Lesbian identity and community projects in Beijing: Notes from the field on studying and theorising same-sex cultures in the age of globalisation

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Introduction:

This paper is based on ongoing ethnographic fieldwork for my PhD in Anthropology, and is a research project that investigates same-sex desire and cultures among women in Mainland urban China, mainly in Beijing and on the Internet. The ambitions with this project are for one to contribute knowledge about the variations and similarities in human sexuality and culture, by way of studying a rarely prioritised category of people (lesbian-identified women) in a relatively seldom studied locale (urban China). And second, I hope to connect ideologies about sexual identity to wider social and cultural economies of change and inter-exchange in this particular moment in history often referred to as an age of 'globalisation'.

The research methodology that I employ is long-term participant observation, in-depth semi-structured interviews, informal conversations with individuals and groups, and media analysis. I am also working with a Beijing-based lesbian network on a social survey that aims to find and publish information about lesbian women's lives and health situation in 2005-2006.

Beijing now has a flourishing lesbian scene, counting numerous bars, regular events such as parties and a weekly culture salon, telephone hotlines, two organisations, and, on a national level, tenfold websites. Prior to last year, however, the organising and possibilities for socialising were scattered and short-term. A lesbian network in Beijing existed in the late nineties for a few years, until an incident with police during a lesbian culture festival brought the network to its close in 2001. The Internet with its promise of relative anonymity, has in

recent years (since its general introduction to China around 1998) become the main arena for women to find friends, lovers, knowledge and support, and poses a far lesser risk of being found-out by parents, classmates and friends, husbands, and society in general.

Making sense of same-sex cultures: The global/local problematic

Concerns recently voiced in work on sexuality cross-culturally question the processes of local cultural change and appropriation of what on the surface may seem to be Euro-American ideologies about individual sexual identity, culture and rights. In Beijing for example, many women now self-consciously identify as 'lesbians' in the context of an emerging local and regional vocabulary based on a gendered understanding of sexuality; increasing numbers of lesbians now seek ways to refuse the traditional imperative to get married within their late-20s; and an increasing number of university educated urban lesbians now organise to promote knowledge and rights as lesbians within Chinese society. How do we make sense of these events and emerging cultures?

A Beijing lesbian in her mid-twenties describes her sexuality by using the self-conscious identity of T (for 'tomboy') because she considers herself to be masculine in appearance and personality, and tells me how she deals with her parents' expectation for her to marry by planning a proforma marriage (*mingyi hunyin*) with a gay man she has met in the local lesbian and gay sports group. So, could we argue that she a lesbian in the meaning of the word that I put into it as a European lesbian? Is she merely copying what she's now heard about Western lesbian culture, perhaps through the Internet, and by watching foreign lesbian films and TV shows like *The L Word*? And what about local Chinese and regional East Asian societal structures that ultimately circumscribe this T woman's possibility to choose at all? How do we make sense of these complex processes that both seem to be specifically Chinese, yet at the

same time very reminiscent of, in some ways, lesbian Euro-American culture, and in other ways, female same-sex cultures across East and South-East Asia?

Work on globalisation, modernity, and cultural change, including studies on same-sex cultures, have struggled to understand local appropriations of seemingly Western signs – like gay and lesbian rights and identity ideology - in the context of increasingly rapid media technology advancements, late-capitalist flow of commodities and people, and socio-economic development in local places. Some have argued for a "globalization of sexuality" (Binnie 2004, Farrer 2002), or in Dennis Altman's words: an "apparent globalization of post-modern gay identities" (Altmann 2001: 19). Categories like gay and lesbian are thereby perceived as global signs which travel across space and time, originating in Europe – or the United States more often - causing homogenisation and, ultimately, Americanisation of local cultures. In such an approach, what is seen to be happening is an import of Western culture to non-Western places, where local cultures, seen as traditional and authentic, are bound to loose out to the hegemonic spread of Western culture. The West is thereby seen as equal to the global, and the local emerging lesbian or gay scene as hybrid copies of the real thing you get in San Francisco or London, for example.

Now, a major problem with this line of thinking has to do with the ways in which concepts of the global and the local are imagined as de-territorialised, abstract processes floating around in a global space, aided by media technologies, and especially the Internet. Recently, some excellent works have critiqued this positioning (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, Moore 2004a, b, Swarr and Nagar 2003, Tsing 2001) to show ways to approach the problem of studying and theorising local/global interconnections. In addition, careful descriptive research on same-sex cultures have now emerged that show us the complexity in the meeting between the global and local, and the necessity for detailed ethnographic analysis and description of particular cultures.

Some excellent examples are Megan Sinnott on female same-sex and transgender cultures in Thailand (2004), Donald Donham on male homosexual cultures in South Africa (1998), Peter Jackson on male homosexualities in Thailand (1997, 2001), and Don Kulick's work on transgendered prostitutes in Brazil (1998).

The emerging argument coming from these critical engagements is one that emphasises the need to study the formation of cultural meaning locally, and enquire into the lived experiences of local people in local places in their own words and understandings. The global does not exist outside the imagination and lives of people in particular places and in specific time, and I argue that the re-imagined local culture in the age of globalisation, is what we, as researchers and activists, need to engage with if we want to understand what is going on with real people in real places.

I will go on to discuss two key aspects of this line of argument, one in which I describe some of my experiences from my fieldwork and show the complexity of local cultural processes, and one in which I discuss the usefulness and problems with applying queer theory to ethnographic inquiry of this kind.

1: Sexual identity categories and lifestyles among 'lesbian' women in Beijing

Beliefs about individual sexual identity are among the most urgent topics that women discuss in the lesbian venues I spend time in.

Like in many other East Asian lesbian cultures - for example Thailand (Sinnott 2004), Taiwan (Chao 1999), and Hong Kong (Chou 2000) - female same-sex identity in Beijing is primarily based on a gendered understanding of sexuality. This terminology, which constitutes a set of new cultural categories in China, is based on a dual set of concepts termed T and P that invoke either a normative masculine gender, T for 'tomboy', or a normative feminine gender –

P, short for the Chinese word *po*, meaning 'wife'. There seems to be a sliding scale of terms, ranging from pure-T (*chun-T*, similar to 'stone butch') to pure-P (*chun-P*, or 'ultra-femme'), with combinations of the core qualities of T and P in-between, including the middle-ground concept of *bu fen*, literally 'no separate or divide', similar to the English word 'versatile'. In my experience, it is difficult to generalise about the meaning of these terms and their applicability, as there is much contradictions about what these terms mean to individual women. However, usually the components of a T/P based sexual identity are related to all or some of the following: sexual behaviour (degrees of being active or passive: being touched/penetrated, degree of undressing with a partner); appearance and body posture; personality, and being financial provider or provided for.

When I ask about the origin of the T/P labels women will often refer back to Taiwan or Hong Kong. Others will express knowledge about masculine and feminine lesbian categories being common in the West earlier and suggest that they are somehow lagging behind the West in this matter. My impression is that they have gained this knowledge through the use of the Internet and by watching foreign movies. Others again will merely say they have no idea and seem little interested in any considerations about where these terms may come from.

Ideas about identity based on sexual desire and orientation as opposed to a gendered identity, do exist simultaneously with these T/P ideologies, although they seem less widespread at the moment. Commonly used terms are *lala*, a term said by many to originate in Taiwan in the nineties, and penned by a young lesbian novelist. Other categories include *tongzhi* (comrade, a somewhat subversive borrowing of a highly political term) and the imported medical-scientific word *tongxinglianzhe* (homosexual). Both *tongzhi* and *tongzinglianzhe* are gender-neutral terms per se, but often the prefixes *nan* (male) or *nü* (female) will be put in front to denote gay or lesbian. The terms *les* and *lesbian* are also used by some.

Just exactly why some women are more comfortable using other terms than T and P based definitions, are varied, I have found. Some will reject the T/P labels entirely and argue for example that 'I just am a woman who loves women' or 'after all we're all women', or they will in other ways express unhappiness with these concepts of perceived rigid masculine and feminine categories. Many women, whether they embrace or reject T/P labels, also express disdain towards women who are seen to be too T or too P, arguing for example that they try to hard to be either men or straight women. Some express ideas about P women being unstable-as-lesbians, and are much more likely to get a boyfriend and marry, than for example a T would be.

While a desire to find others 'like them' is commonly what draw women together in bars, social groups and salons, other identity markers like age, education level, access to the Internet, and class play highly important roles in the construction of personal identity. These different realities strongly influence the experience of being a lesbian, the ways in which they will talk about it (or not), access to lesbian spaces and activities, and the practical and emotional possibility to carry out love-relationships with other women.

Moreover, these women's understandings and developments of specific sexual identities and a language and knowledge with which to express this, needs to be seen in connection with the socio-economic and cultural-specific realities they live with and within. A good example to illustrate this is the fact that everyone I meet, whatever age and socio-economic background, are deeply concerned, in various ways, about the issue of marriage.

In Mainland China, socio-economic change and modernisation have modified kinship structures and norms of social organisation, and enabled a certain degree of individualisation as well as spatial and economic independence from families, to emerge, as opposed to the collective ideology of the past. It has also enabled certain semi-public social spaces in cities to emerge, catering for gays and lesbians. However, prevailing traditional ideals about filial piety

(*xiao*) and kinship's importance as social organising principle in society mean that marriage is seen as compulsory, and often the natural progression for a young man or woman after graduating from university and securing a respectable job (Rofel 1999). This pressure is keenly felt by the lesbians I encounter in Beijing, and various coping strategies are employed in order to deal with this. Only for a very small minority is a complete refusal to marry and being out-lesbians to their parents, a realistic possibility. Very young women in their early twenties are usually the more vocal about refusing to marry, while women in their late twenties who experience the marriage pressure directly are pursuing ways to deal: Either by delaying marriage until they are past 30 years old by blaming work commitment and not finding a suitable partner, or by arranging a proforma marriage with a gay man, or by giving in to the pressure and get heterosexually married. Women in their thirties and up who participate on the lesbian scene, often have direct experience with marriage, as still married, divorced, and sometimes caretakers of children. Some juggle these realities with having love relationships with women. Common for all of these women whatever their age group and civil status at present, is a lived reality in which they are forced to deal with an immense social and cultural expectation to get married, as married life is pretty much seen as the only possible adult and socially and culturally mature way of life and social organisation in society. This ideology importantly also includes forceful ideals about normative femininity and female sexuality as well. Adding to this, is the guilt many express for not being able to be good daughters to their parents and be truthful about why they do not want to marry, and the difficulties the circumstances of living in heterosexual marriage pose for their ability to conduct love relationships with women and pursue a life of their own choosing.

It is thus clear from the stories women tell me about their lives that what it means to be a T, P, *lala* or whatever is crucially bound up with wider social and cultural structures and changes, such as the imperative to marry, and ideologies about what it means to be 'modern'

and 'urban'. To understand what it means to take on a T/P identity in Beijing today, it is therefore imperative to ask how the social and cultural space for the growth of the T/P subculture has come into being at this particular moment in time (cf. Sinnott 2004). This includes looking specifically at local and regional gender and sexuality ideologies, socio-economic development and modernisation within China, as well as how global signs and commodities are being appropriated into local people's lives and how they themselves make sense of this.

2: The problem of applying queer theory to a Chinese context

I will only argue briefly here about the issue of applying queer theory to a Chinese context. I think the challenge it poses, is primarily two-fold: For one it has to do with analytical models, and for the other, it has to do with research methodology. Both of these are of course related to each other.

Queer theory has been criticised for its lack of a wider social and economic perspective and of the material and social components of sexualities (Binnie 2004). Further, queer theory is problematic due to its inherent relationship with a Euro-American rights-based discourse on sexual difference and for a postmodernist approach to sexuality which emphasises ambiguity and multiplicity over other forms of difference (Moore 2004b). This is of course crucially related to similar turns in activist politics and Western popular discourse more generally. However, ethnographic investigation into current same-sex cultures outside the West shows us how problematic this bias is, and bares naked the complex relationships between structural norms, individual agency and choice, and the different imaginaries of sexuality in different cultures. More research on sexual cultures that theorises, not merely describes, difference and local practices, is therefore needed to move theoretical frameworks forwards.

The issue of epistemology brings on the second concern, namely research methodology. As argued here, only by in-depth and long-term engagements with people in their local cultures, through detailed ethnographic fieldwork, can we begin to grasp how and in what forms new imagined communities –like the emergence of self-conscious lesbian identities and cultures – become available to people around the world. It allows us to make sense of people's lived experiences and the meanings they attach to them, in their own words and inconsistencies, and to question the premise within queer theory of sexuality as primary identity marker. For example, before I arrived in Beijing I had no idea of how central the institution of marriage, in all its perceived possible forms and practices, would turn out to be to my research project. Only by spending considerable time with lesbians and listen to them talk about their lives and concerns, did – and could - this knowledge become available to me. In this way we may begin to make useful comparative considerations of the links sexuality and desire may have with other constituents of identity and their relationships with wider socio-cultural processes, as well as to understand the forces in play that create and move the dynamics between local and global flows of culture (Swarr and Nagar 2003).

So what could a 'queer ethnography' look like? My suggestion, and ambition, is that it takes these theoretical and methodological considerations as its basis for studying sexual cultures in the widest sense of the word. This should amongst other things bring on a far more critical engagement with the conceptual frameworks and ideologies we apply as basis for the kinds of research projects we put forwards, and lead to far more precise and rigid situational definitions of concepts and issues in both epistemology and methodology. Such an approach, most importantly, has the political potential to subvert current paradigmatic 'truths' in ethnographic practice, to face and counter heteronormativity, and to benefit the analysis of

difference and change by paying attention to exclusionary practices and politics – both in

academia, activist politics, and societies at large.

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