
Elisabeth Engebretsen’s book ‘Queer women in Urban China. An Ethnography’ is both a much needed ethnography of lesbian (lala) sociality and intimacy in Beijing and a timely contribution to the study of kinship and society in urban China.

The book is divided in seven chapters, in which the author engages with recurrent themes in queer anthropology as well as with subjects generally considered to pertain to the classic anthropology of kinship. Therefore, while the book starts with an informative introduction to queer politics in the People’s Republic of China and with lesbian women’s definitions of their own sexualities, experiences and identities as lalas, it quickly moves to topics like the importance of face, intergenerational relations of nurturing and support, and the role of marriage in contemporary Chinese society. The book also devotes much attention to the activist spaces that lalas created for themselves in the urban space, therefore engaging with public activism in the tightly controlled context of China’s capital, Beijing.

The first two chapters of the book offer the reader an introduction to queer politics in Beijing which is both theoretically sound and grounded into in-depth ethnography. This allows the reader to gradually enter the world of Engebretsen’s informants as they share with the ethnographer their own personal histories of ‘becoming’, ‘taking awareness’ or ‘recognizing themselves as’ lalas. From the beginning of the book, the author’s analysis highlights the continuous tensions between sexuality, which often happens to be fluid and changeable, and identity formation in a context where social roles tend to be rigidly associated with gender and reproductive capability. As the author shows, these tensions affect lalas in wider Chinese society as well as in their own lesbian circles, as they are continuously interpellated to identify themselves according to fix categories like T (tomboy) or P (wife or femme). The analysis of the problematic link between sexuality and social identity/ies remains an important leitmotif throughout the book, reinforcing the author’s subsequent arguments and offering an enjoyable continuity to the reader.

As the reader moves to the central part of the book, the importance and complexity of the above mentioned nexus emerges even more clearly from the voices of the author’s informants. As the author engages with her informants’ personal experiences throughout the lifecycle, she is compelled to deal once again with classic themes of China anthropology: intergenerational relations, marriage and childbearing, but also class inequality, class mobility and the relationship between the state and the market. The prominence that these themes
occupy in the book indicates how these issues are as important for the *lalas* as for heterosexual people in present-day urban China, where heteronormative marriage remains a quasi-obligatory passage and is firmly associated with childbearing.

This attention to lifecycle passages generally considered as heteronormative remains, in my view, one of the main strengths of the book for several reasons. Firstly, this attention to the politics of kinship and marriage emerges from the *lalas*’ reiterated accounts of their own concerns and struggles; by taking these themes seriously, the author is able to challenge the centrality of the ‘out and proud’ political agenda, showing that for many queers in China social normalcy remains an important component of personal happiness and desirable life. In addition, by highlighting the importance that marriage and the intergenerational contract hold in the lives of the *lalas*, Engebretsen shows the pivotal role that these institutions play in the wider social order of the People’s Republic of China.

‘Queer Women in Urban China’ suggests that new political agendas may emerge from queer movements in the non-English speaking world, although the extent of political repression in places like Beijing remains an enormous obstacle to the establishment of alternative modes of kinship formation. The author provides nuanced accounts of how *lalas* creatively practice kinship in ways that do not preclude same-sex desire; the emerging picture, however, is not one of bold confrontation but one of everyday struggle and negotiations that the *lalas* entertain with their partners, families, employers, friends and, last but not least, with themselves. Taking distance from simplistic usages of ‘resistance’, the author looks at these practices and at queer activism as historically grounded phenomena with an unpredictable future. The last part of the book could have looked at the connections between queer activism and other Beijing-based political and civil rights movements, as the queer spaces described by Engebretsen emerge at times as isolated enclaves in Beijing’s bustling urban landscape. On the other hand, the author’s engagement with political activism is already commendable if one considers the sensitivity of this topic in the highly politicized space of the capital city.

Overall, Engebretsen’s ethnography constitutes an important contribution to the study of kinship, family and gender in urban China. Far from being appealing only to scholars in queer studies, it will be of great help to all those who are looking for a theoretically informed and ethnographically rich study of the family in urban China. Its enjoyable style and vivid descriptions will also appeal to scholars interested in urban anthropology and global cities; finally, this book can be recommended to all social scientists interested in modes of affect and intimacy in the globalised world.
(Roberta Zavoretti, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle, Germany)