

# THE CONCEPTION AND FORMATION OF FAMILIES AMONG NON-HETEROSEXUAL WOMEN (*LALAS*) IN URBAN CHINA

Iris Po Yee LO | [iris.lo@stcatz.ox.ac.uk](mailto:iris.lo@stcatz.ox.ac.uk)

Department of Sociology, The University of Oxford

## BACKGROUND

- Like many parts of Asia, heteronormative family discourses still prevail and non-heterosexuality remains socially stigmatized in urban China
- Little is known about *lalas*' (non-heterosexual women in Chinese terms) active processes of building their own same-sex families and defining what "family" means to them

## OBJECTIVES

- To investigate *lalas*' different ways of conceptualizing and doing family in Beijing
- To investigate the impact of socio-cultural, economic, and political constraints and opportunities on *lalas*' ways of conceptualizing and doing family as well as their coping strategies in Beijing

## METHODS

- Purposive sampling
- Inclusion criteria
  - ♦ Women self-identifying as *lala*
  - ♦ Aged 25 or above
  - ♦ Currently residing in Beijing
- Fieldwork in Beijing (July 2017 - June 2018)
  - ♦ Semi-structured interviews with 35 *lalas*
  - ♦ Participant observation
  - ♦ Photovoice
- Thematic analysis

## SUMMARY

Constraints imposed on *lalas* and *lalas*' strategies for developing their intimate and family lives

### Family

- 🔒 Lack of material and non-material support from the family of origin
- ⚙️ Avoid confrontation with the family of origin

### Market

- 🔒 No protection against discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation in the workplaces
- ⚙️ Path to economic independence and solution to parental control

### Government

- 🔒 *Lala* couples are not legally recognized as family units and thus not entitled to apply for family-related welfare benefits
- ⚙️ Access to same-sex marriage and assisted reproductive technology in foreign countries where same-sex relationships are legally recognized

## PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Emerging Themes:

- Lala* navigating the distance from the family of origin
- Excelling oneself as a *lala* and as a *lala* family
- Insecurity and uncertainty about their same-sex family lives
- Performance of and resistance against heterosexuality

**a** Having engaged in the contract marriage [with my gay husband] in these five years, managing family relations, managing the relationship with the child, managing all these...and at the same time **you cannot be too close to your family of origin or else the whole lie will get broken**. These are huge problems.

Bo, 33 years old, married (with a gay man), cohabiting with same-sex partner

**b** You have to believe from the bottom of your heart that you do not feel sorry for them [family of origin]...because you fail to showcase a normal wedding and a normal family in front of the friends of your parents and relatives...You definitely have to **show your parents that you are living a decent life**. You really have to!

Ya, 34 years old, married (with same-sex partner in the U.S.), raising a child(conceived through assisted reproductive technology in the U.S.)

**c** We have always been in a **turmoil, in a turbulent and hidden state of life**...um...because **you cannot rely on your partner to give you a promise of the future**. Since you are not granted any legal protection, your rights are not legally guaranteed and protected.

Ting, 32 years old, married (with a gay man), cohabiting with same-sex partner

**d** Perhaps in China...because of patriarchy...there is such a **divide between "T" and "P"**. That is, there is a **division between the stronger and the weaker**...In fact, I think the ideal of real love between two *lalas* is to have no such **differentiation**...As a T, you have to be dominant, protective and responsible in order to be attractive enough for a P to fall in love with you. **Because of the desire to be loved, we probably impose all these on ourselves**.

Qian, 35 years old, single