Sexuality Research & Social Policy
Journal of NSRC http://nsrc.sfsu.edu

September 2009 Vol. 6, No. 3

Intimate Practices, Conjugal Ideals: Affective Ties and Relationship Strategies Among *Lala* (Lesbian) Women in Contemporary Beijing

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Abstract: This article explores a range of marital ideologies and relationship strategies in the lives of *lala* (lesbian) women in contemporary Beijing. Although new discourses on same-sex marriage rights and sexual equality are becoming popular in parts of Chinese lala communities, the traditional marriage ideal continues to appear desirable, and it structures same-sex life aspirations as well as social, romantic, and family relationships. The author offers ethnographic data to demonstrate why seemingly oppressive structures retain such significance and overall positive association in lala everyday life and ideology. Narratives of 3 complex relationship strategies demonstrate that marriage is at the core of negotiations that reconcile personal same-sex desires with normative social pressures. Compliant-like conjugal strategies enable subversive possibilities that subtly challenge the status quo while appearing normal. This observation requires a rethinking of notions and meanings of agency, power, and the approach to studying the current global diversity of nonnormative sexualities.

Key words: homosexuality; marriage; identity; globalization; China

The quest to legalize same-sex marriage has emerged as a dominant civil rights agenda in current Western and transnational LGBTQ[1] discourse. In this article, I consider the formalized and judicially recognized status of marriage to produce legitimacy, equality, and recognition, as well as eradicate exclusion and stigma. For same-sex marriage, such status requires an open, verbally expressed declaration of categorical sexual identity (coming out), and puts forward an ideal of personal identity and sexuality anchored in the skin-bound individual and sexual desire according to a homo-hetero binary. That which is ambiguous, not spelled out according to out-and-proud standards, is construed as abnormal, suspicious, backward, and evidence of internalized homophobia (Bell & Binnie, 2000; Warner, 2002).

Recent transnational sexualities studies (e.g., Decena, 2008; Engebretsen, 2008c; Manalansan, 2003; Wang, 2001) have critiqued the global applicability and absolute relevance of the aforementioned model. One way this critique has been accomplished is by taking seriously the fundamental relationship that exists between nonnormative sexuality and normative social ties that bind personal desires to familial and national bonds of citizenship. This approach enables the investigation of diverse and creative everyday life strategies that challenge, if not necessarily subvert or reject, normative pressures toward hetero-conformity (Boellstorff, 2005; Cho, 2006; Manalansan; Stella, 2007; Wekker, 2006). This line of work argues the subversive potential inherent in sexual ambiguity and acknowledges that the Western model of identity politics and formal equality is not universally desirable. Decena's assertion, "What is tacit is neither secret nor silent" (p. 340), is a powerful challenge to rethink and take seriously the global diversity

1 LGBTQ is a conceptual shorthand for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer. For a useful discussion on the logistics and problems associated with enumeration of nonnormative sexual identity categories, see Boellstorff (2007).

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Sexuality Research & Social Policy: Journal of NSRC, Vol. 6, Issue 3, pp. 3–14, electronic ISSN 1553-6610. © 2009 by the National Sexuality Research Center. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permissions to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Rights and Permissions website, http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintInfo.asp

in expressions of nonnormative sexuality and relative compliance with socio-familial conformity.

This article builds on these insights by discussing the strategic negotiations of intimate same-sex relationships, conventional marital norms, and family ties in the lives of women who participate in *lala* (lesbian) communities in Beijing.[2]

To be sure, same-sex marriage (*tongxing hunyin*) is becoming a popular topic of conversation, if not practice, among many Chinese lalas, gays, and the social activist groups that operate on the margins of mainstream acceptance and official censorship. For example, Tongyu (Common Language), a Beijing-based lala network founded in 2005, organized public outreach activities on Valentine's Day in downtown Beijing in 2007 and 2008, with volunteers handing out red roses wrapped in leaflets with the following message: "Love has no boundaries.... We are homosexuals (*tongxinglian*), and we want a life together with our loved one...please support all kinds of partnerships and all kinds of love. Please support same-sex marriage" (Gardner, 2007, 2008).

In spring 2008, coinciding with the government's National People's Congress, grassroots groups in a number of Chinese cities launched the monthlong Ten-Thousand-Signature Campaign (*wanren jianming*) to legalize same-sex marriage and advocate greater acceptance of homosexuality (Xian, 2008). Renowned sociologist Li Yinhe has repeatedly appealed to the National People's Congress to amend the existing Marriage Act to replace the term *fuqi* (husband and wife) with *pei'ou* (spouse), and with *xingbie buyin* (gender neutral) as a further modifier (Li, 2006b; Xian, 2008). Indeed, some couples do perform symbolic wedding ceremonies or plan to immigrate to countries where same-sex marriages are legalized. Given their tacit, private, and legally invalid status, same-sex marriages have few actual implications for everyday lives and strategies, especially in terms of family relations and filial obligations.

Despite this recent surge in social and activist possibilities, homosexuality retains a highly ambiguous position in China. The dominant attitude is one of prevailing stigma and negative stereotypes that attach homosexuality firmly to medical and moral deviance, or even crime. Discrimination and ignorance about homosexuality is considerable, and activist networks such as Tongyu have small followings compared with the emergent popularity of informal, semiprivate leisure spaces such as bars, Internet chat rooms, and local groups that promote and support community. Older women in my study who were adults or had come of age in the 1970s or 1980s spoke about their then complete ignorance or deep-seated fear of the homosexuality discourse disseminated by authorities to instill conformity (see Dikötter, 1995; Evans, 1997; Wu, 2003).[3]

Against the backdrop of the emergent popularity of same-sex marriage and identity discourse, the conventional heteronormative marriage model structures most women's everyday lives and life trajectories in Beijing. This article takes seriously the desire for conventional marital and relationship strategies expressed by so many of the women I worked with. I ask why women desire to be part of social institutions that seem to negate the possibility for fulfilling and lasting same-sex relationships. I will argue that the strategic appropriation of heteromarital models and women's emphasis on tacit ambiguity and unspoken, open secrets should not be taken as evidence of internalized homophobia, lack of agency, or being silenced and in the closet. For the women in my study, the appearance of convention allowed for tacit manipulation of the very norms they appeared to comply with, to include same-sex lives and relationships. These strategies illustrate the importance of "the three no's" (*san bu*): no approval, no disapproval, no promotion (*bu zhichi, bu fandui, bu tichang*), a Chinese version of "Don't ask, don't tell." But what is at stake in sustaining these ambiguous standards and the seeming contradiction between surface appearance and everyday practice?

What I term the *marital terrain*—an intensely politicized heteronormative site for claiming rights and societal inclusion that assigns status, inclusion, and equality based on legitimate relationships and the gendered

2 I have appropriated the contemporary Chinese term *lala* to denote women who love women in contemporary Beijing. For greater readability, I will use the term *lalas* to denote the plural form even though it is not grammatically correct. The word *lala* was introduced to mainland China from Taiwan through feminist and LGBTQ networking via the Internet in the late 1990s. In its current use, lala is not equivalent to the categorical sexual identity homosexual, lesbian, or the gender-neutral *tongzhi* (comrade); the word is better conceptualized as a collective umbrella term that incorporates same-sex sexual subjectivity but is not necessarily primarily defined by it. In compliance with popular vernacular styles, if not convention at the time of research (2004–2006), I use the term *gay* to denote male-identified same-sex subjectivity, although many other terms are popular too, including (*nan*) *tongzhi* ([male] comrade), an older term, perhaps more popular as an informal identity term in the 1990s, mostly among men. The terms *tongzhi* and *tongxinglian* often appear in activist and academic literature, compared with the vernacular *lala* and *gay* (Engebretsen, 2008c; Wang, 2004).

3 For extensive discussions on the position of homosexuality in early modern and imperial Chinese society, see, for example, Hinsch (1990), Ruan (1991), Sang (2003), Sommer (1997, 2000), Wu (2003).

sexuality realized through marriage—infuses and shapes the life trajectories of women and men, as well as same-sex and opposite-sex identifications, in fundamental ways. I suggest that lala marital conformity should be understood as a desirable duty. On the one hand, many women express a personal desire to please, conform, and adhere to convention; on the other, many simultaneously experience society's (and their family's) marital expectations as extremely problematic and, therefore, as a constraining, derided duty.

The importance of marriage is grounded in the fact that it is considered to be the principal rite of passage to hetero-gendered adulthood and is therefore endowed with substantial social privilege and status. Dissidence—sexual and other—comes at oftentimes extremely high prices, as the first ethnographic narrative demonstrates. The principle of marriage is further structured by parental obligations, also called filial duties (*xiao*), that remain enormously important in China—despite the fact that the contents and meanings of these responsibilities are slowly changing, in tune with socioeconomic transformation, modernization, and considerable demographic change due to China's One Child Policy[4] (Fong, 2007). One 29-year-old woman I spoke with, who felt the marriage pressure intensely, said: "[My mother] would be devastated if I were to remain unmarried....You know, she is also pressured by her environment: neighbors, other, and older family members, and so on. I should understand her." A year later, this woman decided to marry a gay man in a contract marriage in an attempt (a successful one) to solve this impasse. Others agreed that coming out to one's parents is selfish, inconsiderate, and unnecessary. Many posited a Chinese social logic against a Western one, whereby managing one's sexuality and same-sex intimate relationships according to standards of harmony (*hexie*), normality (*zhengchang*), and stability (*wending*) express recognized Chinese social identity and culture. Political advocacy and coming out are considered as Western and, thus, inappropriate in a Chinese context (see Chou, 2000; Liu & Ding, 2005).

I examine this lived ambiguity in three detailed ethnographic relationship narratives. The first focuses on the constraints that marriage imposes on the possibilities for lasting intimacy in the lives of two women whose circumstances allow them few resources for strategizing or for challenging familial pressure, including instances of domestic and state violence; the second considers a long-term couple's negotiations, highlighting the positive possibilities of tacit identity, as well as relationship management that heeds filial and marital convention; the third discusses the case of a lala-gay contract marriage. Apart from the focus on conjugal logics in diverse forms, the narratives also illustrate the ways in which individual circumstances beyond the domain of sexuality—especially markers of socioeconomic class, age group, urban status, and gender identity—structure and shape the *lala* category and intimate relationships between women.

Marital Logics and Same-Sex Sexuality in Post-Socialist China[5]

The concept of stability remains a defining aspect of Chinese culture, politics, history, and social organization; its pervasive significance circumscribes every level of social life, from the intimacy of two lovers to state government. Its opposites—chaos and disorder—have regularly figured as discursive normative value statements in feudal-imperial, nationalist, socialist, and now post-socialist Chinese official discourse, as well as in less official social discourse across status, class, and geographical regions. Both ancient and modern Chinese cosmology, based predominantly on Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist moral philosophy and religious spirituality, emphasize the cycles of complementary, the oppositional forces (*yin-yang*) that structure life—earthly and spiritual; current, future, and past—and the need to keep these cycles and forces in balance in order to achieve harmony (*hexie*) and stability (see, for example, Chou, 2000; Dikötter, 1995; Wan, 2001).

In modern, socialist China (post-1949), these values and norms merged with political philosophy and propaganda, developing to concern sexuality, family life, the Party state, and their interrelationship in a language different from previous eras. However, 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 in early modern Republican China (after 1911), when European and Japanese medical scientific scholarship and literature took hold among radical intellectuals concerned with establishing a modern, powerful China against the backdrop of the imploded Empire (Dikötter, 1995; Hinsch, 1990; Sommer, 2000). The category of the homosexual (*tongxinglianzhe*) or homosexuality (*tongxinglian*) emerged in binary opposition

4 This policy was established by the government in the late 1970s to curb the country's population growth, limiting couples to having only one child.

5 Drawing on Xudong Zhang's (2008) work, I adopt the term *post-socialist* to mean the period from the 1990s onward, which is marked by an intensification of modernization and developmentalist ideology, including the "circumstances of globalization, commodification, individual freedom, private ownership and rights, social mobility, moral and value plurality, and cultural diversity" (p. 2).

to the concept of the normal citizen. Classified as sexual deviance, homosexuality challenged marital harmony—that is, conjugal sexuality and domestic love—alongside, for example, prostitution (Li, 2006a).

To the extent that sexual matters were addressed, socialist propaganda alternated by representing homosexuality either as a natural inversion or illness curable by medical intervention, or as an ideological or moral failing that resulted from being brainwashed by the bourgeois, landowning classes or by Western capitalism, and curable by socialist reeducation. Unlike the European medico-scientific disciplines, which regarded sexual variation as an expression of human diversity to catalogue and investigate, the regime saw it as a mark of the uncivilized *other* that threatened the natural procreative imperative of heterosexuality and, thus, state power (Chou, 2000; Evans, 1997; Wu, 2003).

Marriage as a practice to consolidate the value of conjugal family and reproductive norms has been cemented as a key fundament for social—and regime—stability in China. As Rofel (2007) has noted, "Family 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" (p. 100). In short, the regulation of sex into proper and improper, normal and abnormal categories, establishes Chinese cultural citizenship and remains at the core of state-sponsored modernizing efforts.

Of course, a strong valuation for kin and lineage exists throughout Chinese history and has been noted in much anthropological literature (see Chun, 1996; Santos, 2006)—a valuation in which the imperatives of filial obedience (*xiao*) are considered regulators of cross-generational, cross-status relationships. Marriage practices remain at the core of these prevailing normative kin relationships, to ensure stable families and proper cultural citizenship. The socialist regime appropriated marriage as a political act laden with considerable political symbolism regarding production—as worker, laborer—and reproduction—as mother, wife (Evans, 1997; Honig & Hershatter, 1988).

Governmental 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, p. 230; also see Anagnost [2004] and Rofel [2007] regarding *suzhi* [quality]). They took shape as part of the highly politicized official discourse on citizenship and society that guided behavior down to the composition and conduct of nuclear families. These notions help designate value and aspiration toward a particular and appropriate cultural citizenship in contemporary China, one that may be called an economy of sex and sociality. This discourse creates distinctive divisions of class, of urbanity and rurality, and of aspirations to a cosmopolitan modernity—still recognizable as appropriately Chinese cultural citizenship—with links to global discourses of identity and gayness. In turn, it produces certain ways of being gay or lala that are desirable over others. Rofel, for example, has noted how the so-called money boys in Beijing were regarded as low-quality (or quality-less: *meiyou suzhi*),[6] effeminate, rural peasant prostitutes. Conversely, in my own research, female masculinity embodied by the *T* (tomboy) role has emerged as a contestable terrain of identity discourse, where excessive masculinity is stigmatized against an emergent androgynous, cosmopolitan ideal. The notions of balance, stability, and harmony are here expressed in an increasingly dominant lala discourse of individual gendered identity on the right—thus, morally good—balance of desirable and respectable masculine and feminine qualities in a tomboy (Engebretsen, 2008b).

Beijing lalas' prevalent emphasis on stability and normality in their lives must be considered in light of the wide-ranging meaning of these qualities. The negative discursive appropriation of *tongxinglian* as medical illness, political and moral deviance, and (thus) anti-family attitude, are now being circumvented into a positive concept of being lala, as well as appropriate forms of *TP*, gay identity, and so forth, based on the emerging values of appropriate cultural citizenship in a modern, urban China.[7] It is important to note that this shift includes practices tied to family, and those of marriage in particular.

6 Many women who discussed the quality concept always used 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 judgments often appeared together.

7 TP denotes the masculine-feminine lesbian pairing in Chinese societies, in mainland China termed *T* (tomboy) and *P,* meaning *po* (wife). This process has been significantly mediated by emerging lesbian networks and groups, often related with gay men's socializing, networking, and organizing—and, again, often based formally on HIV/AIDS networking. The discursive term *tongzhi* (comrade), for example, is an earlier example of a subversive appropriation of a Communist title to denote *gay,* used both in mainland China and Hong Kong, as well as in Taiwan. More recently, the decidedly American term *queer* now has a Chinese translated counter-term in *ku'er*, and has been appropriated by some, often artists, as well as by academics and students familiar with Anglo, U.S.-based queer theory and activism.

The larger problem is about the highly contradictory normalizing forces these women face, on the one hand from emergent homonormative discourses—some derived more from traditionalist Chinese ideas, others more inspired by Euro-American queer activism—within the lesbian and gay community itself. On the other hand, pervasive social norms based on kin ties circumscribe daily life and individual life projects for these women.

In her discussion of *dui pnua* same-sex relationships between women in southeastern China, Friedman (2006) has appropriated Berlant and Warner's (1998) concept of *counter-intimacies* to describe "intimate forms that take shape outside normative spaces such as kinship, [and] the domestic arena" (Friedman, p. 136). Friedman has demonstrated that dui pnua bonds are not intrinsically nonnormative; for example, most women will eventually marry, have children, and move to the husband's family house. The dui pnua bonds thereby seem to continue, parallel to maintaining family and household. The counter-intimacy inferred here implies that there are only "certain moments [when] those bonds have been perceived as threatening to a particular social or political order" (Friedman, p. 137).

Looking at how normative marital ideologies intersected with ideals about lala relationships among Beijing women I knew—in other words, the degree to which the seemingly straightforward instance of the counter-intimacy of lesbianism converged with heteronormative marriage ideologies and practices—illuminated the importance of adhering to conjugal norms among these women. In this article, I demonstrate that broader values underpinning these ideals and practices connect with what the women perceived as traditional (*chuantong*) and backward (*luohou*) ideals of old more readily expressed by the parental and older generations. I also show how adherence to these ideals and practices by getting married is symbolically related to the fulfilment of appropriate roles in a much wider sense, extending from the intimate relations within the natal family to the national dimension of the Chinese state and cultural citizenship.

A Short-Lived Lala Relationship Between a Divorcée and a Married Mother

Qiaohui is a 40-year-old divorced lala who lives with her parents on the outskirts of Beijing. Her sometime lover, Zhenzhen, is a married, 35-year-old mother of a 3-year-old son who does not consider herself lala. The following narrative of the trajectory of their relationship illustrates common beliefs about homosexuality, same-sex intimate relationships and sociality, and the importance of marriage. As I will go on to show, Qiaohui's 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 regard to sexual difference and everyday life, including instances in which same-sex intimacy transgresses, counters, and threatens the fragile normal.

Qiaohui's life as lala was directly framed by state intervention. In the 1980s, she was already married to a man when she became infatuated with a fellow female worker. Qiaohui cut her hair very short—a transgressive social action in itself that also broke the rules of acceptable female appearance—in response to overhearing the woman saying that she found Buddhist nuns beautiful. When members of Qiaohui's work unit realized what was happening, Qiaohui was detained in a mental hospital for several months because of her homosexuality (literally, *gao tongxinglian*: engage in homosexuality). During this period, neither her husband nor her parents claimed her (which was the only way she could have been released), and she underwent supposed treatment for her *tongxinglian bing* (homosexual illness). When at last Qiaohui was released, her husband sought divorce on the grounds of her so-called illness; she has been living with her elderly parents ever since. Having no university qualification or particular career training, Qiaohui does odd jobs in different places, but for the most part she remains financially reliant on her family.

One weekday afternoon, Qiaohui, Zhenzhen, and I chatted in the small office the two of them were renting in a residential-cum-work space in an older business compound in west Beijing. They had met some months previously and, according to Qiaohui, Zhenzhen had been the more eager to pursue an intimate relationship, whereas Qiaohui herself was reluctant. Before Zhenzhen arrived for our meeting, Qiaohui told me that just after they had first met, "I thought of her as just a friend, nothing else.…She has a family (*ta you jiating*)—a husband and a child—so there is no future (*meiyou shenme weilai de)* 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 on a bed hidden in a corner behind tall filing cabinets.

Later, Zhenzhen spoke at length about her views on homosexuality. Prior to knowing Qiaohui, she explained, she had thought of homosexuality as illness (*bing*) and abnormal (*buzhengchang*). In her opinion homosexuality was still a *xiqi* (minority practice or custom), she told me, 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, as well as later in the evening, when we had dinner together in a nearby restaurant. Zhenzhen connected these binaries with the degree to which physical sex and gender conformity matched. Commenting on Qiaohui and me in terms of our short haircuts, relatively androgynous or masculine appearances, clothing styles, and our early awareness of being lesbians—or, at least, different—she then commented: "*Women buyiyang*" ("We are very different"). My impression was that she was referring not only to her different, more conventionally feminine appearance and long hair but also to her married status and motherhood.

Zhenzhen had married very reluctantly and quite late, in her early 30s. 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 outskirt suburbs with her husband, her son, and her parents—her first venture outside her home village—she gloomily commented, "*Wo meiyou banfa*" ("I had no other options"). Enthusiastically talking about her relationship with Qiaohui, she expressed happiness about their affair and stated that it made her feel *ganqing* and *gaoxing* (emotions or affection, and happiness). She explicitly countered these feelings to *hunyin* (marriage): "They are two different things," she explained.

In a later conversation, Qiaohui described how Zhenzhen had experienced physical pain and fear during sexual intercourse with her husband, feelings that had intensified after the son's birth. Qiaohui—evidently proud to announce such proof of her sexual skills— told me that, in contrast, Zhenzhen experienced sexual pleasure with her. Qiaohui believed that the pleasures of their sexual intimacy, together with the alleviation of everyday marital and household monotony that their relationship brought, were the main reasons that Zhenzhen wanted an intimate relationship with her—not because she was really lala.

Shortly after our meeting, Qiaohui and Zhenzhen encountered a severe challenge when Zhenzhen's family found out about their relationship. When Zhenzhen did Qiaohui's laundry in the family home, Zhenzhen's mother queried why she was doing laundry for someone outside the family and asked explicitly whether Zhenzhen and Qiaohui were having an *aimeide guanxi*—a somewhat literary term denoting same-sex intimate relationships.[8] Upon finding out the truth, Zhenzhen's mother had burst into tears and had made Zhenzhen promise to end the relationship. Some weeks later, after Zhenzhen and Qiaohui had continued contact—they kept in touch by text messaging, a preferred communication tool among many lala and gay people due to its inexpensiveness and anonymity—Zhenzhen's parents had physically assaulted Zhenzhen.

Qiaohui was very upset about Zhenzhen's ordeal with her parents; she texted me frequently, saying she felt sick with worry about Zhenzhen and anger toward Zhenzhen's parents. Although Qiaohui did care deeply for Zhenzhen, however, she already was moving on emotionally and had a crush on a teacher she had met at the Beijing Lala Shalong—an informal women's social group that got together weekly on Saturday afternoons. When Zhenzhen found out about Qiaohui's new crush, she was furious. Zhenzhen seemed to want an ideal situation in which she could not only maintain ties with her family but also pursue her affair with Qiaohui. She did not comprehend or accept what Qiaohui, who had considerably more life experience than Zhenzhen and probably had far fewer illusions about the relationship, clearly knew: Zhenzhen's married status and family situation made their relationship impossible.

Qiaohui and Zhenzhen differed even more in terms of their disparate identification with the lala community. Whereas Qiaohui interacted with activist groups to some degree and self-identified as a *bufen* (versatile) lala, Zhenzhen was entirely against participating in lala community events. When I asked Zhenzhen if she wanted to come to the Lala Shalong, she immediately refused, saying, "*Wo you jiating*" ("I have a family"). She also made it clear that she was not interested because, as she put it, "*Wo bushi nayangde ren*" ("I am not that kind of person"). Zhenzhen's misgivings about the lala community included, first, that many of those women smoke and drink alcohol—activities, she argued, that are morally bad. Second, she said, the lala community as a whole is *dongdang* (turbulent), *luan* (rowdy), and *buwending* (unstable). In contrast, her life and status as a married mother ensured stability and normalcy. To Zhenzhen, normal married life and the unstable lala community were mutually exclusive. Finally, same-sex relationships do not last, she argued, again comparing such relationships with marriage, which in her opinion lasts for life.

Qiaohui and Zhenzhen's experiences point to pervasive and widespread ideas about same-sex relationships and sensibility, marriage, and their interrelationship. It is important to note that these ideas are concerned with the perceived fundamental relationship between ideals of what is considered normal and forms of relationships

8 The literal translation of *aimeide guanxi* is loving-beautiful relationship.

and conduct. For example, being lala and participating in lala sociality are in crucial ways evidence of being abnormal, unstable, turbulent, and chaotic, versus the desirable opposites of normal, stable, and harmonious—or, as many of the women I spoke with put it, being "just like everyone else."

Many women in the lala community evoke very similar binary and moralizing characteristics in their discussions of same-sex identification, relationships, and social activism. For example, in one discussion at the Lala Shalong, the convener asked participants their thoughts on why people oppose lesbians. Several women argued that being different in this way attracts others' attention (*bieren kande*)—implying that lesbians stand out [negatively] from the crowd—and moral judgment. Furthermore, participants perceived that society values *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). When Qiaohui proceeded to argue that the emerging TP roles reflect Chinese traditional heterosexual norms, many women sitting around the table nodded in agreement with her. Indeed, the logic of the TP system hinges on attaining a balance between masculine and feminine gendered qualities in appearance, personality, and social and sexual behavior (for a detailed discussion, see Engebretsen, 2008a).

The second major point emerging from Zhenzhen's narrative 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 behavior, not identity)—was met with punitive sanctions, from close family in Zhenzhen's case and from both family and the government in Qiaohui's case. Note that in both cases, the women's transgressive actions were not sexual as such (e.g., doing laundry, cutting hair). However, the implications and social significance of these acts denoted subversive acts inappropriate to the women's social status as married and, thus, these acts were interpreted as marital infidelity. Both Zhenzhen and Qiaohui were conventionally married when their homosexual behavior was discovered; others undoubtedly regarded their transgressions as threats to the stability and normality of their married life as wives and, in Zhenzhen's case, as a mother.

Some time later, when Qiaohui and I talked 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 financial independence, Qiaohui brought up the matter to her father—without mentioning that the man was gay—upon which her father had beaten her (not an uncommon occurrence) and, not surprisingly, blankly refused to consider the proposal.

In the following section, I discuss a middle-aged couple whose circumstances were quite different from Qiaohui and Zhenzhen's: Never conventionally married, Baozhai and Meijie have lived together as a couple for more than 16 years.

Although the women I knew in Beijing were increasingly aware of the possibility of achieving social recognition and legal rights through same-sex marriage abroad—an awareness developed mainly through viewing news on the Internet and TV shows such as *The L Word* (which portrays the lives of lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women), as well as various gay-themed Asian and Western movies—my sense was that the attraction toward marriage-like setups did not primarily result from imported Euro-American queer family models. This attraction seemed, rather, to relate to a Chinese-specific cultural politics of belonging, or cultural citizenship (cf. Rofel, 2007), that through the reform period has enabled large-scale changes even in intimate life (see Yan, 2003).

In other words, these marriage-like setups are not so much instances of counter-intimacy as they are intimate practices designed to familiarly tie in with normative values most notably idealized through the marriage institution itself. It is important to understand that for many Chinese women, being, having been, or planning to be heterosexually married—that is, blending in by ascribing to normative familial practices usually appropriated by opposite-sex spouses—does not automatically exclude the possibility of seeking or sustaining same-sex intimate relationships outside the household; for the women I conducted fieldwork with, marriage and normative practices did not cement exclusively straight sexual subjectivity.

Just Like Marriage: A Long-Term Lala Relationship

For many Beijing lalas, Baozhai and Meijie are the epitome of the ideal lala relationship. A couple for 16 years by the time they started socializing in the local lala bar on weekend evenings, Baozhai and Meijie were regularly referred to as exemplary of lala lifestyles and relationships. One woman put it this way: "*Tamen shi lalade*

bangyang" ("They are lala role models"). When I asked her why, she said, "Because they have been together for 16 years—do you think that's been easy?!" Because they are middle-aged—Baozhai in her late 30s and Meijie in her mid-40s—many people regard them as *dajie/jiejie* (big sisters) or *zhixin jiejie* (intimate elder sisters). In the bar on weekends, I often saw Baozhai and Meijie patiently discussing problems with and helping younger women solve issues related to family and girlfriends. They seemed to greatly enjoy the status and admiration accorded them by the younger women in particular, who regarded Baozhai and Meijie as the embodiment of an everlasting relationship, evidence that it is possible for two women to stay together over time.

Baozhai and Meijie talked about their relationship in ways that demonstrated their successful appropriation of notions and practices of married life. The reason they were able to maintain mutual affection for such a long time, Baozhai argued, was because they shared each other's *tonggan gongku* (joys and sorrows) and helped each other—including their respective families—through difficult times. These problems and sorrows included, for example, financial difficulties due to the collapse of Baozhai's family business and her sister's ensuing health problems, and then Baozhai's own. In addition, they provided daily care for Meijie's father during 5 years of illness and old age until his passing. Baozhai believed that Meijie's *xiaoshun* (filial responsibility) as a single daughter should not be compromised and named it as a key feature that brought them closer together; Baozhai said she did not once complain about caring for Meijie's father, even when cleaning him and helping him to the toilet. Baozhai assumed this filial responsibility partially as a demonstration of her deep and profound relationship with Meijie. Baozhai and Meijie compared their relationship to the ideal of heterosexual relationships:

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

Baozhai and Meijie's emphasis on stability further links to the ideal of tacit strategies. For example, they are not explicitly out to their families, friends, or neighbors 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." What matters when two people live together, they said, is to be sincere and a good person (*hao ren*) to people around you:

> Behaving in a respectful manner to neighbors 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 is their inability to have a child together, especially now that both of them are getting older and time is becoming more pressing. These concerns differ from those of the much younger lala women, as was demonstrated in a lala bar debate on the position of homosexuality in Chinese society. Whereas most participants, many affiliated with Tongyu, lamented the persistent difficulties of coming out, marriage pressure, and their desire for social acceptance, Baozhai spoke passionately about how she and her partner want to have a family, a child, like heterosexual couples.

Through their 16 years together, Baozhai and Meijie have with meticulous and great skill integrated their romantic relationship with normative social values, kin, and social ties. Because of this tacit expression of romantic ties patterned by principles of stability, harmony, and normality, they have been accepted as, ipso facto, a couple—a household (*jia*). This achievement is further demonstrated by their response to my question about whether they were considering a symbolic wedding ceremony. With an uncomprehending stare, Baozhai looked at me for a couple of seconds and both suddenly went silent; then Baozhai retorted: "That makes no sense to us; we have everything already, why would we do that?" In short, a wedding ceremony in their case would be not only superfluous but also, as Baozhai put it, *meiyou yiyi* (meaningless) given that they had already attained the values often invoked by formalized marriage through their successful manipulation of conjugal norms.

A Marriage of Convenience? A Lala-Gay Arrangement

Huaxi and Zhilei, both in their early 30s, got married in 2001 in their hometown, a provincial city some distance away from Beijing. Zhilei, a gay man, works for an international company in Beijing, where he lives with his longtime partner. Huaxi, a self-identified *pure-T*,[9] is a successful entrepreneur in their native city, running a bar that attracts many gays. They grew up in the same neighborhood and, although their parents were friends, they themselves did not become close friends until they

9 Similar to the phrase *stone butch* in English.

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. Initially intrigued by Huaxi's butch appearance and personality, he suspected that she was lala. Gradually, he and Huaxi became good friends and spent much time socializing.

One night, after copious drinking and talking, Huaxi and Zhilei came out to each other in the context of lamenting the marriage pressure they were enduring. Soon after, they decided to go into 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, which greatly disappointed their families.

Zhilei told me that he had a second and more selfish motive for wanting to marry Huaxi. At the time, he was applying to work abroad, and 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. The marriage was a spur-of-the-moment decision, he explained, and he doubted that they would have gone ahead with it if they had spent more time considering the implications.

Although 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 regard to his future, especially in old age. In addition, getting married ensured continuity within the family and saving face with their neighbors and other kin. Zhilei also mentioned something that many people I knew had told me—that the phenomenon of marriage pressure is not exerted exclusively from parents toward their children: Neighbors inquire endlessly into other families' relationships and practices, distant kin nag about the son who never finds a wife, and so on. As previously mentioned, many women and men harbored considerable compassion—and corresponding guilt—toward their elderly parents who still lived away from the cosmopolitan city in their native village or local town, where they were probed endlessly about their never-married son or daughter.

Huaxi expressed views that were somewhat different from Zhilei's. She emphasized that her circumstances were dissimilar to Zhilei's because he had left their native town at a relatively early age and was now well settled in the capital. Because she had never left, Huaxi had to deal with her family on a regular basis regarding her sexuality and intimate relationships. People in her town, she argued, also were much more conservative (*baoshou*) and much less open-minded than people in Beijing. Huaxi "still experienced the pressure" ("*yali hai cunzai*"), she said, especially because she was well known in the region due to the fact that she had been a successful athlete when she was younger. "Many people know who I am" (*henduoren renshi wo*), she told me, with some pride in her voice. This local fame also resulted in other negative experiences, such as when a stranger on the street had loudly commented, "Here comes that woman who likes women" as she passed by. Clearly, rumors about her sexuality were circulating, spurred on by her particularly masculine appearance and personality. She characterized herself as a *feichang chunde T* (very pure T) who was frequently mistaken for a man. However, the gossip did not seem to bother her too much. She attributed this lack of concern about rumors to her successful business entrepreneurship, for which many people admired her.

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 discussing contract marriage as a coping strategy for lalas and gays. Huaxi argued that because China is very traditional and conservative with regard to married life and gender roles, such as the expectation that women will be financially supported by their husbands, it is even more important for lalas and gays to secure financial independence before entering a contract marriage agreement. If a lala and a gay each achieves financial independence, she said, then they will be free to do whatever they want after they marry each other. Huaxi emphasized that money allows people to live their lives as they wish after marrying and gives them an advantage in dealing with the social environment and discrimination, because they can afford not to care, not be anxious.

For Huaxi, marrying Zhilei was primarily about satisfying 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 felt she should, as their only daughter. During a recent holiday period she had not visited them at all because, she explained, the holidays are when business peaks. She had been in a relationship with a local woman for 2 years, usually bringing her along for weekend visits to her family and introducing her as a

friend (*pengyou*). Huaxi had never said anything outright about the nature of 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, Huaxi was able to disregard social pressure and discrimination to carve out a different life for herself and her girlfriend. When she expanded her business and opened a bar in a bigger city, she planned to move there with her partner to escape familial scrutiny and move beyond the current boundaries of her freedom. Huaxi described her supposed husband, Zhilei, as someone who was closer than a good friend to her: "He is family....We can talk about everything."

Huaxi, who did not use the Internet much because she preferred cell phones, said she has had only minimal contact with lala social networks and bars, and is little interested in them. She said she did not know of anyone else like her in her home town, and she was careful to emphasize that her girlfriend was not a lala and most of her friends were *zhide* (straight). She argued that her straight friends admire and respect her because, although she is a woman and they know she is lala, she could attract even the most beautiful women. Huaxi described the lala and gay communities as *luan* (chaotic) and erratic. She had more firsthand experience with the gay male community because, she explained, she used to go to gay hangouts and bars in other cities with gay friends.

For example, she said that 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) and foreigners, and the fact of the AIDS epidemic. Huaxi said she felt that people live with such a high degree of pressure that it drains their lives (*huode henlei*; *yali henda*). But the bigger problem, she suggested, was with Chinese society in general. She told me she hoped that, with further development, opening up, and better welfare, the situation for lalas and gays would improve correspondingly. China's long, ancient history and traditional culture make legalized same-sex marriage difficult. Western countries are more open about same-sex marriage, she argued, and mentioned that she had thought about going to Holland with her girlfriend to get married.

Huaxi's marriage to Zhilei, then, had quite different implications for Huaxi than for Zhilei. Their life trajectories and post-wedding lives were conditioned by gender norms, whereby daughters have a filial duty to care for parents and remain close, whereas sons are expected to go out into the world to seek career and wealth opportunities, often far away from home. Huaxi remained within a local, small-city, normative framework for women's possibilities, a restrictive environment exacerbated by the proximity to her parental home and family. In our conversations, she emphasized her skills and recognition as a businesswoman, as a youth athlete, and as a T who could attract the most beautiful women. The subtext, however, is that her personal agency as a visibly transgressing masculine woman with a female partner, as well as her ability to maintain her relationship, depends on maintaining a conventional appearance of upholding the normative boundaries for female conduct.

The differential effects of the contract marriage on Huaxi and Zhilei's lives point to the fundamental importance of autonomy and distance from parents in enabling and sustaining same-sex identities and relationships. Huaxi was well aware of this fact and was using her career to facilitate further independence by planning to relocate her business and home to a bigger provincial city. Like the narrative of the aforementioned long-term couple, Huaxi's situation emphasizes the fundamental importance of wanting to fit in and be like so-called normal people.

Concluding Remarks

This article has discussed the importance of marriage to lala subjectivity, romantic and familial relationships, and overall life strategies at a historical moment when nonnormative sexuality and marriage is increasingly being reduced to a Western-based activist discourse on legalized same-sex marriage. I have shown that, for lala women in Beijing, the marital terrain brings together multiple and different allegiances and desires for belonging and status, and in a language that simultaneously invokes romantic intimacy, filial kin ties, and national Chineseness. Consequently, the lala desire for marital and familial convention cannot be reduced to a question of rights, equality, and out visibility. Lala subjectivity remains a site of tension and struggle, as well as a position that cannot usefully be designated to a privatized sexual domain. Furthermore, in all its changing manifestations, lala subjectivity infuses the ambitions for social belonging at private, familial, and national levels through the moral trope of marriage. These struggles are being played out between lalas and their families

(parents, in particular), but also between pairs of lovers who rarely, if ever, uniformly subscribe to the marital meanings and kinship practices with which they engage.

At the beginning of this article, I asked why women choose to engage with social institutions that seem to negate the possibility for conducting fulfilling same-sex relationships. My detailed ethnographic examination of marital logics and practices has demonstrated the wide-ranging and deep-seated cultural meanings embedded in the moral values that marital status entails for Beijing lalas. For these women, nonnormative expressions of desire and identity appropriate the core values of heterosexual marriage and filial duty in order to attain socially recognized and seemingly unconflicted personhood. At the same time, this partial ascription is predominantly directed at surface (face) level and thereby enables alternative possibilities at personal and intimate levels. In short, the ability to maintain a hetero-marital face, as it were, allows for tacit possibilities for same-sex intimate relationships in (semi)private spheres.

At the same time, the threat of potential dissidence in lala intimacies surfaces in the lives of women with limited resources and capital—cultural, spatial, and financial—such as when Qiaohui and Zhenzhen experienced violence from parents and state governance. Such moments not only point to the fragility of tacit strategies and the very real problem of invisibility and tacit, situational tolerance but also are one possible reason that the increasing activist discourse on rights and equality is gaining popularity among so many lala and gay people in China (see Liu & Ding, 2005).

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. These meanings do appear to conflict across—even within—social fields and subject positions, and they seem to provide only "an illusory sense of wholeness" (Ewing, 1990, p. 266). However, these fields and sites of contestation and struggle must be engaged with in order to comprehend the multiple and ambiguous affiliations of lala subjectivity and sociality. The notion of marriage provides a defining axis of differentiation in which a range of subjective and social factors engage to produce ways of being, loving, and identification that make sense in China's local yet globalizing lala and gay lifeworlds.

Acknowledgments

The British Economic and Social Research Council generously funded the doctoral research on which this article is based. The Royal Anthropological Institute's Radcliffe Brown Trust Fund/Sutasoma Award 2007 kindly supported post-fieldwork writing. Fieldwork took place in Beijing between September 2004 and May 2006. Earlier versions of this article were read at the LSE Anthropology Department Research Seminar on May 25, 2007, and presented in a lecture as part of the Transnational Sexualities series at Duke University on September 9, 2008. I am very grateful for the audience feedback. I thank John Cho, Stephan Feuchtwang, Derek Hird, Henrietta Moore, William Schroeder, and Charles Stafford for their constructive feedback, support, and insightful conversations with me on this topic. I am particularly indebted to the numerous women and men in Beijing who patiently shared their lives with me. Final thanks are due to the two anonymous reviewers, and editors Brian de Vries and Miguel Munoz Laboy for their careful reading and constructive, encouraging feedback. All remaining shortcomings, of course, remain mine.

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