
In “Shanghai Lalas: Female Tongzhi Communities and Politics in Urban China”, Lucetta Yip Lo Kam critically discusses the impact that practices connected to a “politics of public correctness” have had on the daily life of lesbian-identified women (拉拉 lala). According to Kam, this politics compels Chinese homosexuals to constantly perform heteronormativity in family domains, while also performing homonormativity – in the sense of “good citizenship” – in public (discourse). She sees the emergence of homonormativity in urban China “as part of a greater project to construct a new sexual morality for the newly capitalized and increasingly commodified society” (p. 89).

In the context of this politics Kam examines the disparity between lala’s self-empowered identities and the continuing pressure to get married, focusing on individual coping strategies. After 1978 she sees a gradual shift from collective interests to individual rights and choices, and a shift from direct state control of private life to surveillance conducted by one’s parents and colleagues, which compels the individual to integrate into a heteronormative social system.

Her study is based on extensive fieldwork and qualitative in-depth interviews with twenty-five informants in Shanghai from 2005 to 2011, supplemented by an analysis of the discourse on homosexuality in China since the 1980s. All informants are lesbian-identified Chinese women with urban household registration who are active members of Shanghai’s lala community, 20 to 45 years old, and are either employed as white-collar workers, enrolled as university students or self-employed. The first chapter gives a detailed picture of the development of Shanghai’s lala community since 2005, offering the first academic study about this local community. Kam sees the increased social and geographical mobility of individuals since the 1990s as the most important precondition for the emergence of urban tongzhi cultures. She further points out the influence of transnational flows of information, cultural products and people, especially from Taiwan and Hong Kong, on the development of

1 The term “tongzhi” (同志) meaning “same will” or “comrade” in Chinese, was appropriated in 1989 by Chinese gay and lesbian activists to refer to Chinese homosexuals, thereby creating an alternative to the Western term “gay” and the official term “tongxinglian” (同性恋) to emphasize their agency and the distinctiveness of their cultural and political agenda.
In the second chapter, Kam describes how homosexuals became a visible social group in Chinese public discourse. A presentation of different fragments of the “politics of public correctness”, which in Kam’s analysis was created by the wish of homosexuals to be recognized by their family and the public after many decades of state-imposed medical, moral and legal stigmatization, follows in the third chapter. The strategies of lalas that Kam observed for negotiating the public and the private are described in the fourth chapter: having a dual life and keep one’s same-sex relationship secret after getting married with a straight man; making the relationship with a woman open after getting married, and then attempting to reach a mutual agreement with one’s straight husband; or as the third strategy, organizing a “cooperative marriage” with a gay man, basically a performance for parents (p. 82). She concludes that cooperative marriage on one hand reconfirms the heteronormative system of marriage and makes women as autonomous sexual subjects invisible, but on the other hand also creates spaces for new forms of kinship. In addition, Kam brings up the broader process of coming out to parents and found that most of her informants saw their coming out as an extended process, a “soft coming out” (软出柜 ruan chugui) (p. 76).

In the fifth chapter, Kam analyzes the development of homonormativity and the discursive spread of the belief that one has to be a “model citizen” first, before one can expect to be socially accepted as a homosexual in Chinese society. Kam further emphasizes that “silence can be a violent form of symbolic erasure” (p. 92), and questions Chou Wah-shan’s concept of “Chinese tolerance”, which claims that same-sex relationships are tolerated in Chinese families in a “don’t ask, don’t tell” way. Kam sees tolerance as a “discourse of depoliticization and personalization of political issues” (p. 93) and self-shaming as often being the only emotion permitted to non-normative sexual subjects within Chinese families.

In her conclusion, Kam predicts a further diversification of the tongzhi/lala communities and the emergence of related new social groups in China, including transgender, FTM (female-to-male transsexual) and gay men’s straight wives (同妻 tongqi). A diversification is also visible on the discursive level, according to Kam, debates about queer theory versus “scientism”, as well as “constructivism” versus “essentialism” in homosexuality, can be found in Chinese cyber forums. On the community level, Kam observes the emergence of tongzhi grassroots organizations in economically less developed
regions. Hers is a very convincing book which could only have been written by someone who is not only an academic scholar but also an active participant in Chinese tongzhi communities, as Kam has been for many years. Her analysis of the emergence of a “politics of public correctness” will have to be seriously considered by any scholars and activists working on LGBTQ issues in Chinese societies.

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