



Elisabeth L. Engebretsen

Queer Women in Urban China: An Ethnography

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reviewed by [Jing \(Jamie\) Zhao](#)

1. Since the early 1990s, Chinese queer communities and cultures have been seeing drastic progress and transformations due to the unprecedentedly fast-changing, yet startlingly radical social, cultural, political and economic reforms in mainland China. Yet, research dedicated to specifically documenting and analysing these Chinese queer powers, voices, potentials and struggles in the post-Maoist era remains rare. Following academic calls to decenter the Anglo-American queer studies and reposition queer worlds in non-Western, especially Asian, cultural and social milieus,^[1] *Queer Women in Urban China: An Ethnography* serves as a timely and substantial contribution to a very few English scholarly publications on mainland Chinese queer women.^[2]
2. Elisabeth L. Engebretsen's diligent research is not only expansive in theoretical discussions on mainland Chinese *lala* (queer female) gender, sexuality and identity, but also rich in its ethnographic evidence of *lalas'* constant negotiation with, appropriation of, and either explicit or discursive resistance against conventional socio familial norms, forces, and expectations in the context of modernity and globalisation. This monograph is based upon her long-term participant observation of both online and offline Beijing *lala* communities and spaces, and intense conversations with more than ninety-five Beijing *lalas* between the ages of nineteen and fifty-four. The research was conducted in a period of over twenty-two months between 2004 and 2006, and is complemented by two short-term, follow-up fieldwork studies over three months in 2009 and over two months in 2012 (pp. 22–23). The author's penetrating, nuanced analysis offers a sophisticated understanding of the intricate and paradoxical ways in which Beijing *lalas* carve out 'spaces of their own'^[3] in a reformist age, search for 'socioeconomic and symbolic possibilities' in mainstream society (p. 7), and strategically craft a politics of 'different normativities'^[4] and desire to fit in normative familial, marital and kin relationships.
3. Some parts of the major focus of this book, such as the diverse queer strategies of urban *lalas* that tactically engage with sociofamilial and marital norms, overlap with Lucetta Yip Lo Kam's recently-published book on Shanghai *lala*.^[5] Based on her ethnographic study of young, urban queer women in Shanghai, Kam's work explains how some of the queer strategies can be seen as 'a culturally specific resistance against the silent oppression enacted by the family institution in an era when the state is retreating from its direct influence on regulating citizen's private lives.'^[6] Diverging from Kam's relatively sanguine view of certain queer practices as 'a parody of the heterosexual marriage' and extensions of queer counter-spaces and kinship networks,^[7] Engebretsen goes further to interrogate the multiple and interconnected social, economic, political and familial factors that have

been shaping *lalas'* queer experiences, feelings, and aspirations in the urban Chinese context. She highlights that these factors and forces are simultaneously enacting, menacing and threatened by *lalas'* strategic manipulations of and perfunctory complicity with normative marital ideals.

4. Engebretsen's research draws heavily on the existing theoretical framework of the 'close-to-normal' and 'fitting-in'[8] mentalities for Chinese queer survival within cosmopolitan, normative environments. In addition to her profound investigation of Beijing *lalas'* 'desires for normativity' (p. 13), she also complicates the picture by revealing the multilayered problems that Beijing *lalas* face in these variegated, contradictory discourses. She forcefully argues that Chinese *lalas'* tacit strategising of normative ideals, which might enable their subjective makings of selfhood, modern citizenship, and alternative lifestyles, does not make fundamental changes to the symbolic violence and the structural inequalities against non-normative gender and sexual subjects. Instead, compared to Chinese queer males, *lalas* appear to suffer much more severely from multi-dimensional difficulties and pressures relating to 'personal autonomy' and access to 'emotional and material resources' once their concealment of private queer sexuality from heteronormative daily life fails in the long term (p. 159). With captivating personal stories from Beijing *lalas*, skilful inquiry, and colourful details, her study affords a compelling, insightful dialogue of new layers of Chinese queer cultures, possibilities and predicaments from alternative perspectives.
5. The book opens with a comprehensive overview of relevant theories and research backgrounds. Six substantive chapters follow the introduction. Chapter 2 concentrates on *lala* storytelling practices in offline gatherings where *lalas* work out, imagine, and mediate their gendered past and future. The author sees *lala* life narratives as excellent demonstrations of gendered lesbian subjective practices of playing queerness within a normative context. In turn, she contends that these practices are both actively appropriating and inevitably conditioned by age-specific norms of gender and sexuality and individualised social and cultural statuses, such as autonomy, class and education. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 further scrutinise various kinds of queer strategising of sociofamilial conventions employed by Beijing *lalas*. In chapters 6 and 7, the focus of the discussion shifts to the communal and political characteristics, changes, implications, dilemmas and promises of *lala* social communities and activist practices.
6. This book's strengths lie in the author's compassionate yet provocative readings of Beijing *lalas'* queer strategies and the subsequent concerns, struggles and conflicts entangled in these subjective activities. For instance, in chapter 3, the author admits that the recent social, economic, political and demographic changes in mainland China have helped elevate urban women's social status and expand a wider range of opportunities and alternatives for queer lives. Meanwhile, she critically unveils that hegemonic norms, such as familial heteronormativity and the marriage imperative, and *lalas'* subjective desire for social respectability and family harmony still play major roles in situating their tactics to sustain traditional familial and social relationships while surreptitiously practicing personal queer desires. She also finds a framing of *lala* relationships as female friendship and two queer-kinship models (a second-daughter form of chosen kinship and a caregiving role in the family) that are often employed to resist traditional heterosexual marriages. Yet, as she notes, these strategies are characterised by dominant prescriptions of good-moral citizenship and proper behaviour. Consequently, the *lala* agency realised in the ways to negotiate queer desires and lives with symbolic and sociofamilial norms should not be overstated in that heteronormative structures are eventually validated rather than radically dethroned in the discourses.
7. Moreover, in chapters 4 and 5, two queer marriage practices, *tonghun* (same-sex unions) and *xinghun* (fake marriages between *lalas* and gay men), that tactically challenge the heterosexual marriage imperative and bring new possibilities, belonging, support, and complications to the survival of Beijing *lalas*, are discussed. On the one hand, the author persuasively reveals that these context-

specific queer marriage strategies directly question the universalised 'assimilation/transgression paradigm' in academic debates over same-sex marriages (pp. 83 and 107). Her analysis, on the other hand, compellingly illustrates that, even within these queer marriages that performatively imitate and thus contest the heteronormative marital system, the gendered hierarchies and inequalities in current Chinese repressive regimes still work together in complex ways to promote normal lifestyles, cosmopolitan middle-class family structures, urban citizenship, and queer gender and behavioural conformities. The normative features of these queer practices expose *lalas* to bigger risks concerning individuality and safety and eventually retain the invisibility and silencing of queerness.

8. Indeed, this impressive book sheds light on the underexplored world of urban Chinese *lalas* and their communities. Yet, it also leaves the author room to further strengthen some of her arguments. For example, a lack of any deep comprehension of queer representations in and queer viewership of contemporary Chinese popular culture in the introductory chapter may have somewhat weakened the discussions throughout the book. Engebretsen's analysis of Beijing *lala* communities assumes that their media visibility, social recognition and event organisation remain difficult in urban China (pp. 16, 30, 125–26). Yet, to a certain extent, this assumption overlooks the existence of non-normative gender and ambiguous homosocial/homoerotic performances that have been prevalent in the entertainment media of mainland China since the 2000s. Meanwhile, it underestimates the social and political potentials of diverse queer fan affective communities, activities, and organisations devoted to Chinese, inter-Asian, and global media and celebrities in both online and offline spaces. The convoluted interrelationships between queer identity-formation, non-normative desires, and queer fandom have been uncovered in a growing body of media and fan studies.^[9] Some of the underlying, discursive queer reading, appreciating, and gossiping practices of these affective groups have noticeably complicated the processes in which Chinese queers, especially queer females, make sense of their own genders and sexualities, find emotional support and cultural belonging, and even come out to their families.^[10] Thus, the discussions on Chinese *lala* social communities in the rest of the book can be further enriched by delving into these 'commercial' or 'mainstreamed' queer popular cultures permitted by the authoritarian Chinese government.^[11]
9. Also, I find her analysis in chapter 2 about the distinctiveness of the masculine/feminine binary in *lalas'* gendered social relations—the T-P role model—particularly intriguing. She identifies 'T-P gender roles' as one of the most common topics in Beijing *lalas'* conversations and storytelling practices during their weekly gatherings (pp. 36 and 47). As she contends, different from the western butch-femme lesbian gender model, the T-P paradigm is built upon unstable, gendered 'roles' 'positions' (p. 50) and 'personality' (p. 51), and is 'divided into masculine or feminine depending on a combination of inner, physical, and practical qualities' (p. 51). It functions as a normalising framework of desirable, 'good,' 'healthy,' 'high-quality' lesbianism (pp. 52–55) that has been shaped by historical, social and political circumstances and individual lived experiences. Actually, in the introduction, the author has already acknowledged that the new imaginaries and possibilities of urban *lalas* have been facilitated by 'trans-Asian and global circuits of culture and politics' (pp. 16–17). I would like to see more stimulating examinations of how the gradually intense 'interac[tion] with regional and global circuits of knowledge and discourse' (p. 51) influences these gendered *lala* roles and meanings. This is especially needed in this part of the analysis because the *lala* social group that organised their weekly storytelling activities, 'Beijing Lala Salon,' often screened western lesbian media, such as the American television show *The L Word*, during their meetings in 2005. Therefore, it would be more convincing if the author could explicitly probe whether and in what ways the circulation of these mesmerising western lesbian images and spectacles in Chinese *lala* communities facilitate or circumscribe the reimagining and/or recollecting of local female queerness.
10. Besides, the points made in the final two chapters about a variety of support, belonging and

motivations offered by the offline *lala* organisations and spaces remain quite thought-provoking. Yet, Engebretsen's view of the developments and political potential of the two major *lala* networking groups in Beijing, 'The Salon' and 'Tongyu,' is rather optimistic. It largely disregards the internal power struggles, contradictions, and vicissitudes within these two, or other, *lala* organisations. For instance, there were some dramatic changes in the key organising personnel of a major non-governmental queer organisation in Beijing, 'The Beijing LGBT Center,' in 2013. One of its chief figures, who was also a famous activist in Tongyu, was discharged from her position in the Center and banned from participating in the Center's activities. She once complained on Facebook and microblog (the Chinese version of Twitter) to her followers, implying that she was framed by others during this incident which was due to personal grudges between her and other important figures of the Center. Certainly, it is not absolutely imperative to track this specific issue closely in the last two chapters. Yet, the book could benefit from a more extensive inquiry in which some serious consideration to the formulas and contexts of similar kinds of potential discord within queer activist organisations might have appeared in the concluding section.

11. Of course, the above-mentioned shortcomings do not prevent *Queer Women in Urban China* from becoming a truly exceptional academic book that debunks the homogenous academic framework of queer studies and markedly broadens the already-existing scholarship on urban Chinese lesbianism. Alternative ways to contemplate Chinese female queerness within the dynamics of regional, local, national and global encounters have been meticulously paved throughout it. Its adroitly-put arguments, special attention to the generational differences and subtleties of urban *lala* self-making and subject-positioning, and powerful critiques of both academic and social dilemmas concerning the genders and sexualities of Chinese women combine to make it appealing to read and of great value to students and scholars, as well as those within the general public who are interested in Asian queer cultures.

Notes

[1] See David L. Eng, Judith Halberstam and José Esteban Muñoz, 'Introduction: What's queer about queer studies now?' *Social Text* vol. 23, nos 3–4 (2005): 1–17, p. 8; Petrus Liu, 'Why does queer theory need China?,' *positions* vol. 18, no. 2 (2010): 291–320, p. 297; James Welker, '(Re)Positioning (Asian) queer studies,' *GLQ* vol. 20, nos 1–2 (2014): 181–98; [Ara Wilson](#), 'Queering Asia,' *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context*, issue 14 (November 2006), online: <http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue14/wilson.html> (accessed January 2015).

[2] Other recent studies concentrating on urban mainland Chinese lesbianism include: Loretta Wing Wah Ho, *Gay and Lesbian Subculture in Urban China*, New York: Routledge, 2010; Lucetta Yip Lo Kam, 'Noras on the road: Family and marriage of lesbian women in Shanghai,' *Journal of Lesbian Studies* vol. 10, nos 3–4 (2006): 87–103; Lucetta Yip Lo Kam, 'Opening up marriage: Married lalas in Shanghai,' in *As Normal as Possible: Negotiating Sexuality and Gender in Mainland China and Hong Kong*, ed. Ching Yau, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010, pp. 87–102; and Lucetta Yip Lo Kam, *Shanghai Lalas: Female Tongzhi Communities and Politics in Urban China*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013.

[3] Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, 'Introduction,' in *Spaces of Their Own: Women's Public Sphere in Transnational China*, ed. Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999, pp. 1–32.

[4] Ching Yau, 'Dreaming of normal while sleeping with impossible: introduction,' in *As Normal as Possible: Negotiating Sexuality and Gender in Mainland China and Hong Kong*, ed. Ching Yau, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010, pp. 1–14.

[5] See Kam, *Shanghai Lalas*.

[6] Kam, *Shanghai Lalas*, p. 103.

[7] Kam, *Shanghai Lalas*, p. 101–02.

[8] See Hans Tao-Ming Huang, *Queer Politics and Sexual Modernity in Taiwan*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University

Press, 2011; Travis S.K. Kong, *Chinese Male Homosexualities: Memba, Tongzhi, and Golden Boys*, London: Routledge, 2011, p. 98; Lisa Rofel, *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2007, p. 100; Yau, 'Dreaming of normal,' p. 4.

[9] See Lucetta Yip Lo Kam, 'Desiring T, desiring self: "T-style" pop singers and lesbian cultures in China,' *Journal of Lesbian Studies* vol. 18, no. 3 (2014): 252–65; Eva Cheuk-Yin Li, 'Approaching transnational Chinese queer fandom as zhongxing ("neutral sex/gender") sensibility,' *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture* vol. 1, no. 1 (2015): 75–95; Ling Yang and Hongwei Bao, 'Queerly intimate: friends, fans and affective communication in a Super Girl fan fiction community,' *Cultural Studies* vol. 26, no. 6 (2012): 842–71.

[10] Kam, *Shanghai Lalas*, p. 75; Yang and Bao, 'Queerly intimate,' pp. 842–71.

[11] See Peter A. Jackson, 'Bangkok's early twenty-first-century queer boom,' in *Queer Bangkok: 21st Century Markets, Media and Rights*, ed. Peter A. Jackson, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011, pp. 17–42, p. 24; Kam, 'Desiring T,' pp. 252–65.

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