modes of participation and different ways of establishing networking and social spaces.

Four statements published under the title *Womende lala kongjian/Our lala space in the Les+ zine* (2007: 19), illustrate the main appropriations and meanings of lala spatiality:

Huiyi: The bars carried endless enchantment for me. Every week I found myself longing for the weekend; it was my only happiness. If you ask me whether the bars back then were more *luan/rowdy* than now, I can only say that the age span then was more diverse compared with today's *laba de renqun/lala bar community*, and the number of patrons was far smaller. But the *xintai dou shi yiyang/atmosphere* was pretty much the same.

Xiaopei: Tongzhi *huodong changsuo/activist venues* are extremely important for tongzhi, in order to organise activities to help everyone to step forwards, to change from being “invisible” or a kind of “phenomenon”, towards a status as visible, living human beings. It is only by coming together as an organized *zhengzhi qunti/political community* that we have been able to alter our sad, lonely lives and struggle together to achieve social equality.

Shitou: In fact, I don't think it is very important whether you participate [in lala spaces] or not. If your heart is open, your mind relaxed, and you integrate with other people, then that is 'ok'. The bars are not the only important spaces [for us] but they are inevitably [still] needed, and their importance does for many surpass that of other spaces. However, your *xinling/spirit* is also a very important space; people should consider how every kind of space has its own culture.

Qiaoqiao: Ever since I started [the Bar] [in 2000] and until now, it was never about making money. Earlier, just after the bar opened, there was no opportunity to make money on it anyway; now there is though ... I think I will always manage the lala bar, and I really want to as well because I know that it is very rare that other lesbians are leading the kind of *zhenshi, yangguang, xingfu/authentic, bright and happy life* that I am. Eventually, I hope that all 'les' women are able to *yangguangqilai/step into the sunlight*.

These accounts illustrate different approaches to the notion of a shared lala space, past and present. Huiyi points to the much needed free-space provided by the early bars and their changes since. Bar manager Qiaoqiao comments on their recent and growing commercialisation. Both of them convey the centrality of the bars to foster positive

community and lead 'bright and happy lives'. The differing assessments of lala spaces and activities, including activism, Xiaopei, who participated in the founding tongzhi salons and meetings in Beijing in the mid-nineties,¹⁰² evokes a distinctively activist rhetoric in the transformative potential for tongzhi and lalas from being invisible to being human. On the other hand, the famously out artist and film-maker Shitou, suggests that lala categorical identity cannot be the sole basis for group membership. She also maintains the importance of individual positive attitudes, or self recognition. The *Les+* zine is itself a glowing - and increasingly glossy - testament to the recent phenomenal growth of the lala community and lifestyle. Its frequent publication since 2006, and availability free-of-charge in lala, gay or lala/gay friendly venues in 35 cities in 26 provinces and its *Les+* online blog and shop.

Huiyi, Xiaopei, and Qiaoqiao's narratives refer to the circumstances for the lala community prior to the post-millennial period. Next, I will discuss pre-millennial lala community formation including Xiaopei's published narratives of early 1990s organizing, pre-Internet networking, and the *Beijing Jiemei/Sisters* network, Tongyu's predecessor.

In the early 1990s, the first organized possibilities for lesbians emerged as part of gay networking that was enabled mainly by the AIDS pandemic, but also the general increase in social freedom. Many 'gay' networks emerged in the name of public health and development, and NGO and policy workers, students and cadres, foreign and Chinese, gay, bi, queer, and lesbian, formed the early discussion groups and salons (He, 2001, 2002; Rofel, 1999, 2007). Below, Xiaopei describes the first tongzhi event in a public space:

In 1996 there were still no homosexual bars in Beijing. An activity was organized by Susan Jolly and Wu Chunsheng [British and Chinese queer/gay activists at the time] to commemorate the anniversary of the Stonewall riots. To avoid police attention, we told all the people we knew to go to a very quiet bar in a small lane, for a 'birthday party'. We even bought a birthday cake. Sixty people came, among them eight women. This was the first time that this many women tongzhi had ever turned up in a public place. Wu whispered to me that there were plain-clothes police in the bar. We thought of a way to get around them. We sang 'Happy birthday' and cut the cake. I announced: 'Can you guess whose birthday it is today? Come and whisper it in my ear, and if you get it right, you get a present!' (which consisted of wrapped up condoms

¹⁰² I discussed her published narratives in chapter two (He, 2001, 2002).

and sweets). Everyone started to ask each other whose birthday it was. Those who knew about Stonewall told those who did not, who then came and whispered the answer to me: ‘Today is the commemoration day of the American gay movement.’ ... It really moved me. From that day on, that bar became the first gay bar in Beijing.¹⁰³

Nine years later, the Salon celebrated its one-year anniversary in a venue situated only streets away from this bar (itself demolished in 2006 to give way to a shopping mall). Yet, this was in many ways a completely different material and cultural environment. As Xiaopei commented earlier, it was by coming together “to alter sad lonely lives” that women could start to struggle for equality. And Qiaoqiao recollects how she opened a weekly bar event for lalas in 2000, which has increased in popularity over the years, although the clientele and modes of entertainment have changed drastically.

In the repressive socio-political climate of pre-millennial Beijing, it is understandable that many older women recounted that in their earlier life they were fearful of tongxinglian and found it difficult to reconcile the official rhetoric with their personal desires (see, 3.3.). Xiaopei, for example, said:

My first girlfriend and I did not know what homosexuality was. We thought homosexuality was another word for sexual perversion. We advised each other: ‘We are definitely not homosexuals. We just love each other. Later we’ll both marry men.’ Later we both did get married, and then both got divorced. I remember the first time someone said to me ‘I am a homosexual,’ I thought, ‘Actually, I am too.’ But I did not dare to say it (2001: 41).

Similarly, 54-year old Nuoshan had met her girlfriend in the *danwei*/work unit in the early 1980s, and tried to conduct a clandestine affair away from the gaze of her co-workers:

She always used to bring me my lunch and other things. But one day, a co-worker asked me if we were tongxinglian (*nimen shibushi tongxinglian ya?*). My face went red immediately, I was so ashamed; but my girlfriend was seemingly unfazed. She didn’t care that we were a same-sex couple. I really admired her bravery; she said she would even declare her love for me to the *fating*/court if required. After some time, I relaxed, and didn’t worry [about

¹⁰³ He Xiaopei’s account has been published in various places. A Chinese translation was published in *Les+*, March 2007(8): 33, titled: *Koushu lala: Xiaopei – Qishi wo tebie wusuowei*/Xiaopei: Actually I don’t really care. See also, Ge & Jolly, 2001.

people knowing] anymore. It became a kind of open secret ... You know, this was the beginning of the 1980s; people, including me, were *tebie kunhuo*/really bewildered about these things. There was nothing about it in the media back then. I remember I read a magazine article at some point, titled “San Francisco big homosexual parade” and I was so excited about it ...

These accounts along with the narratives of older women’s lives and experiences in preceding chapters, clearly show that most women’s same-sex lives prior to the nascent organizing were conducted mainly in private in which two women found each other in the work place or, perhaps, in the immediate home environment or neighbourhood. Knowledge about tongxinglian and lesbianism was minimal.

With the increased public discourse on homosexuality from the mid-1980s onwards new spatial and discursive possibilities took shape. A national letter writing network developed as a result of the first publications on homosexuality in the early-to-mid 1990s by scholars Zhang Beichuan and Li Yinhe. These public figures were among the first to positively speak officially and openly about homosexuality. They advocated understanding and equality. Importantly, they personally facilitated a nation-wide letter-writing network amongst lesbian women who had contacted the authors individually after the publication of these books.

I spoke with several middle-aged women in Beijing who had initially met through these networks and had been meeting informally for dinners in each other’s homes or at restaurants for years prior to the emergence of the salon and bars. None of these women became regulars of the bars, the Salon or Tongyu during my fieldwork, though some came to the Salon occasionally. Despite the diverse social possibilities now opening up, they seemed to prefer this early established community as it did not interfere with regular family and work life and new spaces catered more to a money-spending, leisure-craving younger crowd that did not have the same family responsibilities.

After the first women tongzhi gathering in the summer of 1998, the Beijing Sisters network emerged. As noted in chapter one (1.2.1.3.), the 1995 UN Women’s Conference marked a shift in socializing from informal get-togethers in homes to more activist and organized networking. Aided by gay/MSM networks and inspired by lesbian achievements in Taiwan and Hong Kong, the first mainland *nütongzhi*

dahui/women tongzhi conference took place in the summer of 1998 in Beijing with over thirty participants from all over China. My impression was that the letter writing network was instrumental in inviting women to participate from different regions. This was a landmark event that inspired a group of women to establish the *Beijing Jiemei*/Sisters network and *Tiankong*/Sky magazine.

Two years later in 2000, the Internet had become a major resource and avenue for organizing, support, and information, and the Beijing Sisters endeavoured to organize a second conference and the first national lesbian culture festival (Wang, 2001, 2004). The conference was successful with fifty women from different regions participating. Wang (2001) commented that this event provided “women from all over China with opportunities to share their perspective and experience.” However, on the eve of the planned culture festival, the festivities were shut down by authorities in an intimidating manner: for example, names were recorded and women were detained. This incident has had far-reaching and long-lasting negative effects for lala organizing. The women I knew often referred to this incident as the reason for not wanting to attend the Salon, get involved with Tongyu, or any other lala socializing that was *zuzhide*/organized. Some women who had been involved were wary of any current lala/gay event that appeared ‘activist.’ The attitude was one of general suspicion and also questioned the lala or gay activist organizers’ motives. Soon after 2000, the Beijing Sisters dissolved and no equivalent network emerged until Tongyu was established in January 2005.

About the festival, Wang wrote:

Police targeted [the festival] as a form of political assembly as it implicitly promoted legal rights for women tongzhi ... The conference had been announced ... and discussed on women tongzhi websites in China and Chinese women tongzhi websites overseas. Organizers posted their vision, mission, and proposed activities. However, this publicity attracted the attention of police ... Organizers, unaware of the surveillance, openly reported details of their preparations, including funding sources, organizational situation, names of organizers (by pseudonym), supportive scholars, etc ... The police successfully diverted the energy of the organizers from their real activist work, created mutual suspicion in the community, and destroyed the solidarity of women tongzhi community ... (2003: 8)

Tongyu manager, Xingmian, was wary of the bad publicity this incident has had for lala networking:

There was a very heated discussion on the Internet following [the festival shut-down]: What was really the strategy, and what did they want to achieve? [The main organiser] was very radical, very human rights focussed, and while I agree with her basic principle, the timing of this event was very problematic.

Lala networking prior to the turn of the millennium generally focussed on bringing women together to share experiences of isolated lives and start to organized initiatives for improvement and equality – this is especially prominent in narratives of older women like Nuoshan. The Tongyu network consciously sought a more moderate approach compared to the Beijing Sisters.

7.3. “Now there exists a space, so we lesbians have to take it”:

Narratives of two community spaces

7.3.1. The Salon’s one-year anniversary

The setting of the Salon’s one-year anniversary celebration was different to the venue, the Saturday Bar, where the inaugural Salon took place a year earlier. The Saturday Bar venue was anonymously located off a small street near the Workers’ Stadium in the upmarket, central Sanlitun area. The one-year anniversary was in a Western-style fast food restaurant in a modern glass-clad, high-rise shopping mall in Chaoyangmen not far from Sanlitun. This venue, brightly lit, with several TV sets playing Western and Chinese pop videos, furnished in American diner style, and paintings of Western and Cantonese pop and movie stars covering the walls, was substantially different to the ground floor, sun-deprived and dark Saturday Bar.

As per usual socializing, the first hour was devoted to informal conversations, drinking tea and eating a meal or snacks, exchanging news and gossip, and chatting with new women. Almost every week throughout my time in Beijing there would be a new face or more amongst the matrons. Salon regulars were generally careful to

welcome them especially. This kind of socializing was what most women were comfortable with and they would engage in it in the Salon, the badminton group, or in informal socializing amongst groups of friends. The general absence of alcohol and loud music distinguished them from the weekend bars. Many young women found the lack of party atmosphere increasingly boring and meaningless and argued that this ambience was for *laoren*/old people and *zhishifenzi*/intellectuals. The younger women preferred the weekend bars with the bustling party crowd, entertainment such as (male and female) pole dancers and strippers, competitions and games with prizes, and alcohol that were considered more fun and worthwhile. I also suspected that many did not really want or enjoyed sitting around and debating their lives, and the weekend bars were an escape and source of have fun far from everyday life. As Huiyi said, “Every week I found myself longing for the weekend. It was my only happiness.” This was certainly the case for Qing Zhao and Xiao Zhi, the two Beijing Ts introduced in chapter three (3.2.), who worked long hours and had little escape from their parents’ marital and normalizing pressures.

At the one-year anniversary when the discussion started those participating moved to a larger secluded table away from the noise of card-playing, drinking and movie watching women in the main area. On this special occasion, Amei, who usually revealed little about her visions for the Salon, gave a lengthy talk about the Salon’s role and achievement since its inception. About twenty women pressed into the booth to listen and, unusually, the conversation continued for over two hours.

Start of the event was routine with a round of introductions and greetings whereby each participant introduced herself by (nick) name, age, TP-identification, and then Amei spoke. She began to explain how the Salon seemed to have a transformative effect on the women who visited it as it helped them to accept themselves as lala (*rentong zijide kaishi*). She repeated the familiar tale of a woman in her late thirties from a northern city, whose story of recurrent suicide attempts, depression, and discrimination were well known through her long-running and controversial autobiographical postings on the *Tianya* lala website.¹⁰⁴ Amei reiterated her ambition for the Salon was to provide a positive introduction to lala life and to ensure that women did not have to endure this misery. She then recounted the more

¹⁰⁴ *Tianya* is a popular web portal, and the lala section is found within the *yilütongxing* .

positive experience of Cici, a younger university student, who had been anxiously crying the first time she visited the Salon. Cici was worried about her lesbianism and about being among other lalas but, three weeks later she brought a straight female friend along after coming out to her.

In Amei's own words: "The main purpose of the salon is really to *bang tamen jiao pengyou*/help lalas to make friends ... and then [help them] focus on the next steps ... such as romantic relationships, deal with parents, marriage and so on." A few months earlier she had done an interview about the Salon with the respected *Zhongguo Xinwen Zhoukan*/China News Weekly: "[I wanted] everyone to have a weekly chance to come together to chat, and help them make friends, talk about their state of mind, watch movies ... [in short] have a *fangsongde difang*/place to relax" (Zheng, 2005).

That afternoon Amei proceeded to give more examples of how they changed from being *ting jinzhangde*/rather nervous, to *ziyoude*/relaxed. A few of them were sitting around the table, nodding and smiling knowingly as Amei spoke. Dandan, a younger bufen and media student, then spoke:

Before I first came to the Salon last year, I had been thinking a lot about what kinds of women I was attracted to and wanted to have a relationship with. I thought, for example, that I preferred older, more mature women. But after I started coming to the Salon I have become more open-minded about my preferences, and I have realised that different kinds of women have different attractive qualities; you just have to try ...

Renxiang, who was a T in her fifties introduced in chapter four (4.1.2.) and had her first experience with other lalas in the Salon some months earlier, then stood up to speak:

I have always had many intimate female friends, we would even share beds at night and embrace, but I never experienced anything more intimate than that. I never dared to approach them, because I thought that [being lala] was *buhao*/bad. Now [after joining the Salon] I have started to think more positively about it ...

Amei emphasized two factors that structured patterns of participation and the Salon's development. The first factor was about *you shijian*/'having the time' and freedom to attend. Having time and freedom meant that women, particularly students and also those working in regular office jobs could regularly participate. Whereas, as Amei pointed out, women who worked in government offices or the police force rarely

participated as they experienced less personal freedom. This is reminiscent of the fundamental importance of independence and autonomy on various levels, discussed in chapter three.

The second factor was *sixiang fangmian*/attitude, again discussed in previous chapters. Age was an element and Amei discussed who the age span was widening with the youngest visitor being sixteen years old and the oldest was fifty-four. A new trend was women over the age of forty had started coming to the Salon, with over forty women in this age group attending the Salon over the past year. Amei was pleased with the *chengshude*/mature atmosphere this created and she speculated that the number of older women participants would increase as recent official statistics indicated an increase in divorce or resisted marriage in middle age. She also commented that *xueli*/educational level was irrelevant to whether one had conservative views about homosexuality. Someone asked whether Confucian morals caused conservative attitudes, to which Amei responded she did not think so: The biggest problem is they fear that others will find out, and the *huanyingde yingxiang*/social pressure.

However, there were other concerns about Salon attendance and image beyond the discussion led by Amei on this occasion. A week prior to the Salon's anniversary, the new Tongzhi Archive opened with an inaugural dinner hosted by archive managers Xingmian of Tongyu and Xiongren of the joint Aibai network and Information Clearinghouse for Chinese Gays and Lesbians.¹⁰⁵ The archive space consisted of one approximately 25m² sized, book-shelved room in a three-bedroom flat in a modern apartment compound (*shequ*) near Beijing's northern fourth ring road, which Xingmian and Xiongren shared.

This evening at the archive hosted an intense discussion between Amei and Lanmai, an outspoken T in her thirties who worked in the IT business, about the Salon's purpose and future. Lanmai argued passionately that the Salon needed a change in focus:

The salon now is *tai baoshou*/too conservative and does not provide a good enough environment (lit. *chou'oude huanying*) for lalas; with regards to its

¹⁰⁵ Aibai Web portal for "Tongzhi resources, culture, education, and legal aid"; at <http://www.aibai.cn/> Information Clearinghouse of Chinese Gays and Lesbians at <http://www.iccgl.org/>

kaiyang/openness it is inadequate ... There doesn't seem to really be any aim for the Salon as it is now ... I think that one aim should be to provide lalas aged 30-40 and older with the *meilide jihui*/beautiful possibilities to learn how to lead a beautiful and *henyou huoli*/vital life ...

Lanmai focused on Amei herself as an issue of representation and the importance of being good example, and Amei's self-presentation was part of a continued advocacy for older, more mature women:

... What Amei wears and how she chooses to present herself to the lala community serves to reflect on the whole community; she should wear the kind of clothes that forty year old women find attractive (*ta yinggai chuan 40 suide nüren xinggande*), because [she] is the entry-point for new women to the salon to gain an understanding of the lala community (*liaojie lalaqunzi*). She should want others to be like her ...

Amei intervened to say that the Salon objective needed to be considered more fully and that this was not a simple decision considering the diversity of women attending. However, Lanmai was on a roll:

The first step should be, as I said, that Amei in being a representative for the lala community [as Salon manager] needs to help lalas to find 'a beautiful way out' (*kandao chulude meili*) ... Step two, based on the former point, is that these women will then slowly change their ideas about [lesbianism]...

Amei and Lanmai's exchange indicated that many women affiliated with the Salon and Tongyu wanted to re-focus towards more *chengshude*/mature women's needs primarily through intra-community activities such as raising awareness about lala possibilities for older women, providing positive role models, and so on. The intention was, furthermore, to foster extra-community effects such as providing a positive and representative image to the general public and thereby challenging the negative stereotypes of lalas and homosexuality.

These social activities proposed two seemingly contradictory aims: firstly, that being lala is a positive identity and thereby aiming to enhance wellbeing through informal socialising and secondly, the need to integrate with the general society and counter prevailing negative stereotypes through promoting 'being good lalas' – i.e. being good citizens who just happen to be lesbians. No wonder that Amei said quietly at the Archive dinner: "*wo fanle*/I'm fed up!" She raised some rhetorical questions

neither she nor I had the answers to in order to illustrate her dilemmas: What is it that people actually want? What makes people come back and participate over time? How best to compromise in catering to diverse women's needs and interests, yet not alienate others? In other words, the more successful the salon was in reaching out to different women and attracting them as participants, the more difficult it was to ascertain how the Salon could provide for their diverse needs and interests.

In order to shed further light on the process of establishing social activism in Beijing, I now turn to discuss a related, but different lala space, namely the Tongyu network and its manager Xingmian,.

7.3.2. Common language: The Tongyu network

Founded in January 2005, Common Language (*Tongyu*) is a grassroots, community-based group providing health service, support and education for lesbian and bisexual women in China. By public education and social advocacy, we aim to empower LGBT community (*nütongxinglianzhe, shuangxinglianzhe he kuaxingbie renqun*), promote understanding among different groups of people, eliminate the discrimination based on gender and sexuality, and strive for the equal rights for LGBT and all women in China.

“Our mission”, Tongyu leaflet, spring 2005

Tongyu emerged as the most prominent lala activist during my fieldwork. I discuss Xingmian's, Tongyu manager, own narratives of lala organizing, abroad and in China and her transformative personal experiences from being an 'anti-activist' student to her return to Beijing to set up a local lala network. I consider the major differences between the Salon and Tongyu in terms of participation and attitudes in order to probe the overlapping sensibilities of the lala community in Beijing and demonstrate the increasingly differentiating 'fun versus organized' approach to *huodong*/activities.

While lala spaces were almost invisible until the mid-nineties, there was a dynamic upsurge in community building by 2005 that diversified into bars and parties, trips, sports and performances. In addition there was a proliferation of semi-public lala-identified networks, conferences, research projects, magazines, and mainstream media participation that increasingly blurred the previous absolute private/public divide of lala sociality. The gay men's networks and spaces outnumbered those for

lalas. In the following section I want to discuss the specific climate for lala social activism in the narratives of Xingmian.

When Xingmian returned to Beijing after several years in the US, there was only one weekly bar event for lalas, but the gay scene was well-established:

When I returned to China in 2004, I suddenly realized that there were already over twenty active gay men's groups in China ... The Chinese situation is very particular because of the rapid economic development ... Actually, I think that civil society now has achieved some *kongjian*/space in China, and that this is really a chance for activism. So, for lesbians, then ... there is a *shehuishangde yige kongjian*/social space, so we have to take it (*women yinggai qu 'take it'*). Someone from the lesbian community have to take it.

A consistent problem, from Xingmian's perspective, was that most women were not particularly interested in actively 'taking' any publicly available spatial opportunities and label them lala. 'Having fun' remained dominant and 'organizing' was often perceived as negative and dangerous, or 'boring' with too many old women and 'nothing happens', 'no culture' or 'no quality'. Xingmian said:

There was only one "ladies' night" [the Saturday Bar], with lots of teenagers who didn't care at all [about community]. I got to know women in their thirties; they also did not care about community, they only cared about making money: Women over thirty were past the worst [marriage] pressure; they knew how to deal with it, and they didn't have problems with their lesbian identity anymore. What's left was making money. So when I started, I didn't have a feeling of optimism (*bu leguan*), or that it was an easy start ...

This contributed to the general anti-activist attitude amongst women from all backgrounds. Xingmian discussed this dissonance at length:

Many people's belief is that one should not participate in just any kind of social activism, with regards to 'rights'. It's [regarded as] your own personal stuff, you know. The best thing is to be a good citizen, and [then] a lesbian at the same time. So you can be a good example to others, especially the public: You're a good citizen, so lesbians are not that horrible, or whatever. At the same time, actually, I think many want to hide, not necessarily deliberately so, but they want to pass as heterosexuals ... In my own view, I think there still exists a kind of being 'in the fear', you know ... However, I can understand

this fear very well. Yet another reason why many oppose activism is, I think, to do with not wanting to stand out and say things like “We’re lesbians, we’re here” etc ... because you can really end up ‘outing’ the whole community. They worry that this will generate a negative response, and then [we all will suffer] attack! Originally, lesbians were just invisible, ignored; but now you [your actions] could cause attack on other people. Many women therefore worry that engaging in activism could have a negative drawback for the whole community. And this is why they oppose it.

Xingmian identifies what is in many ways the central paradox of contemporary lala life: women were clear that they just wanted to get on with everyday life, have a job and make money, and be good citizens who just happen to also be lala. Fighting for rights and be visible in public life could generate risk to everyday life and could produce incidents like the culture festival in 2000. There was a deep anxiety about traversing the rigid private/public divide of lala life, and therefore being lala was firmly established in the privatized sphere. Yet, as the earlier statements about the importance of ‘lala space’ and lala subjectivity and intimate relationships demonstrated, community and togetherness were crucial to break down isolation and generate positive experiences of community and similitude.

At several points during my fieldwork the concern with representability and collective consequences if some women were to speak out publicly as lesbians surfaced. For example, when the popular TV talk show *Luyu you yue/A date with Lu Yu*, interviewed five lalas on-screen in spring 2006, several women questioned the suitability of some of the interviewees. For instances they argued that “She doesn’t even have a proper job!” or expressed disdain that an interviewee repeatedly talked about getting drunk when suffering relationship problems.¹⁰⁶ The first Gay and Lesbian Culture Festival in December 2005, was shut down by police minutes before it was due to start. It received criticism for its organizational focus. One woman complained that the organizers were alternative ‘artists’ and ‘avant-gardes’ who were not interested in benefiting the wider lesbian and gay community.¹⁰⁷

Indeed, stories about the festival and the Beijing Sisters still circulated during my fieldwork. Stories were told about key affiliates using funding for their own personal

¹⁰⁶ This particular show is available at <http://you.video.sina.com.cn/b/456663-1265645467.html>, (accessed 18 June, 2008)

¹⁰⁷ See for example, Gardner, 2005; Goldkorn, 2005.

gains to host lavish dinners, further personal business ambitions or to travel. The Ford Foundation had funded some of the Beijing Sisters activities, and this money was widely regarded to have disappeared into individual women's pockets. Hence Xingmian worried considerably about applying to them now to support Tongyu activities, despite not having participated in the Beijing Sisters. The tension between business versus community continued to emerge in relation to current activities. Organizers' motives were often questioned when money was involved, for instance when the Salon cover charge rose from the initial 10 rmb to 15 rmb, or when the Bar took a cover charge to attend a themed Moon Festival party, and later, the x-mas party. Women debated whether this was about making money, doing business, and getting rich, or about doing 'good' for the lala community. The moral subtext was one of representability, about being 'good lalas' - and by extension, 'good citizens' and vice versa. Yet the emerging discourse of urban modernity and transitioning social norms, including women's increasing financial independence, meant that making money became a defining quality of cosmopolitan identity that many women who had surplus income bought into. Xingmian also commented that it was hard to recruit women in their thirties, i.e. those in settled jobs, to Tongyu because "they only cared about making money."

When Xingmian got involved with Chinese lesbians' networks in the US, she soon became interested in political activism and rights. However, rather than directly applying a Western rights discourse to the Chinese context, she saw the importance of maintaining informal socializing alongside activist work and she appreciated the need and value for both in different ways:

Personally, I became very interested in political rights and networking, and not so much in just 'social gathering'. But of course social gatherings are important as a start to break down the isolation. So when we started out in the US, we organized a couple of social events. In the end these gatherings were more like discussion groups, a bit like with the Salon now, in fact. But after a little while, having organized these social events and set up Internet spaces too [esp. the Lavender Phoenix bbs], which helped a lot in breaking down isolation, I felt that the problem was not about isolation anymore, but about rights.

The problem with 'rights' is that in the US for example there is this typical term 'fight for your rights' and according to the American law. I thought that as a Chinese who was concerned with the situation in China, then if I wanted to do the right thing, I would have to go back to China to fight for the rights of Chinese lesbians in China... I was very inspired by meeting a Taiwanese

lesbian in the US through the ITS (Institute for Tongzhi Studies) who had over ten years of activist experience. She had a big influence on me because she was so dedicated to this kind of work. Previously I had never thought I would be an activist. And I used to absolutely hate politics and even the word 'activism'. You know, when you learn about and experience politics in a Chinese environment [first], well of course you're going to hate it!

Here Xingmian clearly expresses the split between social gatherings and activities aimed at achieving rights, i.e. activism. During my fieldwork, women referred to this distinction in lala *huodong*/activities as either *wan'er*, or 'having fun', or *zuzhide*/organized activities. More often than not, they co-existed, such as in the Salon where hanging out and chatting took place alongside serious, and organized debates and education and support. In November 2004, the Salon started up in the Saturday Bar premises as mainly an informal and non-activist social space. However, it soon became an important alternative place to the Saturday evening Bar. The Salon was critical in instigating a wider array of lala activities such as the Tongyu network. Xingmian talked about these overlapping allegiances and activities:

I already knew Amei. And Zhang Beichuan introduced me to a number of women who had expressed interest in doing such work, but I soon realised that they actually did not know at all what this would entail; they had no experience or ideas about how to do this sort of thing. Maybe that's why it never got off the ground earlier.

But Amei was very active; she really wanted to start the salon, which I initially also wanted to but I felt I was not prepared. Amei, however, was unfazed (*ta henyou xindongli*), she just started the salon anyway. Amei then got Lingshen onboard, and then some others. The salon really was a very important starting point in that it was a safe and friendly space where everyone could come and talk about issues. The salon was also extremely important for Tongyu. As you know, many times the Salon discussions get very serious. If you go there to find a girlfriend for example, those discussions are probably not for you. So the discussion events were a way for me to find people who might be interested in participating in organizing and determine what activist work they could do.

A different approach was going online to the lesbian community on websites such as Tianya. You could get an overall picture of the lesbian situation from looking at these sites, postings and those things. My first posting was titled "What kind of community (*huodong*) do we want?" I asked, what kinds of spaces are appropriate (*heshi*) for lesbians to get together, what do we want? Many replies concerned bars, but I was thinking more in terms of lesbian public space, not just a regular bar, just for drinking...I also started submitting postings on the salon website about this. It took some time for this to gain

momentum though, because when people don't know you, there is little trust and a lot of suspicion. People wonder what you're on about. But eventually we started gaining support. Another problem was that many postings were censored (*burang fade*) [by web administrators]. But as our activities gained understanding and recognition this problem decreased. Now the situation is ok.

Tongyu's slogans "Strive for equality, embrace diversity, love in harmony" (*pingdeng, duoyuan, hexie*) dominated the first Tongyu leaflet cover in Spring 2005, which was bilingual and glossy. The inner pages listed Tongyu's aims according to three themes: firstly, community empowerment - such as assisting the salon and its website, assisting the Les+ zine and a 'lala hotline;' secondly, social education and advocacy, including media watch, university advocacy, LGBT cultural festivals and *jiao'ao yue*/pride month celebration, and national and international conferences; and finally, capacity building and networking, including workshops and conferences, national lesbian community groups and networks, and support for other lala groups. The back page listed Tongyu's future plans such as the women's safer sex handbook, Chinese lala archive (with ICCGL/Aibai), lala summer camp, film festival, and the national lala survey.

This was certainly an ambitious plan, especially in light of the failed previous attempts at networking and festival organizing and Xingmian was aware of these potential difficulties when arriving back in Beijing in 2004:

In many ways, the situation was not very positive [when I returned] ... Between 1998 and 2000 the Beijing Sisters network had flourished (*bijiao huoyue*). It's very regrettable that this period didn't last, but I heard many things about those times that provided lessons for the current organizing. You know, all the in-fighting, getting emotionally involved with each other - it's kind of funny, really - and issues about money management. I personally did not think that this would be problems in starting up lesbian work again. I just thought: 'I am ready to do the work' ...

So I hardly knew anyone. I had a few very, very old friends, you know: the very first Chinese lesbians in China [those who participated in the letter writing network in the early-mid 1990s], but other than that I didn't know anything about the current lesbian community. But I [had a few contacts]. So I contacted these people and they updated me on the situation. They were very supportive of what I wanted to do, but they all said it would be difficult and were not sure how best to go forwards ...

Tongyu accomplished many of their initial ambitious aims by the time I left the field in April 2006 and several others were achieved the following year. Tongyu's growing success was partly due to the willingness to cooperate and draw on earlier community building in terms of human resources and experience. As Xingmian mentioned in an earlier quote she contacted many of the established activists - gays and lalas - in Beijing and planned Tongyu's work around their recommendations. Women who helped establish the earlier networks and events, such as Xiaopei and Shitou, and enjoyed considerable influence amongst lalas attended several Tongyu events and shared their experiences. The local goodwill from bar managers and HIV/AIDS affiliated activists assisted in getting Tongyu off the ground. For instance, Amei's Salon provided an important space to recruit Tongyu volunteers and members and several Tongyu events, including the inaugural meeting on 23 January 2005, were hosted in the Bar where refreshments were provided free-of-charge.

In addition, Xingmian as the leading organiser with ITS contacts and backing from New York had the time, experience, connections, and vision to put the network into practice and, importantly, keep it going. It was a well-planned and well-timed instigation of a network that celebrated the social focus on *wan'er*/having fun that most women were happy to participate in. Tongyu arranged topical debates on marriage, sex, dealing with parents, and so on that resonated with many women. Tongyu also offered ways to learn more about social activism that appealed especially to the university student population, and this included training programmes on volunteering and sexual health that were co-sponsored by the Aizhixing research centre. The network was also instrumental in launching the *Les+* zine, blog, and website as well as hosting national conferences, meetings, Pride events, and a national lala summer camp. The Tongyu discourse remained relatively apolitical and focused on education, support, and health and therefore, did not alienate the mainstream lala community.

The achievements of initial projects, such as the lala health survey and the launch of *Les+*, gained Tongyu popularity, influence, and goodwill from wider lala audiences. This contrasts with the 2005 Lesbian and Gay Film Festival and the Culture Festival that received harsh criticism for their run-in with police and shut-down, as well as the side-lining of lala issues and concerns in their programmes. Yet Tongyu did not receive similar criticism for its ambitious programme and moreover, their activities, particularly those that attracted positive mainstream media attention like the

Valentine's Day same-sex marriage rights event, gained increasing lala goodwill. Tongyu successfully balanced their social activism with positively representing lalas in a non-threatening, non-confrontational ways.¹⁰⁸

A final important factor was context. As Shitou put it, *shidai zhen bianle*/times have indeed changed. This was partly due to the spread of the Internet since the late-1990s, a change in public attitude to homosexuality as a consequence of HIV/AIDS, and the extended reach of public health policies. Since the early 2000s, authorities have relaxed their previous tight control on lesbian and gay activities. Websites still face periodic shut-down and censorship, but activists and other queers alike, believe that the overall situation has improved vastly. Furthermore, it is still the case that male homosexuality and HIV/AIDS, including their link with public health concerns, remain the more likely target for government censorship. Yet this does not affect women and lalas to the same degree. As Xingmian noted earlier, "lesbians were just invisible, [and] ignored."

Tongyu operated in the borderline domains of potential illegality in that it remained an unregistered organization in order to escape official red-tape and excessive intervention. In keeping low and minding the extent of political, activist rhetoric and action, Tongyu cleverly manoeuvred the possibilities for public advocacy, whilst raising social awareness within and beyond lala community.

7.3.3. Products of a lala imaginary: Spatial differentiation, categorical limitations, and the question of community

The Salon and Tongyu examples point to a range of factors that structured, and have continued to structure, the possibilities for and practices of lala spatiality and community in Beijing. Here I briefly address the main factors in the production and

¹⁰⁸ The Valentine's Day action - in many ways the most upfront and open queer rights event I have heard of in the PRC - happened both in 2007 and 2008 in downtown Beijing, and consisted of lala and gay activists offering a red rose with an attached not advocating equal marriage rights for all. Both times, these actions were reported in the mainstream media, and in favourable terms, and both times the actions happened peacefully, without any police interruption. See, Gardner, 2007.

reproduction of lala sociality and organizing, before relating it to regional and global activism and queer rights rhetoric in the next and final section.

Keeping lala life separate from the everyday domain of normal, conventional life constitutes a major reason why women are opposed the kind of sociality that makes obvious statements about one's sexual subjectivity beyond the privatized lala sphere. In the instances where these public and private boundaries have been traversed such as affiliating with an organized network (Tongyu) or being at a particular place at the wrong time (festivals), there have been indirect and unintentional effects. The experience and memory of the police crack-down on the 2000 culture festival, and a similar incident at the 2005 lesbian and gay culture festival, has assured the continued existence of, what Xingmian coined, 'the fear-factor'.

The overall relaxation in social freedom and the State focus on ethnic and religious minority groupings and difference has created space for the proliferation of queer spaces since the turn of the millennium. Although lala spaces have taken longer to emerge and women are generally spending less time and money in such places, in recent years there has been unprecedented rise of different types of semi-public lala spaces. Xingmian noted that in 2004 when she returned, there was, apart from the Internet, only the one Saturday Bar. Yet by May 2006 when I was to return to London, there were a number of events and activities organized by Tongyu, the weekly Saturday afternoon Salon, three different bar spaces¹⁰⁹, different sports initiatives, a joint lala-gay badminton group on Sunday afternoons; one-off parties, trips, and events organized amongst groups of friends who were likely to have first met in online lala spaces, or at any of the places mentioned above.

With the increased numbers of lala spaces and participating women came a corresponding and proliferating discourse about membership, participation, and questions about identity. I have already discussed the importance of the TP roles and the ways in which TP-based ideologies structured discourses and practices with regards to same-sex sexuality. The emergent spaces for women were increasingly appropriating lala as an umbrella term to refer to women who desired other women. However, the women who participated and their patterns of participation varied enormously. Many women did not even subscribe to subjective categorization that distinguished them as lesbian, or similar. They professed that they were 'normal', 'just

¹⁰⁹ including one that was women-only and open 24/7, the other two were lala-only on Fridays and Saturdays respectively

like everybody else', and that the gender of their lover was unimportant. Yet, most women I met expressed that their same-sex preference was crucial to their sense of self and compelled them to seek lala spaces and community. However, many were at the same time reluctant to participate and be part of, these very spaces.

Tiantian, a twenty-four year-old T-identified journalism student from a northern province whose girlfriend is straight, pointed to the difference between the bars and everyday life:

I don't really want to introduce my girlfriend to many of the people in the [lala] community (*quanzilide ren*) ... only to a few very good friends of similar age and educational background (*xueli*) with whom I am close. Other [lalas] are my own friends, I don't want to bring her into the lala community, you know, maybe she would be tempted [laughing]...

Well, most people are alright, but you have surely noticed that apart from their nick names you don't really know anything about them. Although everyone's *hen fangsong*/really relaxed in the bar, there remains a big difference from the friendships you have in everyday life. Everyone separates these two worlds rigidly ...

Tiantian explicitly distinguished between the varying characteristics of participants, and hence her relative desire to make friends with them, according to age and educational attainment. I later asked Tiantian what the *lala quanzi*/lala community meant to her:

I think the women I have met so far are nice, but I don't like those who are very exaggerated and strange, who look like hooligans (*liumangqide*). I have learned a lot about how to handle problems by chatting with those who are older and more experienced than me...I would like to bring my girlfriend along more often, but mostly I come alone. It's because I want to discuss my problems and I don't want her to know too much about my inner struggles (*xinli wenti*)...

In comparison, Kuangrong, 29-years old, with whom I chatted online after she had added me from the *lalabar* blog, refused to participate at all:

KR: I have never been [to the salon] ... I don't know anyone there; I heard everyone's really young, and the mature ones all have a girlfriend already. (*wo yebu xiang rang taiduoren zhidao, zhishi xiang zhaoge ban*/ I also don't want a lot of people to know [about me], I only want to find a girlfriend. Why don't

you introduce me to someone who is *danshende chengshulala*/ mature and single [online]?

E: Well, I do know many women who attend the Salon. If you come along I will be happy to introduce you, but I can't really give you their details ...

KR: *Wobu xiang canjia nayangde huodong*/I don't want to attend that kind of activities; there's going to be lots of strangers, I'm not used to it. *Yebushi henpa, jiushi xinggede yuanyin*/It's not that I am afraid, it's my personality ... [But] I don't have any lala friends, so I feel very lonely.

E: Lately, there are many lala activities in Beijing: bars, the Salon and so on, why don't you visit one of them, I'm sure you'll make friends there ...

KR: Everyone thinks differently about these things! I just think this is *hen sirende shiqing, yehen zirande shiqing*/a private, natural thing, but this way [i.e. socializing in lala-labelled spaces] make it seem like it is *buzhengchang*/abnormal ... I only want to find a girlfriend discreetly, I am not interested in other people; I don't want to *darao bieren*/bother others...

Notably, Kuangrong associates the lala community with 'abnormality' and argues that it is 'natural' and 'private' to desire other women, but to make this desire the focal point for collective socializing transgresses the normalizing boundaries of what she considers a private desire. This parallels what Friedman (2006) and Berlant and Warner (1998) termed counter-intimacies (chapter five). Berlant and Warner's discussion of public sex argued that the dominant mechanisms for keeping non-normative sexuality outside the public domain is its exclusion from public view, and therefore same-sex desire (i.e. sex/uality) remains invisible. The active invisibility of same-sex desire is known as 'passing', 'blending in' or having tacit agreements and as long as sexual difference remains tacit and subsumed within mainstream everyday lives 'like everyone else', the naturalized ideology of (hetero)normality prevails.

However, in light of the obsessive focus on being 'normal', it is interesting to consider its possible implication for alternative futures, and aspiration. Having normal-like same-sex relationships was clearly an attempt to make them last, and were strategies to seek acceptance by significant others. Being too visibly lesbian in an 'abnormal' way broke with hegemonic gendered norms. For example being too T or too confrontational about rights and identity, challenged one's Chinese identity and was therefore discouraged and undesirable in mainstream interaction with the general public.

Organized socializing and networking, with Tongyu as a case in point, demonstrate that the otherwise reticent dynamics of lala spatiality is being subtly and persistently challenged, by way of a clever appropriation of aspects of emergent regional and global influences, amidst a face-preserving strategy that emphasizes 'Chineseness'. The final section will consider scales of spatiality and lala collectivity, and the co-existence of lala imaginary and social activism, and global activist discourse and movement.

7.4. Concluding discussion: Lala spatiality in a local/regional/global perspective

This chapter has shown that lala sociality has emerged during a period of unprecedented socio-spatial transformation, including appropriations of trans-regional and trans-national discourse and practice with regards to gender, sexuality, kinship, and nation. The interconnection between local Chinese meanings of same-sex subjectivity and collective life, and the trans-national discourses and imaginaries grounded in Western lesbian and gay identity politics, is crucial in Beijing women's appropriation of lala spatiality. I will outline some aspects of this local/regional/global dynamics that emerge from the ethnography, and relate it to the discussion on sexuality and globalization in chapter two.

The comparison of the women tongzhi initiatives in the 1990s with the post-millennial lala networking is important because it contextualizes the changing socio-economic and political situation that structure their emergence and continuation - or discontinuation. In both periods, access to outside influence and resources were of fundamental importance, but in different ways. The first networking for women - the letter-writing network - emerged as an effect of the state-induced possibility for scholars to publish academic studies on homosexuality that marked a unprecedented shift in official approach to same-sex sexuality away from being pathological or criminal. The first semi-public tongzhi event celebrated the US Stonewall uprising and was partially organized by a foreigner and gay activists affiliated with NGO and public health HIV/AIDS prevention work. The UN Women's Meeting in 1995 established further trans-national connections to bolster the local groups. The Taiwanese and Hong

Kong connections with tongzhi organizations and meetings (in 1996 and 1998 in particular) were enormously important in this endeavour.

The state-induced rupture in 2000, with the lesbian culture festival close-down, and dissolution of the Beijing Sisters, marked the start of a dormant period of lesbian initiatives on the ground - literally speaking. Meanwhile, the Internet proliferated, and mobile phones became common accessories and these communication tools began to bridge the gap between the private and public spheres as well as the Chinese, regional, and international sites and discourses for contact and information (see, Wang, 2004). The Chinese queer diaspora in the United States and elsewhere formed Chinese-language online bulletin board systems and web portals that replaced letter writing and the relative isolation of the previous era. Lesbians and queers in Taiwan, Hong Kong and the PRC, who shared the same language, communicated and exchanged experiences beyond the prying eyes of the PRC government. Chinese queers also appropriated aspects of Western queer activism and discourse for their own local struggles, though its applicability was and still is hotly debated (e.g. Chou, 2000). Yet these changes in lala sociality were primarily enabled by large-scale socio-political and economic transformation in Chinese society. One effect has been the increasing consumption culture in urban leisure spaces that has cemented socio-economic differences within the experience of 'community'. 'Having fun' is increasingly something you have to pay for, not simply participate in.

What characterizes lala sociality in the post-millennial period is the proliferation and diversification in types of sociality that have diversified its membership, according to age, socio-economic background and spending power, and gender. However, membership and identity management were sources of continued struggles, as I have shown. The spaces are both the informal, loosely organized venues for 'having fun', such as bars and sports and also, increasingly, the spaces of activist and organized initiatives that traverse the previously rigid private/public divide and establish lala in parts of mainstream society, such as the media and academia. However, social gatherings continued to be important in order to 'alter sad and lonely lives' and remained central to much networking, such as the Salon, Tongyu, and the badminton group.

Do these developments in organized activism and consumption-style leisure and having fun translate straightforwardly into globalization, with the implication that lala networking is becoming Western? A surface reading suggests that the increasing

emphasis on ‘organized activities’ appropriated discourses and practices that were decidedly similar to the political activism and public queer culture long-established in the West. Yet the numerous narratives in this and the previous chapters, demonstrate how fraught women’s participation in and allegiance to the lala identity and community, continues to be.

A deeper analysis suggests that what is happening in the post-millennial PRC with regards to lala community is that the reference points for the projects of ‘making community’ and ‘being lala’ are appropriating regional and global queer locations, to an extent that was impossible in previous eras. The idea of lala is being brought together from dispersed imaginary and physical locations that are simultaneously local, regional, and global, which in turn, produce contemporary lala sociality (cf. Valentine, 2007, ch. 2). What makes it specifically Chinese? What has maintained its Chinese character is that the main cultural reference point remains the Chinese-language and cultural world, including Taiwan, Hong Kong, or the Chinese diaspora. For instance: Xingmian was inspired by a Taiwanese lala activist, the US-based ITS was instrumental in setting up the Tongyu network, and, publications on queer life in the PRC in the 1990s came out on Hong Kong publishing houses.

I noted earlier that borders, ambiguities, and reticence are useful conceptual locations for studying meanings of community. In an earlier chapter I critiqued the existing scholarship on queer cultures for appropriating local notions and practices of same-sex sexuality as if always already there, without enquiring into their production, negotiation, and struggles over representation and collective membership. My study seeks to rectify the limitations of this scholarship by looking at the borders, and beyond them, into the matters of everyday lives and those lives lived in public. In this way, it is possible to study lala community in a meaningful way, by way of the constant negotiation of structural normativities that frame lala sociality.

In this chapter I have considered lala community as a process of negotiation and struggle over the meaning of specific communities and establishing membership. At the Salon, I followed its development over a year and manager Amei’s struggles with regards to establishing membership in light of the different demands for meaning and content. On the one hand, there was the prevailing need to simply provide a place to be and help women out of isolation. On the other hand, there were those who wanted more attention to the needs of older women at the expense of younger women. The

Tongyu network balanced the social aspects of pre-existing lala spaces, including the Salon as well as initiatives in the 1990s, with new possibilities inspired by contemporary global achievements in queer advocacy.

CONCLUSION

My thesis examines individual, familial, and collective aspects of women's same-sex sexuality in post-millennial Beijing. Against the backdrop of women's greater freedoms with regards to alternative gendered and sexual identifications and practices, and shifting public attitudes to homosexuality in the reform period, I set out to investigate the increasing visibility of lesbian - or lala - subjective identity and collective community. Informed by twenty months of ethnographic research, I explore the domains of sexuality and gender, kinship and marriage, social and national belonging, and their changing meanings in light of three decades of socio-economic development and increased openness to the world beyond China's borders.

I trace the emergence of lala visibility and identity by considering the issue of homosexuality alongside mainstream reform policies, family changes, and socio-economic transformation (chapter one). On this basis, I suggest that liberalization of marriage laws, social modifications of marriage and filial norms, less direct State intervention into private lives, and growing financial and residential autonomy from kin, benefit women who seek alternatives to hetero-marital femininity. I thus demonstrate that same-sex lives in the PRC are fundamentally enabled by the post-Mao state-sponsored drive towards modernization, development, and global participation.

I enquire into the constitution of categorical sexuality and the formation of sexed subjectivity, in the locations of contemporary Beijing and anthropological scholarship. I examine a range of approaches to the study of sexual globalization, global queers, queer globalization, and so on. I also consider the ways in which gender and sexual difference, especially non-normative difference, have been customarily theorized in anthropological literature and ethnographically informed queer and sexuality studies. Based on my data, I question the oft-made pre-theoretical assumption that non-normative sexuality and gender are inherently transgressive, always effecting ruptures, changes, and breaks. I consider theories on subject formation, especially as regards the dynamics between structural power and alternative agency (chapter two). I seek to develop an analysis that can successfully account for the seeming inconsistencies, contradictions, and 'illusory' self-presentations of control, stability, and coherence (cf. Ewing, 1990) in the lives I

observed in Beijing. On the one hand, the emerging lala spaces and subjectivities seem to challenge heteronormative morals, but on the other hand, women also seek to conform to these morals in important ways. My ambition is to account for the ways in which a gendered sexual subjectivity is important in some social situations but fade from view and attention in many others where other markers of difference take precedence (cf. Hershatter, 2007). It seems erroneous to conclude that women simply lack agency to resist State-sponsored and traditional collective norms, and are deluding themselves to think that they possess any negotiating powers.

Based on my research findings, it also seems insufficient to approach lala lives in Beijing mainly as categorical lesbian identity and community, because it presupposes the primary and stable role of sexual difference in configuring subjectivity, and as somehow prior to other differences and positions. In short, a 'sexuality-as-identity' approach does not account sufficiently for the multiple contexts and diverging presentations and engagements that characterize people's lives. I discuss how these ambiguities, paradoxes, and their generative analytical possibilities have been acknowledged and theorized in scholarship on globalization (Moore, 2004), sexuality (Valentine, 2007), and subjectification (Ewing, 1990; Jean-Klein, 2000; Mageo, 1998; McNay, 2000).

I therefore propose that lala is best approached as a subjective and collective category, or an ambiguous trope 'to think with', and as a critical cultural site where meanings of sexuality and gender - dominant *and* alternative - are constantly being produced, negotiated, and challenged (Jean-Klein, 2000; McNay, 2000; Valentine, 2007; Wekker, 2006). Moreover, I adapt the insight from feminist and gender theory that acknowledges how sexual and gender differences are configured through other forms of difference (e.g. Hershatter, 2007; Moore, 1988, 2007; Wekker, 2006), to show that non-normative female sexuality is fundamentally structured by normative gender regimes (e.g. Blackwood & Wieringa, 2007). I propose that social lives and individual experiences of selfhood and identity are fundamentally and irrevocably interconnected, that they co-constitute each other, and that this is happening partially through irresolvable tensions which are customarily reinscribed as unconflicted identity and life style, or in Ewing's words: an "illusory sense of wholeness" (1990: 226). I argue that women's same-sex sexuality must be investigated in social and cultural context, across and within spatial and temporal domains. This approach

recognizes the generative possibilities of incoherencies, marginalities, and paradoxes, and hence their central importance to theorizing and research methodologies.

To this end, I explore three sets of themes located in specific yet intersecting domains; first, social geographies and the production of lala subjectivity; second, marital status, family, and lala relationship strategies; and third, lala community and social activism.

I consider a range of sociological variables, including lala, sexual and gender subjectivity, age/generation, marital status and motherhood, kin autonomy, educational and career attainment (chapter three). By investigating these differentiating factors and comparing them, I demonstrate the patterns of difference and connections that produce lala subjectivity in the form of self-recognition and intimate relationships. I suggest that autonomy based on educational and career attainment, financial independence, 'out residency' (living away from natal kin), and *sixiang*/attitude, seem to produce a more sustained and positive identification with lala intimacy and community. Sometimes, but not always, these lala identifications translate into identity. Women with little education and money-earning power, and who live with kin or are in normative marriages, are markedly less able to partake in lala community. This ethnographically grounded analysis points to the constitutive importance of a range of social markers beyond sexual subjectivity in producing lala subjectivity.

The gendered sexual subjectivities marked by the TP roles are shown to incorporate but also transgress conventional gender norms (chapter four). I demonstrate how same-sex subjectivity is shaped by an emergent dominance of TP-based gender dichotomies rooted in normative gender regimes. Comparable studies on masculine/feminine dichotomies of lesbian gender categories tend to emphasize their categorical coherence and inherent subversive effect, especially the masculine roles (e.g. Blackwood, 1998, 2007; Lai, 2007; Sinnott, 2004, 2007). However, my examination of lala TP roles shows that these concepts are largely prescriptive and normalizing, and not descriptive; they are not transparent representations of lived experience. They translate with difficulty to female sexual identity categories studied elsewhere, yet they are related, especially across East and South-East Asia. The P role is shown to relate less to sexual difference than does T, which is more often seen to translate into 'homosexuality' and lesbianism. These gendered ambiguities and

constant negotiations of difference and similitude, co-produce and reiterate normalizing ideologies simultaneously with same-sex strategies to enable and maintain lala intimacy and sociality.

The TP roles, then, provide conceptual sites to think and negotiate desirable and acceptable lala subjectivity. The application of oppositional gender-normative terminologies provides nodes of reference to strategize social identities. The moral qualities of TP discourse, moreover, incorporate key normative values such as normality, stability, harmony, and quality. These conceptual linkages serve to connect the personal and privatized sensibilities of lala, and national discourse of modernity and citizenship.

The discussion of marriage strategies and ideologies demonstrates that the marital terrain brings together multiple and different allegiances and desires for belonging and status, and in a language that simultaneously invoke romantic intimacy, filial kin ties, and nationalist Chineseness (chapter five and six). Lala subjectivity is here shown to remain a key site of tension and struggle, and a position that cannot usefully be designated to a privatized sexual domain. Lala subjectivity in all its changing manifestations infuses the ambitions for social belonging at private, familial, and national levels through the moral discursive trope of marriage. Importantly, these struggles are being played out between lalas and their natal and affinal kin, but also between two lovers and participants in social networks, who rarely if ever uniformly subscribe to the marital meanings and practices they engage with.

Women tend to be deeply concerned with pleasing parents, with being socio-ethically 'good' children, and they consider this a major structural component to their own lives. This is a fundamental source of their own individual happiness even if this makes romantic relationships with other women difficult, even impossible. Conjugal strategies such as lala-gay contract marriages, living apart, divorce and outright marriage refusal, are appropriated in order to negotiate and reconcile familial responsibilities and lala subjectivity. Same-sex marriages have become increasingly popular practices, or perhaps more often, talking points within the lala community, especially among women of the younger generation. Such marriages are seen to achieve mainstream recognition by demonstrating the 'normal' and stable nature of lesbian relationships.

The institution of marriage, then, remains *the* primary social and symbolic threshold that marks entry to hetero-gendered adulthood. The variety of conjugal ideologies and practices I examine, convey the multiple allegiances and desires at play in dealing with heteronormative pressures. I appropriate Fong's insights on the singleton generation of young women in Dalian (2004a/b, 2007), where she argues that changing filial norms due to the OCP and increasing cosmopolitan modernity enable women to manipulate filial ideologies to an unprecedented extent. In my study I develop the notion of 'desirable duty' to evoke this ambiguous reality of filial norms versus changing notions of ideal, *suzhi*/quality, and modern female personhood. I thus argue that 'being married' is desirable because it is seen to enable women greater autonomy and overall social recognition as adults. The ethnographies of various marriages such as same-sex and contract marriages, show however, that although getting married may resolve the immediate pressure to marry, other normalizing pressures either continue or emerge in post-wedding life. Women strategize their intimate lala relationships and social participation by ascribing, at least partially on surface-level, to face-saving conjugal ideologies and practices.

The third set of themes is community and social activism (chapter seven). The emerging and organized lala activism vis-à-vis leisure and 'just having fun', is shown to adhere to similar principles to balance personal desires for recognition and equality with acceptable public limits for difference and transgression. 'Coming out' and overt rights rhetoric are deemed un-Chinese. Local successful activist initiatives are those that refrain from using confrontational and politicized discourse similar to Western queer advocacy. By comparing current initiatives with those that emerged in the 1990s, I demonstrate that whilst there are distinctively new aspects to lala community and networking that differ from previous practices, the memories and experiences of past events - especially State intervention and the risk this entail - influence contemporary space-making, social activism, and also inform individual choices to participate.

I appropriate Valentine's notion of community as a variety of dispersed places and experiences that are brought together by the category marker 'lala' and the idea of common membership and collective belonging that it entails (2007). Community is thereby considered an achievement, not a static given, and thus enables an analysis that incorporates the ambiguous margins: those who refuse to

belong, or whose requests to (full) membership are being refused by a dominant majority. I suggest that this approach is important, because many women remained inherently sceptical or outright negative to the idea and practice of lala community and activism. Also, amidst an increasing consumption and leisure focus of lala community events, unequal access to social and economic capital cause increasing fragmentation and exclusion.

What characterizes lala sociality in the post-millennial period is the proliferation and diversification in types of sociality, and in turn the growing diversity in its membership. However, membership and identity management are sources of continued struggles. The current spaces include the informal, loosely organized venues for 'having fun', and increasingly also activist and organized collective initiatives, that traverse the previously rigid private/public divide, and in turn serve to make lala visible to parts of mainstream society.

I suggest that the reference points for the projects of 'making community' and 'being lala' are increasingly appropriating regional and global queer locations, to an extent that was impossible in previous eras. The idea of lala is being brought together from dispersed - imaginary and physical - locations that are simultaneously local, regional, and global. In turn, they produce contemporary lala sociality. This importantly includes the ways in which lala sociality and intimacy intersect with peoples and practices regionally and globally via travel, mass media such as the Internet, and social activism. Lala sociality is moreover structured by a fundamental consideration of the way in which cultural citizenship and national belonging are discursively constructed via familial ideologies that emphasise the nation-building quality and importance of marriage and filial ideologies. This State-sponsored normative discourse remains fundamental to contemporary Chinese imaginaries of modernity and global participation.

In sum, the multiple terrains of lala subjectivity - including TP-based sexual subjectivity, marital status and practice, and community - are in my thesis shown to be intimately connected with wide-ranging cultural imaginaries and norms of national belonging. It includes the spatial scales of local, regional, and global places - such as different provinces within the PRC as well as the emergent importance and effects of the rural/urban divide (Rofel, 2007; Yan H., 2003), Greater China including a queer Chinese diaspora, and the world beyond. It also includes temporal

considerations in which the genealogies of becoming lala, lesbian, T/P, and the possibilities for queer life in certain times and places are studied. The contemporary State-sponsored project of modern nation-building and development, in which allegiance to appropriate and desirable Chineseness remains fundamental, continues to shape alternative agency and the possibilities for such action. Yet, the inherent ambiguities that characterize all dominant claims to power are now, more than ever, appropriated to produce positive alternatives that co-exist amicably, at most times, within and on the borders of these very possibilities.

The time of my fieldwork coincided with a period of unprecedented and fast development of queer communities in urban China, especially in Beijing. However, at the time of thesis completion - a few weeks before the start of the Beijing Olympic Games - there have been numerous credible reports of increasing surveillance of and interventions into lala and gay activities, in the name of preserving social harmony and order in the run-up to the Games. In some ways, these events are reminiscent of very familiar strategies that Chinese authorities impose to ascertain conformity. But are they? What will the post-Olympic realities on the ground look like for lalas: will the event generate the flurry of initiatives we saw after the 1995 UN Women's Conference, or might the intimidations and controversies about human rights violations propel queer activism to shadowy margins and the Internet, similar to the post-Cultural Festival condition?

Being the first full ethnographic study of female gendered same-sex sexuality in the PRC, there are of course many topical as well as analytical gaps yet to be filled. In this thesis I have alluded to my interest in probing the limits for queer life possibilities and the consequences of transgressing - willed or incidentally - tacit agreements to conform. I have here been concerned with the limits to these possibilities and enquired into their structuring factors and the complexities of 'normal life'. In future work, I aim to explore these difficult dynamics further, both conceptually and ethnographically. In line with my interest in scales, spaces, and terrains, I suggest that Internet cultures, regional variance within the PRC in terms of queer formations and practices, rural/urban divides and cosmopolitanism, and PRC/Chinese diaspora requires further research.

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